

Chpt. 8

Questioning Techniques

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2001

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO TRAINING DELIVERY

11/16/00 *over*

A COMPETENCY-BASED APPROACH

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CHAPTER 8

DEMONSTRATING EFFECTIVE QUESTIONING SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

SKILLS ASSESSMENT

Take a moment to review the competency and associated performances that will be covered in this chapter. Consider your current level of proficiency in the competency as a whole as well as each performance and check the items where you feel you need to improve. As you read the chapter, concentrate on those areas most in need of development.

Competency:

- Demonstrate effective questioning skills and techniques.

Associated Performances:

- Use appropriate question types and levels.
- Direct questions appropriately.
- Use active listening techniques.
- Repeat, rephrase, or restructure questions.
- Provide opportunity and adequate time for learners to state questions, comments, and concerns and respond to questions.
- Judge the adequacy of instructional questions.

Asking questions, as we mentioned in Chapters Six and Seven, is key to your success in your role as an instructor in training. Because asking questions is so important, this chapter focuses on that competency. The chapter asks and answers the following questions:

- What purposes are served by questions, and why are they so important?
- What are the types of questions?
- What levels of questions exist?
- How should questions be directed appropriately?
- How is active listening related to questioning?
- How can questions be successfully repeated, rephrased, and restructured?
- How should you provide learners with time to respond?

WHY ARE QUESTIONS SO IMPORTANT?

The art of asking questions has enjoyed a venerable history in Western civilization.

Socrates, one of the most famous teachers of all time, never lectured his students at all.

As Plato showed in his *Dialogues*, Socrates did nothing more than keep asking questions—questions that were directed to his students with such skill and panache that they are the envy of trial lawyers even today.

Questions serve various purposes in training, and they are important for each purpose that they serve. One purpose is to encourage active participation and involvement among learners. A quick way to turn a boring lecture into an exciting discussion is to stop *telling* and start *asking*. Questions are open invitations to learners to respond. When learners respond, they accept the responsibility to take part in their own learning process. In acknowledging the powerful role that questions can play in encouraging interaction, presentation expert Dianna Booher, of Booher Consultants Inc. in Dallas/Fort Worth, observes, "A reflective question followed by a long pause can be a more effective way for participants to examine new ideas than to play three games without their brains in gear."¹

A second purpose of questions is to capture learner interest and hold attention. Questions focus learners on what you want them to look at and think about. They can also encourage creative thought, transforming learners into instructors in their own right. Another master presenter, Lance Dublin, of EPS Solutions in San Francisco, urges trainers to "be a provocateur, not a presenter." He encourages presenters to

try delivering most of your content through a series of questions rather than statements. For each slide, develop a provocative question that will unveil or lead people to answers or points you want to make."²

A third purpose of questions is to gauge learners' understanding. The response to a question shows how much a learner has comprehended, it thereby giving you feedback about the program. Armed with this feedback, you can take corrective action when necessary to ensure that learners understand important information.

A fourth purpose of questions is to elicit learners' decisions and preferences. A key premise in adult learning theory is that adult learners should take an active role in their learning process. In one sense, that means learners should be given a say in decisions affecting them and the learning process. Questions can facilitate the learners' decision-making and can afford them opportunities to state their preferences.

Asking questions effectively is a more difficult competency to master than it might appear to be. In fact, some authorities regard it as one of the most difficult to do well. In our survey study of training practitioners, they rated this competency as the fourth most difficult to demonstrate. One reason this competency is more difficult than others is that trainers are presented with the challenge of striking a balance between asking questions that challenge learners and asking questions that build learner confidence. For example, a trainer may ask several probing questions to push the learner to thinking about connections and relationships between different principles. However, if the trainer pushes too hard, it may make learners feel incompetent, diminishing their confidence. Remember that each learner is different and will respond according to his or her own level of comprehension. It is your responsibility to identify this level. One strategy for accomplishing this is to float several test questions and listen to the responses you receive to determine the learners' current level of comprehension.

WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF QUESTIONS?

There are numerous types of questions at your disposal as an instructor in a training session. This section defines and illustrates these question types, which are also summarized in Exhibit 8-1.

CLOSED AND OPEN QUESTIONS

A *closed question*, sometimes called a closed-ended question, is designed to elicit a "yes" or "no" response. A simple example is "Do you have any questions?" That is a closed question because the participant

Exhibit 8-1
Types of questions: characteristics and uses.

Types	Characteristics	Uses
Open	Open questions require respondents to elaborate with a narrative response.	Open questions enable trainers to gauge the level of understanding among the learners. They also encourage involvement and participation.
Closed	Closed questions are typically answered with a "yes" or "no" response.	Closed questions can be used to drive a point home, gauge opinions among learners, introduce topics, or change topics.
Overhead	Overhead questions are questions asked to the entire group. They are often rhetorical.	Overhead questions can focus the learning to a particular topic and encourage participation. They can also be used to avoid embarrassing a learner who gives an incorrect response.
Direct	Direct questions are directed toward an individual learner.	Direct questions can be used by the trainer to gauge the understanding of an individual learner. They can also be used to gain learner attention or involve a nonparticipative learner. One danger with direct questions is that they may cause embarrassment by putting a learner on the spot.
Reversed	Reversed questions are statements rather than questions. These statements paraphrase questions asked by learners to ensure that the question is presented very clearly.	Reversed questions clarify learner questions so that they hear and understand the question. Additionally, they help to ensure that the trainer is answering the correct question.
Redirected	A redirected question is a technique used by trainers to redirect a question to the group instead of answering it.	Redirected questions can encourage involvement and reflection as well as create ownership of problems by shifting the responsibility of knowledge transfer from the trainer to the learners. Also useful when the trainer is unsure of the answer.

must answer with either a "yes" or a "no." Closed questions often start with words like *do*, *are*, or *is*. Other examples of this type of question are "Is everyone ready to move on to the next module?" and "Are you comfortable with the skill practice?"

