

## Information sheet

# Effective questioning

Guides to questioning techniques often recommend the 5WH approach. This stands for: What? Why? When? Where? Who? How?

This is a useful starting point for thinking about the sort of questions you might ask, but there is more to questioning in motivational dialogue than the 5WH model suggests.

You are not a detective in search of the truth. Yours is a partnership role with your learners, so questioning is a two-way process – for the learner's benefit as well as yours. You ask questions to:

- elicit information that will feed into planning the next step
- help learners reflect on their experiences and to reinforce their motivation for change.

You need to develop a questioning approach that encourages dialogue:

- is collaborative rather than prescriptive;
- respects the learner's autonomy and encourages self-direction;
- explores what the learner is able and willing to do;
- demonstrates a genuine interest in the learner's experience and points of view.

### Closed questions

Questions that can be answered with 'yes' or 'no' or with a very specific piece of information – have their place. But learners usually talk more willingly and freely in response to open questions because these convey the message that you are genuinely interested in the way learners see things.

Effective questioning means:

- choosing questions that suit your purpose;
- including reflective listening statements and summaries to keep the flow of the conversation going.

Imagine putting questions like these to your learners.

- **Do** you know how to use e-mail?

- **Is** it time for your review?
- **Can** you drive a car?
- **Could** you answer the questions in that test?
- **Will** you be staying on here next month?
- **Would** you consider a placement in a supermarket?
- **When** will you be 18?
- **Shall** we put you down for the next course?
- **Should** I send a letter to your parents about this?
- **Are** you going to study at college?

What are they likely to answer? Assuming that they are reasonably cooperative, they will most probably answer 'yes' or 'no', or give you a specific piece of information because these are all closed questions.

Closed questions are useful when you want:

- a 'yes' or 'no' answer;
- very specific information;
- to establish agreement;
- to check something before going any further.

They are **not** helpful when you want to invite learners to talk about themselves and their experiences. In fact, they have the potential to stifle the free flow of a conversation. They can set up a balance of power where you pose the questions and the learner has to search for the 'right' answer.

### **Watch out for ...**

If you start a conversation with a series of closed questions, you could be setting expectations that you will do all the thinking and talking. So, once you have welcomed the learner, established the purpose of the meeting and set a time limit, ask an inviting open question as soon as you can.

If this does not move things in the way you had hoped, follow up with a slightly more focused open question.

## Open questions

If you want a learner to talk more widely, use open questions.

- When you think about doing another work placement, **how** do you feel?
- **What** happened?
- **Why** do you think he made that suggestion?
- **What's** going on here right now?

Open questions can be answered in many different ways. They encourage learners to:

- clarify their thinking;
  - “When you say ‘...’, what do you mean?”
  - “You say he’s got something against you. What would be an example of that?”
- look at the assumptions they might be making;
  - “Why might someone say that?”
  - “What might be a reason for her doing that?”
- look for the evidence behind the judgements they are making;
  - “You say it’s rubbish. What is the basis for saying that?”
- think about the implications of what they think, say and do;
  - “If you say that to your friend, how do you think she might react?”
  - “If you go out with your mates tonight, what might be the effects on your work tomorrow?”
- consider other viewpoints or perspectives;
  - “How is what you’ve just said different from what your supervisor said?”
  - “How do you think your tutor might describe what you’ve done?”

### Watch out for ...

‘Why?’ is a tricky question to ask: it can sound confrontational and aggressive. Guard against this by using a gentle tone of voice. Soften the question with extra words that involve the learner directly.

For example, it is easier to ask “Why do you think that happened?” with genuine interest than “Why did that happen?”

## When a learner is reluctant to talk

Sometimes a learner is disinclined to open up and answers with 'Don't know' or 'Nothing'. Do not give up. Try giving a little more context or explanation, or asking another, easier open question.

For example:

"I want to make sure that we get a placement that really suits you, so tell me what made the last one so unsatisfactory for you."

(Silence.)

"What was it about it that you didn't like?"

Note the use of the words **'tell me'**. This is one of the most effective ways of encouraging someone to open up. Strictly speaking, it is not a question. It could be described as an order. In practice, it can be made to sound like an invitation to talk.

Similar invitations begin with **'Explain...'** or **'Describe...'**

These are powerful ways of moving a conversation in a particular direction while still giving learners room to say what is on their mind.

### Watch out for ...

Sometimes a learner might talk at length about things that seem irrelevant to the question you have asked. If this happens, you may feel uneasy, and want to re-focus the conversation. But if the learner has previously been reluctant to say much at all, you will build rapport and gain their trust if you listen attentively and let them lead the conversation for a few minutes. You can return to your question later.

## What to avoid when asking questions

- Multiple questions that leave the learner wondering what to answer first.
  - "How are you doing on your placement? Is it going as you expected? And are you getting on OK with your supervisor?"
- Forced choice.
  - "When that happened, was it because the supervisor hadn't told you what to do, or because you had forgotten?"

(NB: You might choose a forced choice question if you want to focus attention on particular options. For example: “Which time suits you better, 2pm or 4pm?”)

- Asking questions to which you already know the answers. The learner will sense that you are manipulating them.
- Leading questions that convey that you expect the learner to agree with you or that indicate the answer you expect.
  - “The reason you got into a mess was because you forgot the rules, wasn’t it?”
  - “Don’t you think you ought to complete your placement?”

### **What to do when you do not get the answers you are looking for**

- Wait! Some people think as they talk; others think and then speak. So allow for both. By waiting, you are allowing a silence to emerge. This signals that you really want to hear what the learner has to say.
- Repeat the question softly, so as not to interrupt what the learner might be thinking. Gentle persistence is another way of showing that you genuinely want the learner to answer.
- If your learner is struggling to answer an open question, perhaps your question lacked focus. Try rephrasing it to make it a little more specific but keep it open. Avoid rephrasing it as a leading question because this would signal that you are looking for confirmation of your own point of view, rather than hearing from the learner.

#### **Watch out for ...**

When a learner does not answer your open question, it is tempting to provide the answer yourself.

Resist the temptation. Rephrase your question instead.

\*Ted Daszkiewicz and Paul Lalgée supported the development of the ‘motivational dialogue’ resources for the Standards Unit E2E resources. The resources are based on:

Miller W.R. and Rollnick S., *Motivational interviewing: preparing people for change*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New York, Guilford Publications, Inc.

Further information can also be found at: [www.motivationalinterview.org](http://www.motivationalinterview.org)