



THE BEST ANSWER BEGINS WITH THE RIGHT QUESTION

It has just come to your attention that a customer filed a complaint about Mr. Smith, one of your employees. While your gut tells you that the customer may have overreacted a bit, there's enough information to warrant a meeting with Mr. Smith. You know from past experience that he's somewhat sensitive to criticism, but you have several legitimate concerns. How can you get the information you need without triggering a negative response from Mr. Smith?

You are meeting with a vendor who's behind schedule and over budget on a project. You don't want to jeopardize the job and you don't want to burn a bridge with this company. However, you're not at all satisfied with the way things are going and you need to take some answers back to your VP of Operations. What is your best approach?

It takes cooperation between every person involved to ensure the smooth operation of a company or organization. This is no small task and in the process there are likely to be ongoing interpersonal challenges. Whether you need information to help you address the need of a customer, resolve an employee issue, or effectively remedy a concern with a vendor, asking the right questions in the right way and at the right time can make all the difference.

Good questions help everyone involved work toward a "win-win" outcome. They should be used to clarify information, not demean or criticize. St. Francis said, "Seek to understand [rather] than to be understood." Understanding is difficult to come by without first gathering the right information.

In order to ask the right questions in the right way you need to consider several key rules and strategies:

Listen! When someone feels understood they are more receptive of other's opinions, ideas and questions. Giving someone the opportunity, without interruption, to express themselves completely communicates interest in what they have to say and respect for them as a person. Equally important, it allows them to "get it off their chest," releasing the emotions that might otherwise inhibit a constructive dialogue.

Control your emotions. If you're angry or out of control, you lose respect and credibility. If your frustration has grown into anger, it may be best to avoid asking questions until you are able to get off the emotional escalator. As Thomas Jefferson advised, "If you are angry, count to ten before you respond. If you are really angry, count all the way to 100."

Start with something positive. No matter how much you may disagree with someone on a particular issue, try to find something positive to share about them or their efforts. Expressing appreciation or a sincere compliment before asking your question will often open the listener to hear what you have to say. It will show them that you are not the enemy and that you have the ability to think objectively. For example, "I really appreciate the time and effort you have put into this project. Thank you. My question for you is..."

Build on agreement. If your question is likely to reflect disagreement or an alternative point of view, attempt to find something you can agree on first and preface your question with it. For example, "I agree with you that we need a policy governing this issue. My question concerning your recommendation for the policy is this..." Agreement on an issue, no matter how small, puts you in less of an adversarial role.

Avoid "why" questions. The word "why" can come across as accusatory, and communicates disappointment or disapproval. This one little word has the power to trigger a defensive reaction. See if you can rephrase your question by using "what" or "how" instead of "why" and eliminate the personal pronoun "you". For example, instead of asking, "Why did you make the decision before consulting with us?" you may say, "What made it necessary to make the decision before consulting with us?" This simple change in phrasing can keep the matter from becoming personal and allows you to stay focused on the facts.

Stay off the soapbox. People sometimes use the opportunity to ask a question as a platform for expressing what they think the answer should be. If you are sincerely looking for information to increase your understanding, construct your question appropriately so the discussion can move forward.

Avoid personal attacks and sarcasm. Questions containing personal jabs or sarcasm greatly discount the value of an important question and may reflect a lack of personal integrity and self-control. Fight the temptation to "act out" your emotions by staying focused on the facts, not the person.

Ask "Do you agree?" One effective way to solicit dialogue is to state your understanding of the issue and the decision you believe is best and then simply ask, "Do you agree?" For example, "I believe it would not be prudent for us to use ABC Engineering for this project given the challenges we experienced with them last year. Do you agree?" Sharing your views in this non-threatening manner gives the respondent the opportunity to either see your point and agree with you, or to disagree and offer information that will add to your understanding of the issue.

Ask "open-ended" questions. An open-ended question invites more than just a "yes" or "no" answer. It opens the door to more dialogue and the possibility for greater understanding. Instead of asking, "Do you support the new computer networking proposal?" you may request, "Please tell me what you think of the new computer networking proposal." The open-ended question will likely tell you where the person stands on the issue, and also why they have taken the position that they have.

Well-constructed questions, asked in the right way and at the right time, increase the likelihood of productive dialogue. And remember, whether you are asking questions or expressing an opinion, if you treat people with courtesy and respect most of them will bend over backwards to cooperate with you as you work toward successful resolution of the issue.