An *open question*, sometimes called an open-ended question, is designed to evoke a response other than a simple yes or no. Open questions encourage people to elaborate. A simple example: "What questions do you have?" That is an open question that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no." Instead, the participant must provide an essay response. Open questions typically begin with certain words including *what*, *why*, *how*, *when*, or *where*. Examples of open questions are "Why do you believe some people resist the idea of merging with another bank?" and "How would you go about responding to a customer who berates you?"

RECOGNIZING WHEN TO USE OPEN AND CLOSED QUESTIONS

Both closed and open questions are appropriate to use during training. One type is not better or worse than the other, and both serve useful purposes. What is important is to know when to use each type and how to apply the skills to use each type of questions appropriately.

Use closed questions to gauge participant reactions or opinions. For example, you could ask, "Is teamwork important?" The yes or no responses to this closed question, with a request for a show of hands, can help you to take an on-the-spot poll to measure learner opinions about the importance of teamwork. Later, if appropriate, you can follow that up with an open question to explore the issue in greater depth. It is also typical to use closed questions near the end of a training segment or when you want to limit questions to only those topics about which learners feel strongly. A question such as "Are there any questions or comments before we end for the day?" can minimize the chances for a long-winded response because it informs learners that the class will end if there are no questions. This should prompt learners to ask only questions that are critical or that they feel strongly about.

Open questions are a premier method for expanding the discussion of a topic. As such, open questions are useful for encouraging participation and involvement among the learners. For example, if you ask the group of learners "How do you feel about teamwork?" learners will be more likely to provide a lengthier reply. Open questions gain learners' attention, especially at the opening of a training segment. When you pose an open question to the group it represents something that

learners must attend to, think about, and focus on. In effect, it stimulates cognitive processing. In contrast, opening a segment with a statement or a series of statements does not necessarily demand focus and allows learners to be more passive. Imagine sitting in the beginning of a training class. The trainer begins by introducing herself and telling you why the topic of the course is important to you. Now imagine the same course but instead of the trainer telling you why the course is important to you, she asks you to tell her why it is important to you. If the training program is on measuring employee performance, for example, the trainer could ask, "Why is it important to measure employee performance?" In doing this, she has changed the course from passive learning to a more engaging and interesting environment by simply asking an open question.

Inexperienced trainers have a tendency to use too many closed questions, and you may find that to be a problem for you at first. For example, when you want to find out if learners have questions you might ask, "Does anyone have any questions?" Often this closed question does not yield any responses, leading you to conclude that there are no questions. In reality, however, learners may have questions, but don't feel encouraged to ask them, given your approach. Maybe you use closed questions because you assume that the mere act of posing questions is what is important. But that is not the case. Open questions are far more effective than closed questions in building participation. In the example above, you could rephrase the query to "What questions do you have?" (followed by silence), and you would find that much more effective in prompting learner participation. Using that type of open question can also be less threatening, because it sends a message that you as the trainer are expecting questions, thus putting the learner more at ease and able to admit to having questions. The closed question implies only that there could be questions, leaving the learner to believe that he or she might be the only person with questions.

To improve your questioning skill, begin by assessing what question types you ask most frequently. If you discover that most questions you pose are closed and you would like to increase the number of open questions you ask, practice by consciously transforming closed to open questions by restating them and beginning them with words such as *what*, *why*, or *how*. Exhibit 8-2 supplies examples of closed questions that have been converted into open questions.

Additionally, once a closed question has been asked, it can be converted into an open question by using follow-up inquiries such as *Why?*, *To what degree?*, *How?*, or *How would you explain that?* Doing

Exhibit 8-2
Converting closed questions into open questions.

Closed Questions	Open Questions
Do you agree with these principles?	Tell me why you agree or disagree with these principles?
Do you have any questions?	What questions do you have at this point?
Is this clear?	What about this is not clear?
Does everyone understand?	Can someone explain this to me in their own words?

this enables you to probe deeper into the learners' knowledge to determine their level of understanding of the issues at hand. Consider the following dialogue where a trainer starts with a closed question and then leads into an open question. This method of questioning also allows a trainer to identify those who know the answer without putting them on the spot. As you read further, note the similarities between a closed question and an open question:

TRAINER: *Can this principle be applied to your everyday work?*

JOSH: *Yes.*

TRAINER: *Josh, tell me more. How can it be applied and how does that differ from the way you are currently doing it?*

JOSH: *Well, it can be applied by...*

OVERHEAD AND DIRECT QUESTIONS

In addition to closed and open questions, there are overhead and direct questions. An *overhead question* is asked of an entire learner group. For example, "Who has seen the movie *The Shining*?" is an overhead question because it is posed to the entire group and not just one individual.

