



Asking open Questions

Leadership is often regarded as ‘doing’: action taken, issues resolved. Yet effective leadership is also about learning. Leaders need to understand the environment, the challenges and the opportunities facing their team and business.

While closed-ended questions, answered with a simple “yes” or “no”, may sometimes be necessary, learning is best done by asking open-ended questions. Such questions leave room for self-expression, engagement, mutual learning, and co-creation.

Fact gathering vs. open exchange

There are times when closed-ended questions are useful. For example, when you need to gather data or background facts, when you require a specific answer, look for a commitment from someone who is avoiding it or when having a conversation with a very talkative person. Closed-ended questions certainly have their place when the hard facts are needed. They can however be over-used, especially with a top-down management style.

Open-ended questions encourage people to come up with a more thoughtful and filled-out answer. They motivate team members to think through business problems and engage in active learning and problem-solving. They develop insights, lead a team to a more innovative process and strengthen an employee-manager relationship. A leader who mindfully combines open-ended questions with attentive listening (see the previous paper) is likely to create a motivating and engaging environment for their team to flourish.

Open-Ended Questions serve different needs

There are a range of open-ended question types that can be used for different purposes. They typically start with 'what', 'how', 'why', 'which' or 'when'. For example,

Fully open-ended	<i>"What are your concerns about this situation?"</i>
Reflective	<i>"How would you best assign responsibilities for this project?"</i>
Hypothetical	<i>"If you could get all the funding you need, how would you allocate it?"</i>
Probing	<i>"And why does that matter?"</i>
Deflective	<i>(orienting a negative reaction towards solution finding) "What can we do to address your concerns?" or "how would you resolve the situation?"</i>

Re-wording questions

Below are some examples of common questions, and how they can be turned around to yield more information and lead to a deeper exchange.

Closed-ended

Are you stressed?	_____
Is this it?	_____
Do you agree on ...?	_____
Are you happy in the team?	_____
Did you find what you were looking for?	_____
Are you going to do X or Y?	_____
Will you report to me when it's done?	_____
If you do this, wouldn't it affect XYZ?	_____

Open-ended

How are you feeling?	_____
What else?	_____
What's your view on ...?	_____
How would you describe your experience within the team?	_____
What will you do?	_____
How will I know it was done?	_____
If you do this, how will it affect XYZ?	_____

Once you've asked your open-ended question, stop talking. This may seem obvious, but it is not. It does take practice. Pause, and give the other person the time and space to reply even if the silence feels awkward (as it often does).

More examples of open-ended questions

As you further develop the art of asking question, you may wish to keep a list of useful questions at hand. You may also prepare some questions ahead of a meeting and consult your list if your memory runs out. Some examples of typical questions include

- How would you see
- What are your thoughts
- What do you mean by ...
- What do you make of ...
- Which team member would be best for the job? Why?
- Could you explain
- Is there any reason why
- How would you feel if ...
- What seems to be the issue
- Why does it matter
- What would you suggest
- Tell me more...

Moment of reflection

Listen to yourself while in a meeting or when conversing with another person, personally or professionally.

How often do you find yourself asking closed-ended questions?
What would the quality of the conversation be like if you asked more open-ended questions?
How easy is it for you to think of an open-ended alternative to a closed-ended question?

Call for action

Choose three possible open questions (more if you can remember them). For one day practice using them in every interaction you have, both personally and professionally.

If you catch yourself using many close-ended question, refrain from judgement. Rephrase, and ask open-ended questions instead.

Conclusion

The quality of a leader's questions matters greatly. Asking the right questions lets you hear the information you need to better understand a person, an issue, or a situation, as long as you are actively listening. Open-ended questions give your team members freedom to express their opinions and ideas. They create opportunities for your people to highlight points of view you may be missing and to co-create solutions.