



# The Value of a Question

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What is more valuable – a good question or a good answer? If you think it's an answer, think again. If you are in a position of influence such as a manager, salesperson or parent, a question can hold much greater value to both you and those with whom you are communicating.

If for example you want to communicate to someone that they need to eat healthier, you have two options. You can communicate with them by telling or by asking. If you elect the telling option you might say "People have higher mental acuity when they eat healthily. You need to eat more fruits and vegetables." Alternatively, if you use the asking option, you might say "People have higher mental acuity when they eat healthily. How might you eat healthier?" Which option do you think best engages the brain of the person with whom you are talking? It is the latter. Questions more fully engage a person's mind than statements. They move the responsibility of the conversation back to the other person. The other person has little choice but to start their thinking process. They are now responsible for the next piece of the conversation. Having to answer a question requires their deliberate thinking which includes engaging their creativity, knowledge, experience and problem solving skills.

Having others come up with the answer also moves ownership of the answer from you to them. If you provide the answer, the answer is YOURS. If they provide the answer, the answer is THEIRS. This is critical if you are expecting them to take responsibility for the outcome of your dialog. If one of your subordinates comes to you with a question, your natural reaction may be to provide them the answer, especially if it's in a domain in which you are considered an expert. While there are clearly situations where this is perfectly logical, there are also many where you are doing yourself and them a disservice. In cases where the implication of the conversation results in some level of ownership or learning, you would be wise to turn their question into another question of your own. By asking the right follow-on question(s), you can guide them in the direction of the best answer, but not give it to them. Instead, they come up with the right answer. They feel a greater sense of ownership for it. They better learn from the experience.

Great leaders don't have all the answers. Great leaders have the right questions. They use questions rather than statements to move people to action. Rather than try to be the subject matter expert, they expect those around them to be the experts. They instead develop and tap into their team's expertise. They ask questions as simple and naive as "how might we do this more efficiently?" or "how can we best achieve this objective". These questions often lead to valuable discussions that result in making people feel appreciated, imparting greater responsibility, developing critical thinking skills and identifying business performance improvements.

There are other benefits of asking questions too. There is much insight you can gain yourself by asking questions. Studies have shown that three out of four new product ideas come from outside the company. There is wisdom and wise counsel that only comes from talking to people and asking questions – both inside and outside your organization. Overcoming conflict, making decisions and negotiating are a few other competencies that fully depend on good questioning skills. Questions also help people clarify their own thinking and reinforce their own learning. A student is much more likely to retain what they have learned if they are asked a question about it following a lecture and they then have to explain the answer to it.

To gain the value of a question, follow these eight steps:

1. Resist the temptation to always be the expert answer provider. Even if you have the domain expertise and know the answer, recognize the situations where a better response would be a question. It is especially important when there is a learning or ownership implication to the other person with whom you are communicating.
2. Clarify and probe the answer you get to your question until you clearly understand it. Help turn the unknowns into knowns. Move generalities to specifics.
3. Build your mental library of simple, yet powerful questions like "On what basis do you think we should make this decision?", "How would you contrast the best alternatives to be considered?", "What is your opinion of the best solution?", "What might we do to improve our odds of success with that solution?" and so on.
4. Avoid "leading questions" that have hidden motives or directly give away the answers.
5. Avoid yes/no questions. Ask open-ended questions that encourage thoughtful responses.
6. Listen patiently. Don't interrupt. Be comfortable with short periods of silence. Let the other person finish their thought before turning your attention to what you will ask or say next.
7. Take notes. The only dumb question is the one that has to be asked again because the answer was forgotten.
8. Summarize the final answer so that the key points are made clear, the ownership is assigned and all parties involved are in alignment in their understanding and in any future actions to be taken.

Since the Greek philosopher Socrates stimulated rational thinking and a deeper understanding of ethics through his use of inquiry, questioning has been a critical skill of successful people. Take your ability to influence to a higher level by building your competency in good questioning.