A *direct question*, as its name implies, is directed at an individual learner. For example, "John, do you know what type of valve connection this is?" is a direct question asked of John. That is not just a direct question. It is also a closed question because it prompts a "yes" or "no" reply from John. Overhead and direct questions serve different purposes and can be either open or closed.

OVERHEAD QUESTIONS

Overhead questions tend to increase the likelihood of producing a correct response from the learners. An overhead question often represents an invitation to the entire group of learners to respond if they are comfortable and if they believe they have a correct or appropriate answer. Those who respond to an overhead question are usually confident that they have a correct answer. Otherwise, individuals would be unlikely to answer. The actual answer may not be correct, but the probability of accuracy tends to increase when people volunteer to respond to overhead questions.

When you ask an overhead question and no one answers, reframe the question, repeat it, provide clues as to the answer, or assume that no one actually knows the answer and therefore decide to provide the correct answer with a supporting explanation. When too many learners try to respond, you can select the learner who answers first. When you do that, however, you risk making other learners feel excluded. To deal with that perception, say something like, "Let's start with Victor." That indicates to the others that they will have a chance to provide their response after Victor provides his. Another tactic is to acknowledge the first learner who attempts to respond and select that person to provide the answer.

Remember not to overuse overhead questions, because learners may get bored with this technique and stop answering them. This is especially true if the overhead questions are remedial. For example, imagine a training situation where the trainer always starts by saying, "Are we happy to be here?" or "Are we ready to get started?" The first time or two, learners might respond. But soon responding will seem silly and learners may begin to stare back at the trainer or respond sarcastically.

THE DANGERS AND BENEFITS OF DIRECT QUESTIONS

Unlike overhead questions, direct questions single out individuals. They can be risky for that reason. A direct question can startle individ-

uals and cause them to answer incorrectly or draw a blank. It also puts a person under the spotlight and may therefore cause discomfort. In this way, direct questions may remind some learners of negative experiences they had while in school. Direct questions can create a threatening, psychologically uncomfortable learning climate as well. On the positive side, however, direct questions can condition learners to speak up.

Learners are more likely to concentrate and pay close attention when they know they might be singled out and questioned without warning. Chapter Five discussed the technique of questioning as a way to deal with learner behavior problems. Direct questions can be excellent tools by which to accomplish this goal. Direct questions can also be used effectively to assess the comprehension of an otherwise quiet individual. Finally, direct questions can also be a way to involve a non-participative member of the group. For example, you could attempt to draw out a silent learner by saying "Jill, do you have anything to add?" or "Chris, you look like you wanted to say something."

STRATEGIES FOR USING DIRECT QUESTIONS EFFECTIVELY

Use direct questions sensitively to ensure positive outcomes. To do that effectively, forewarn learners that you will use this technique. That gives them a clue to pay close attention so that they are not caught completely off guard. In addition, when you use direct questions, deliver them in a positive way. Do not set out to embarrass people; rather, use direct questions to encourage learners to pay closer attention and participate. You might even want to qualify your direct question by briefly stating why you are asking them. Look at the following examples. Observe how much less threatening the question can be when softened with a qualifying statement. This technique turns the "test-like" questions into nonthreatening conversations.

TRAINER: *Don, since you work in purchasing, can you tell us your perception of how the recent deregulation has affected our vendor relationships?*

TRAINER: *Valerie, in light of our conversation at lunch, what do you think will be our next step in the assimilation process?*

TRAINER: *Paul, with your background in aeronautics, how will this new procedure affect the aerospace industry?*

The way in which you handle the first few direct questions sets the tone. If participants are not made to look or feel foolish, they are more willing to answer questions. You can also tell them that they can "take a rain check" or "pass" on a question, thereby avoiding the chance that they might be embarrassed by giving them an "out." That will keep the learning climate positive and upbeat. Another strategy you can use to enliven the question-asking process is to throw a beanbag or sponge ball to a person, indicating that they should respond to your question. For the next question that person gets to toss the ball to the person of their choosing. A rule you can add is that the ball must always be passed to someone who has not yet answered. This ensures that everyone is eventually involved.

REVERSED QUESTIONS

A *reversed question*, sometimes called a *reflective question*, is typically used when a learner makes a comment or asks a question. It is essentially a restatement, by the trainer, of the learner's original question. Sometimes when a learner asks something it may be confusing to other learners—and even, perhaps, to the trainer. The primary purpose of a reversed question is to clarify what the learner has asked. If the question is lengthy or contains multiple questions (sometimes called a *double-barreled question*), it may become difficult to understand. A reverse question is introduced in such instances to focus attention on what has been asked and to make it clear and succinct. You may also want to break problems down into several smaller, more focused parts so that you are sure to capture all of the intent or concern behind the questions being asked.

