

The Power of Asking The Right Questions

In school or in corporate training, we are often taught speaking skills but hardly “asking skills.” Asking questions is a means of learning. It gathers information, helps us understand others better, gives us more opportunity in finding plausible answers and explanations.

ASKING IN GOOD LEADERSHIP. Dr. Marshall Goldsmith, author of the best-selling and award-winning book “**What Got You Here Won’t Get You There**,” suggests that asking for feedback from subordinates is crucial in self-development. However, not all questions will do the trick.

“In my experience there are a hundred wrong ways to ask for feedback and one right way.” said Dr. Goldsmith.

Getting feedback to improve oneself is more than just: “*Did I do ok?*” / “*Do you like the way I work?*” / “*How did I perform my duties?*”

Meaningful feedback is obtainable through meaningful questions. “*In what ways can I better perform my duties?*” / “*What can I do better to contribute to our team?*” These questions invite more specific answers, avoid unnecessary criticism, promote positive changes, and imply that you are constantly improving yourself.

I was fortunate to have learnt these asking skills from Dr. Goldsmith when I was overseeing employees **from 8 different countries**. Except for Thai employees, English was used in communication. Asking questions gave me a clear perspective of what attributes employees from each cultural background value in good leaders or which particular factors play pivotal roles in successful teamwork. The right questions won them over both personally and professionally. Simultaneously, I was receiving a valuable culture lesson. I found although we used our own version of English to communicate, we all had identical “*heart language*.”



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Success comes from how much importance we give to 1) the job itself 2) relationships and 3) self-monitoring and self-development. If any one area is weak, it affects the rest of the chain. A common example is how a happy home entuses an employee at work. On the other hand, an unhappy family life produces poor performance.

Therefore, **ON THE RELATIONSHIP FRONT**, asking the right questions helps keep the relationship in good shape. Likewise, good questions at home are equally important. Asking your spouse *“As your life partner, what else should I do to improve our lives together?”* could strengthen the bond. Couples who are less successful or even unsuccessful usually stop asking questions. Or worse, the questions they choose to ask end the relationship sooner. *“What do you want me to do?”* and *“What else do you want from me?”* are some of the common mistakes.

IN SALES and MARKETING, questions that delve into the minds or needs of the customers often lead to faster product presentation, more accurate service and closing the deal more quickly. Marketing kings and great salesmen are normally sociable and mingle well with any crowd. They are constantly networking, building new relationship and representing their company. After self-introduction, they get acquainted with new friends through small talk. Many people were born with this gift while others have no clue where to start. The talkative ones sometimes get too chatty, making the less loquacious ones uncomfortable. This is when good asking skills come in handy.

Avoid using only closed-ended questions like *“Are you here alone?”* or *“How do you like this party?”* for they lead to short answers and invite more awkwardness among the shy guests. Mix these questions with open-ended ones like *“What in particular do you like about this party?”* or *“Who is your clientele these days?”* or *“Wow., you have a degree in accounting but you are now a marketing leader, may I ask, what inspired you to make the move?”* Work-related questions are effective because people like to talk about themselves. More importantly, your conversation partner will feel you are a good listener and not self-centered.



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IN THE SERVICE INDUSTRY, frontline employees need to ask great questions. If they fail to identify the real needs of the customers, it could mean delivering wrong or inappropriate service which will result in service recovery and much more. Particularly true in this business, one needs to ask questions that clarify all vagueness and confirm mutual understanding before providing the service.

When encountering angry customers, employees tend to talk more, explain more or just run and fix the problem to get it over with. The best thing to do is opposite from running. Stay and ask more questions. Caring questions show you care and that the customer is not left stranded. Asking the right questions help vent anger and seek cooperation in problem solving. Never ask “*Why don’t you do this?*” Ask questions that pinpoint the problem like “*I am sorry. May I ask at which branch did you place your order? This will speed up the follow-up process.*”

IN EDUCATION, the more questions one asks, the more knowledge is obtained. When a student listens and criticizes the teacher, the learning process is interrupted. We learn more by processing the message and asking follow-up questions. Researchers start their work by asking questions.

Asking and listening go hand in hand. Getting the questions right is only halfway. Listening completes the circle. Answers we get are useless if we don’t listen properly. Listening without thinking, analyzing or evaluating is ineffective.

There are 2 parts to being a good listener. The first part is invisible since it is a process of message reception and decoding in our brain. The second part can be experienced by others via our non-verbal and verbal cues such as nodding, eye contact, acknowledging, rephrasing, or replying. Without one or the other, listening is incomplete. For example, if one nods and says “*Yes..Yes*” but is taking a mental vacation, listening is futile. Or if one is paying attention to every single word but the eyes are wandering around the room or has a negative facial expression, the other party will not want to converse again in the future.



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Dr. Goldsmith reminded us “*Stop Asking For Feedback and Then Expressing Your Opinion.*” When feedback is given, do not make excuses or discuss it. That would mean as a leader, you are not really hearing the answer. Simply practice the 2 parts of listening skills and thank the feedback provider. This encourages people to willingly give honest answers. Remember sugarcoated insincere feedback is pointless.

Good listeners should thank the person being asked whether we agree with them or not. Good listening skills do not mean agreeing with every answer we get but rather reviewing them and seeking logic and reason within.

[How To Become And Expert In Asking](#)

First of all, for some of us who don't like asking, we may start by changing our attitude and considering these teachings. In Buddhism's Kalama Sutta 10 or Buddha's charter of free inquiry, disciples are taught not to believe in anything until proven true. At the other end of gullibility lies curiosity. We ask more to know more. Constantly questioning and testing acceptance are what the scripture suggests:

Do not go upon what has been **acquired by repeated hearing**; nor upon **tradition**; nor upon **rumor**; nor upon **what is in a scripture**; nor upon **surmise**; nor upon an **axiom**; nor upon **specious reasoning**; nor upon a **bias towards a notion that has been pondered over**; nor upon **another's seeming ability**; nor upon the consideration, "**The monk is our teacher.**"

These teachings help form a great “asking habit.”

Secondly, whether or not we concur with the speaker, we should avoid condescendence of all sorts. Per Dr. Goldsmith's suggestion, it is best to merely listen and thank the speaker for their time.

Thirdly, know your options. There are numerous ways to pose questions. Observe the context and choose the best approach. Ask your close friends if they think you are creative or if they feel you appear awkward in your delivery. This means either the chosen verbal or non-verbal is not right for you.



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Among the many communication skills required in leadership, asking and listening can seem deceptively easy to master. In reality, it is more complicated than we imagine.

With a few simple techniques, I have successfully advised several people to set goals for themselves. Each time a subordinate enters the room, ask a question. Even if they suggest something you disagree, try to ask at least one question before you say “No”.

Ask those close to you or those you interact with the most. Be the one to start. Give yourself one point per question. When you reach ten, reward yourself. At the end of the week, look at what you’ve gathered and you will be surprised how much new information you’ve collected.

What you get depends on how you ask.

Ask the right questions, so you get the right answers.



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Dr. Marshall Goldsmith is the author of the book “**What Got You Here Won’t Get You There**”. The book has just won the Harold Longman Award as the Best Business Book of 2007. It is also a 'Best of 2007' Top 25 Customer Favorite for all books on amazon.com and amazon's #1 Best Seller for the year on Leading People.

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Dr. Marshall Goldsmith, the world’s leading corporate consultants and executive coaches. He is an authority on helping successful leaders achieve positive changes in behavior to make themselves, their teams and organizations even stronger.