Reversed questions are helpful to learners because they tend to clarify questions. However, they are not without danger. One problem is that when restated, the meaning of the original question can be lost or altered by the trainer in an honest attempt to make it clearer. That can provoke anger, resentment, or frustration from some participants. The best strategy is probably to present a reverse question and then ask the questioner if the reversed question has adequately captured the meaning of the original. When you use a microphone, you should repeat questions. In that way, you ensure that everyone can hear it. A reversed question is appropriate in such cases because a summary of the original question is sufficient to convey its content to others and because it would probably be difficult, if not impossible, to repeat it verbatim.

REDIRECTED QUESTIONS

A *redirected question* is a technique that you can use when a learner asks a question or makes a comment. Instead of answering the ques-

tion, as many trainers might be tempted to do, you simply redirect it to others. Questions can be redirected to several targets, of course: to the person who initiated the question, to another learner, or to the learning group as a whole. Below is an example of a trainer redirecting a question to the person who asked the question.

MYRNA: *I have a question for you: how does what you're saying relate to the philosophy of empowerment?*

TRAINER: *That's a good question, Myrna. How do you think it relates to empowerment?*

Here is an example of a question that the trainer redirects to the entire learning group:

BOB: *Do you really believe our CEO is going to adopt this idea of "open book" management?*

TRAINER: *Bob, thanks for the question. Instead of giving my opinion, let me ask the group. Does the group think our CEO is on board?*

There are several purposes for redirected questions. One is to encourage learners to take ownership of the problem and formulate answers rather than rely on the trainer to provide all the answers or the one "correct" answer. Spoon-feeding learners will not teach them to think on their own or internalize the answer to a question.

Another purpose of a redirected question is to avoid informing learners that they have given an incorrect response. When a learner gives an inaccurate response—or makes a questionable comment—you can ask, "What do others think about that response?" Doing that does not place the learner in an embarrassing spotlight and provides others a chance to respond correctly. You can also use a redirected question when you do not know the correct answer to a question yourself. You can simply state, "I'm not really sure about the answer to that, so what do others think?" That should not be done too frequently because it risks damaging your credibility. As an alternative, you can simply say "That's a good question, what do others think?" That redirects the questions without bringing your own credibility into doubt. It also permits you extra time to reflect on the question.

Redirected questions can also be guided in several directions. You can refocus a question back to the questioner by asking, "What do *you* think the answer is?" Doing that can help a learner work through an issue to obtain clarity and comprehension. Such involvement can result in deeper understanding because the person was not provided with a quick answer but was invited to think it through to arrive at his or her own solution.

Be sure to keep track of the questions you ask to see if you are maintaining a balance. Use the checklist shown in Exhibit 8-3 to track the patterns of your questions and determine what question types you favor and which types you should use most frequently. The checklist can be used by a colleague sitting in to observe your presentation style or can be used to do a question count by type from a videotape of your presentation.

WHAT ARE THE LEVELS OF QUESTIONS?

The previous section addressed the many types of questions that you can use during delivery. This section covers the different levels that questions can assume. The *level* of a question refers to the depth to which the question probes the learners' knowledge of the subject matter. Deep questions require more knowledge to be answered correctly, while shallow questions can be answered with less knowledge or understanding of the topic. Consider, for instance, the following questions:

1. What is organization development?
2. How is the Action Research Model, which is the underpinning for most organization development interventions, different from the Instructional Systems Design model that is the underpinning for most rigorously designed training efforts?

Both questions gauge the learners' understanding of organization development, but the second question requires deeper knowledge to answer than the first. To answer it, learners not only need to know what organization development is but also what it is not and how it compares to training. Use different levels of questions to assess the depth of learner understanding and their readiness or confidence to provide answers.

When you ask questions, normally start by asking shallow questions and gradually move into deeper ones as the learners' knowledge increases. Take care not to leap into deep questions that are far beyond the learners' ability to answer, since that will reduce their confidence in

Exhibit 8-3
Question type checklist.

Directions: Categorize the questions asked during training by type. Count the number of each question as well.

Types	Questions asked during training	Total number of questions asked for each type
Open		
Closed		
Overhead		
Direct		
Reversed		
Redirected		

their own ability. Try instead to build their confidence by matching questions appropriately to their level of understanding.

HOW SHOULD QUESTIONS BE DIRECTED?

The direction of a question has to do with the way it is framed and delivered. Directing questions appropriately ensures that you achieve intended purposes. When questions are directed effectively, the learners' confidence level is enhanced. This section provides more information about issues you should consider and strategies you should use to direct questions effectively.

PROMOTING PARTICIPATION THROUGH QUESTIONING

As mentioned earlier, one primary purpose of questions is to encourage learner involvement. Questions should be delivered in ways that do not threaten learners and decrease participation. Overhead and direct questions are the most important here. If the chance exists that direct questions may cause anxiety among learners, substitute an overhead question. An overhead question encourages any learner to respond. If many overhead questions are used throughout delivery, all learners are presented with repeated opportunities to participate. This strategy does not guarantee the involvement of everyone, but increases the likelihood of that. Further, if certain learners consistently choose not to respond to overhead questions, use a "softly" delivered direct question to nudge a reluctant or shy participant.

HANDLING RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS

How you handle responses to questions is important in encouraging learner involvement. Learners will not respond if they feel you will punish them with embarrassment, condescension, or sarcasm when they do not provide correct answers. On the other hand, if all responses are welcomed with no penalty or negative reaction, then the learners' comfort levels increase and they are more likely to participate.

Several ways exist to handle incorrect answers. One is, of course, to redirect the question to other learners. A second is to praise any portion of the question that was answered correctly. A third is to praise or recognize the first person to try to answer—even when the answer is not correct. You can recognize learners in many ways, such as giving them a round of applause, verbally praising them, giving them a prize, or giv-

ing them a reward (like candy). Doing this helps people feel that attempts at participation are as important as the response itself. While the response is not necessarily rewarded, the effort is.

MATCHING THE LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING

Frame your questions to match the learners' level of understanding. As you progress through training, the questions should become more challenging. But asking questions that are too difficult will only reduce or stop participation. Once again, the difficulty with this is that all learners have varying levels of understanding. You must be able to gauge each learner's level when asking questions so that you do not overwhelm some of them and bore others. You can attain this fine balance by constantly observing learners' behavior.

USING AN APPROPRIATE NUMBER OF QUESTIONS

You need to remain aware of how many questions, as well as what type of questions, you are using. If you provide too many questions at once, learners will not know how to start answering. They may feel overwhelmed or confused.

Some experts claim that you should pose about one question every five minutes. That rule of thumb, however, may be inappropriate for some training, such as technical training. Still, the more effective questions you ask, the better.

SELECTING RESPONDENTS

Selecting respondents is a topic related to questioning that is rarely discussed. Sometimes a few learners will monopolize all answers. Their hands shoot up every time a question is asked, but nobody else seems to be willing to answer. In such cases, selecting who will respond becomes easier due to the small number of choices. When only a few learners respond to all questions, it becomes important for you to involve those not responding so that the voices of a few do not dominate the entire program. Making an effort to involve others, through direct questions or other methods, can help to distribute the responses evenly among all learners.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, sometimes a large number of learners want to respond to questions. When this happens you have the dilemma of choosing whom to select. One option is to let one learner respond but then afford others the opportunity to build on to what the first person said. Another viable strategy is to vary deliberately on

whom you call. If you attempt to let each learner respond to questions, different perspectives will be heard, which will enrich the learning experience. A third strategy is to vary your way of selecting people to answer questions. You may, for instance, explain that you will only call on someone seated in a specific row of seats. Read the following training dilemma and how a savvy trainer was able to overcome it.

Lea was new to her organization and was immediately identified as a good communicator. Consequently, she was asked to conduct several communication workshops. She was excited at the prospect of this new venture and the workshops started out well. She was well prepared to get people involved by having a list of questions ready to keep the conversation moving and was amazed at how well people responded. However, after some time, she realized that only three of the twenty people in the class were answering questions. In fact, it got to the point that the other learners expected the three eager students to answer the questions, so they made no attempt to respond. Lea knew she was losing the class so she immediately put them into five smaller groups containing four people. Then, she asked the questions, instructed them to answer the questions as a group, and then had them elect a spokesperson to answer the questions to the larger group. After every group had their chance to speak, she asked them to change spokespersons. The result was more participation from everyone.

HOW IS ACTIVE LISTENING RELATED TO QUESTIONING?

Active listening means the visible behaviors you exhibit to show the speaker that you are listening. An often-neglected aspect of questioning skills is the trainer's ability to listen actively to the answers provided by learners. How you listen is critical because it is the best way for you to recognize if your question was understood, if the participant understands what he or she has learned, and if corrective action is necessary.

Active listening is used when learners are transmitting a message—as well as feelings—to the trainer. When learners feel that you have been listening carefully to them, they realize that their comments or responses are valued and respected. That contributes to a positive learning climate.

Use Exhibit 8-4 to assess your own active listening skills. The tool in this exhibit focuses on the key elements that contribute to active listening. These elements will be explored in the next section.

Exhibit 8-4
Active listening skills assessment tool.

Directions: Rate yourself on the following questions using the 1 to 5 scale. Then ask a colleague to rate you. Compare your responses to those of your colleague. The items where there are differences could represent areas to focus on to improve your active listening skills. Use the results of this assessment as a starting point to improve your active listening skills.

1. When listening to others, I make eye contact					
1 <i>Never</i>	2 <i>Rarely</i>	3 <i>Occasionally</i>	4 <i>Usually</i>	5 <i>Always</i>	
2. When listening to others, I lean forward					
1 <i>Never</i>	2 <i>Rarely</i>	3 <i>Occasionally</i>	4 <i>Usually</i>	5 <i>Always</i>	
3. After listening to others, I correctly paraphrase what they said					
1 <i>Never</i>	2 <i>Rarely</i>	3 <i>Occasionally</i>	4 <i>Usually</i>	5 <i>Always</i>	
4. While listening to others, I think about how to respond					
1 <i>Never</i>	2 <i>Rarely</i>	3 <i>Occasionally</i>	4 <i>Usually</i>	5 <i>Always</i>	
5. When listening to others, my mind wanders to other topics					
1 <i>Never</i>	2 <i>Rarely</i>	3 <i>Occasionally</i>	4 <i>Usually</i>	5 <i>Always</i>	
6. After listening to others, I ask clarifying questions					
1 <i>Never</i>	2 <i>Rarely</i>	3 <i>Occasionally</i>	4 <i>Usually</i>	5 <i>Always</i>	
7. When listening to others, I watch their facial expressions for cues to understanding					
1 <i>Never</i>	2 <i>Rarely</i>	3 <i>Occasionally</i>	4 <i>Usually</i>	5 <i>Always</i>	
8. When listening to others, I observe nonverbal language					
1 <i>Never</i>	2 <i>Rarely</i>	3 <i>Occasionally</i>	4 <i>Usually</i>	5 <i>Always</i>	
9. When listening to others, I am able to detect underlying feelings					
1 <i>Never</i>	2 <i>Rarely</i>	3 <i>Occasionally</i>	4 <i>Usually</i>	5 <i>Always</i>	

USING NONVERBAL BEHAVIORS TO CONVEY ACTIVE LISTENING

When two people communicate, nonverbal cues indicate how much active listening is occurring. Maintaining eye contact with someone is a powerful way to show that you are listening to them. If you were listening to learners as they respond to a question but you were also continually looking around the room or at your notes, the learners will feel that you are not listening to them. On the other hand, if you maintain direct eye contact with the speaker, it shows that you are paying close attention. Further, eye contact is useful for detecting subtle nonverbal cues from the speaker representing important feelings that are embedded in the message.

Other nonverbal behaviors can also demonstrate to the learner that you are actively listening. You can, for instance, show that you are paying attention by frequent nodding, leaning toward the speaker, or using facial expressions such as smiling or raising your eyebrows. When you offer such nonverbal acknowledgements to the learner, the learner's confidence level can be enhanced. Further, learners realize, through such cues, that you understand what they are saying. (If you do not understand, interrupt by asking, "Do you mean...?" or "What are you saying?")

PARAPHRASING TO CONFIRM LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING

You can also demonstrate active listening skills as well as confirm your understanding by the responses you give to learners. If you make such remarks as "yes," "right," and even "uh-huh," you are showing that you are listening to the learner. In addition, an especially powerful way to confirm that you are listening is to stop the speaker periodically and provide a paraphrase. *Paraphrasing* occurs when you restate, in your own words, what the speaker has said. Paraphrasing does not involve a verbatim repetition of the words. Instead, it typically takes the form of a phrase that captures the essence of what was said. Paraphrasing demonstrates to the learner that you have listened and understood or it gives the learner an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings detected. Other active listening techniques, on the other hand, are more superficial. For example, nodding and making eye contact may convey to the speaker that you are listening, but your mind could be wandering.

Paraphrasing can be a difficult skill to master, for several reasons. First, most people have a tendency to take what is said at face value, but

a speaker's body language and tone can tip off a careful listener that the person does not believe what he or she is saying. For example, a learner may nod his head in apparent agreement with an argument you are making, but his folded arms could be an indication that he really is not in agreement. It is tough to paraphrase the emotionally laden content of a message. Second, if the speaker is not clear in what he or she says, it can become difficult to capture the message. Third, when there are distractions in the background—such as other people talking—it is difficult to hear on multiple levels at once. Fourth, when someone talks for a long time and conveys complex thoughts and feelings, you may have trouble capturing it all in a simple paraphrase.

For these reasons, pay close attention to what is being said and how it is being said while simultaneously processing it for a more concise retelling. Then pause and clarify in your mind what the learner said. Once you have it pictured, you can paraphrase the key elements. If you are unsure about anything the speaker said, seek clarification before paraphrasing. You might say something like, "I wasn't clear about one point. Would you mind repeating what you said about..." to convey that you may not have fully understood what the speaker said.

VERIFYING YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Another technique to use when you paraphrase is to add a qualifying statement at the beginning. For instance, you could say, "I thought I heard you say that..." or "My understanding of what you said was..." followed by the paraphrased version of the comments. Such statements—followed by a question such as "Is this correct?" or "Was that what you said?"—convey that you are seeking affirmation about your understanding of the message. It is then up to the speaker to affirm, deny, or clarify what you said.

When you accurately paraphrase what the learner has said, you reap at least two benefits. First, the learner feels that you have genuinely listened and understood. That builds trust and mutual respect. Second, other learners benefit from a succinct restatement of what the learner had said.

LISTENING TO BOTH CONTENT AND FEELINGS

Content and feelings represent two sides of the communication coin. It is easier to listen to the content of what a speaker says than to unravel the emotional content loaded into the words. Feelings can be subtle and even imperceptible. Often, the feelings behind comments are not

relevant in many training situations, such as when a learner is making a general statement or is responding to an informational question. However, some responses given by learners are emotionally loaded. For example, a learner may feel excited, confused, or angry. Whatever the source of those emotions, you must recognize, identify, and show sensitivity to the feelings that are expressed. Examine Exhibit 8-5, which provides a list of common feelings and their potential causes. Consider the feelings and their underlying causes as you deliver training and as you listen to what learners say as they answer questions or make presentations.

Exhibit 8-5
Emotions and their potential causes.

Emotions/Feelings	Causes
Frustration	Inability to understand a concept or perform a task.
Pride	Mastery of a task, successful performance, correct response.
Boredom	Already knows content, no incentive or motivation to learn, doesn't recognize relevance of training.
Excitement	Grasped a difficult concept, participated in game or activity.
Anger	Forced to attend training, doesn't agree with content.
Appreciation	Thankfulness for learning new skills.
Anxiety	Intimidated by content, classroom environment, instructor, or other learners.

RECOGNIZING FEELINGS THROUGH VERBAL AND NONVERBAL CUES

Feelings may be conveyed through nonverbal behaviors. For this reason, you should watch the person who is speaking carefully. Through facial expressions, body movements, and eye contact, the speaker expresses positive and negative feelings. For example, if a verbal response is accompanied by a smile, the learner may feel pride or confidence in the response. A frown or scowl, in contrast, could signify a lack of comprehension or self-confidence.

Feelings can also be conveyed through various verbal expressions, such as an increased rate of speech, a change in pitch, or a change in volume. Learners may feel excitement or anxiety when they begin to speak rapidly. Alternatively, learners may be feeling low self-confidence when they mumble or speak in a low volume.

Determining the exact feelings associated with nonverbal and verbal behaviors is difficult. But once you are aware that there are two dimensions to all responses—content (what is said) and feelings (how the speaker feels about what he or she is saying)—you can dissect a response to identify its parts.

Think about the following vignette where a trainer is able to decipher nonverbal behavior to effectively alter the training to meet learner needs:

Manabu was teaching a technical skills training course when he noticed that several people were either staring out the window or looking at their watches. Since they had recently taken a break, Manabu decided that the learners were probably bored. After asking a couple of questions to gauge their level of understanding, he realized that he was covering content with which they were already familiar. Manabu quickly moved on to a topic that was more complex and was able to generate increased interest and participation.

HOW CAN QUESTIONS BE REPEATED, REPHRASED, AND RESTRUCTURED?

When you listen actively, you may detect learner errors or misperceptions. When you do, you must correct them. The most common errors you may notice are incorrect answers to your questions, partial or incomplete responses, or undecipherable responses. To take corrective action in such situations, you may need to redeliver the question to the learner. When learners provide a response that is only partially correct,

recognize it and build upon the partial answer through new questions or through repeating, rephrasing, or restructuring the original question. This section discusses strategies for doing this so that the goal of producing an appropriate response is achieved.

REPEATING QUESTIONS

Repeating a question involves simply restating it as it was originally delivered. That is one way you can take corrective action when learners give a poor response or are simply confused. Sometimes learners do not hear all or part of a question or do not understand it completely. In such cases, repeating the question allows them to hear it again and gives them time to rethink it and provide another response to it. When you ask questions, make it a practice to ask the question and then to repeat it immediately. This helps to ensure that everyone hears the question and gives them time, as the question is repeated, to prepare a response.

REPHRASING QUESTIONS

When learners give a poor response to one of your questions, you may find it helpful to rephrase the question. *Rephrasing a question* means repeating it with a slight variation. Rephrasing provides learners with another version of the same question that, although presented differently, has essentially the same meaning. The purpose is to guide learners toward more correct or complete responses than they provided originally. To signal the learners that a rephrased question will follow, you can say something like, "In other words..." or "Stated another way..." followed by the rephrased question.

When you prepare for delivering a training session you should practice different ways of asking the same question. Doing this provides you with an arsenal of questions from which to draw if a restatement becomes necessary. Typically you will restate questions when you detect confusion among the learners or when the responses are not correct. Doing this not only ensures that the question is heard by all learners, but also provides adequate response time.

But beware of one problem in using this technique: Learners may mistake the rephrased question for a completely different question rather than for a restatement of the same question. Because this could lead to confusion, use the technique carefully, such as asking the person who originated the question whether it was rephrased correctly. The following dialogue is an example of a repeated and rephrased question.

TRAINER: *What questions do you have?*

BONNIE: *Is there a time when using the technique is wrong?*

TRAINER: *(Looking at Bonnie) That's a good question. (Then, turning to the group) The question that was raised is whether or not there are times when it may not be best, or even harmful, to use this technique. (Then, turning back to Bonnie) Is that what you were asking?*

BONNIE: *Yes.*

TRAINER: *(Turning to the group) There are several occasions when this technique should not be used...*

The trainer in this dialogue not only repeated the question but also rephrased it, elaborated on it, and checked for agreement from the originator of the question.

RESTRUCTURING QUESTIONS

To restructure a question means to alter it fundamentally to help the learners understand it. Restructuring a question may be required if you detect problems with the original question. Perhaps the question did not make sense, was incomplete, or was too complex. These problems may be detected based on the response provided by the learner or by the learner's reaction, such as bewilderment. In such cases restructuring may be needed.

A *double-barreled question*, as the name indicates, asks two or more questions embedded in one. That can cause confusion. An example of a double-barreled question is, "Do you feel that it is important for supervisors to communicate expectations for employees and reward the achievement of goals?" Such a question may cause confusion because it contains two completely different questions. One question relates to communicating expectations and a second question relates to rewarding goal achievement. Breaking it into two distinct questions makes this question clearer.

Another type of question that can lead to problems is the *leading question*. Perhaps the most famous leading question is, "When did you stop beating your wife?" That is a leading question because any answers seem to accept the underlying premise that the listener was, in fact, beating his wife at some point. Another example of a leading question that could occur in a training course is, "What is the best part of the new

sales incentive program?" That is a leading question because it implies that the new program is good and also that it has only one best component. Leading questions may need restructuring because they may restrict learner thinking or lead learners to challenge your assumptions.

This section has presented strategies for repeating, rephrasing, and restructuring a question following an inaccurate or inappropriate response provided by a learner or a poorly asked question by the trainer. The purpose of these techniques is to present learners with a new or revised question that is more likely to result in a correct response. Since inaccurate responses are potentially embarrassing to learners it is paramount that you repeat, rephrase, or restructure the question without causing distress or humiliation. Handling incorrect responses in a way that does not lead to embarrassment or punishment creates a supportive learning environment. As mentioned earlier, when learners answer incorrectly, you can provide positive feedback on their effort. Doing this also contributes to a supportive environment in which learners feel comfortable and where learning can take place.

HOW SHOULD YOU PROVIDE TIME FOR LEARNERS TO RESPOND?

When you ask a question, provide ample time for learners to respond. The exact amount of time required varies, depending on the rate at which people can process information after a question has been posed, or the rate at which they are able to formulate responses or questions. To make sure that you have allowed sufficient time, try to identify and monitor general patterns of information processing and question development. Once you understand the patterns, you can match the allotted time accordingly.

A mistake sometimes made is not to allow sufficient response time, such as asking learners, "What questions do you have?" and then moving immediately into the next statement. A similar error is to say, "If there are no questions, we'll move on" and then proceed into the next segment without even glancing around the room. In both examples, learners are not given enough time to form questions and get up the courage to ask them. Further, it communicates to learners that you do not really want a response, making it a *rhetorical question*.

Another mistake is to allow too much time for response. A question such as "What questions do you have?" could be followed by a long period of silence as you wait for a response. Or you could wait too long for an individual learner to answer a direct question. Waiting too long

puts undue pressure on people because they feel compelled to provide an answer, or to ask a question even when they do not have one. This pressure creates discomfort among the learners and makes the learning climate less conducive to openness.

USING SILENCE AFTER A QUESTION

A silence or pause after you ask a question can serve several useful purposes. As mentioned above, a common mistake is to not allow enough time for learners to answer. One strategy is to incorporate a pause or period of silence after the question has been posed so learners have adequate time to form an answer. A deliberate period of silence after a question also sends the message to an otherwise shy, quiet, or reluctant learner that a response is expected.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we examined effective questioning skills and techniques. Trainers who master this competency should be able to do the following:

- Use the different types and levels of questions effectively—including open and closed questions, overhead and direct questions, and reversed and redirected questions.
- Use direct questions appropriately.
- Use active listening skills.
- Repeat, rephrase, and restructure questions.
- Use silence and pauses after posing questions to give learners time to process information, respond, comment, and ask questions themselves.

STRATEGY LIST

Actionable Strategies to Improve Training Effectiveness:

Use Questions Effectively

- Use questions to assess learner understanding, identify learner preferences, encourage participation, enable reflection, and to capture and hold learner attention.

- Ask questions that are challenging enough to hold learner interest, but not so difficult that learners are unable to answer.
- Do not overuse questions or your audience may stop responding to them.
- Avoid forcing people to answer questions so that you do not alienate them or put them on the spot.
- Float several test questions and listen to the responses you receive to determine the learners' current level of comprehension.
- Set expectations up front that you plan to ask questions and want their participation.
- Only ask one question at a time to avoid confusing learners.
- Redirect learner questions to the entire group to encourage everyone's participation and to capitalize on the group's knowledge.
- Track the types and levels of the questions you ask to ensure you are maintaining a balance.
- Vary to whom you ask questions and how you ask them.
- Once you ask a question, use active listening skills to demonstrate that you sincerely care about the response. Make eye contact, lean toward the learner who is responding, nod in approval for the response, paraphrase what you hear, and assume a casual posture.
- Avoid using leading questions since they may restrict learner thinking or lead learners to challenge your motives.
- Avoid using double-barreled questions which combine two or more questions into one and confuse learners.
- Use silence after asking a question to provide learners with time to consider and reflect before answering. If you begin talking too quickly after asking a question, learners assume they do not have to answer questions if they wait long enough. However, don't wait too long either. This may create an uncomfortable environment for you as well as the learners.

Strategies for Using Different Types of Questions

- Ask a variety of open, closed, and follow-up questions to elicit different responses depending upon the level of participation you are seeking.
- Use closed questions to gauge participant reactions or opinions.
- Use open questions when you want to encourage more dialogue and participation.
- Instead of asking, "Does anyone have any questions?" ask, "What questions do you have?" This open versus closed question will encourage people to respond with something other than a simple yes or no.
- Use overhead questions when you want to elicit responses or gain the attention of the entire group.
- Use direct questions when you want to elicit responses or gain the attention of an individual learner.
- Use follow-up questions when you want to probe deeper into learner responses.
- Use reversed or reflective questions to clarify learner questions to the rest of the group.
- Use redirected questions to avoid informing learners that they have given an incorrect response by subtly redirecting the question to the rest of the group.

Levels of Questions

- Use different levels of questions to assess the depth of learner understanding and their readiness or confidence to provide answers.
- Begin by asking shallow questions and gradually move to the more difficult (deeper) questions.