

Becoming a master-asker

10 keys to asking strategic, powerful and effective questions

By Michael McQueen



Teaching; it is something we all do in one way or another. Naturally, we picture teachers as those who stand at the front of classrooms impacting information to students. However, teaching is so much broader. Parents teach children, employers teach staff, sports coaches teach teams, mentors teach protégés.

Traditionally, the notion of teaching in all its various forms centered on the teacher being something of a source... a fountain of knowledge. The built-in assumption was that the student was an empty vessel that needed filling. Not that many decades ago, this approach to teaching was entirely appropriate and necessary. After all, books were valuable and rare, information was held by those in power and access to education was reserved for the aristocracy.

These days, however, the Information Age has profoundly changed the nature and needs of students. Young people today have access to more information at their fingertips than entire countries did just fifty years ago in national libraries. As the old adage says, none of us knows as much as all of us and today 'all of us' is the whole planet sharing information, perspectives and experiences. Just two words typed into a Google search can return well over 100,000 articles in 0.37 of a second. Students today have a source of knowledge; it's called Google, Wikipedia and YouTube. While this fountain may be notoriously unreliable, it is an ever-present source of knowledge that any teacher will find it almost impossible to compete with.

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All this means one thing - teaching from the 'source of knowledge' perspective is becoming increasingly unnecessary. The parents, employers and classroom teachers and educational institutions that are successfully engaging today's young people recognize this shift. The key in getting through to today's students focus on being *facilitators* of knowledge rather than fountain. The distinction? Fountains focus on having all the right answers, whereas facilitators focus on asking all the right *questions*.

By far, the most significant skill in becoming a good facilitator of learning is the ability to ask questions that are strategic and powerful.

To find out more of what constitutes a 'good' question, I interviewed an award-winning counselor and social worker with over 30 years experience. Drawing on countless hours of asking powerful and strategic questions of her clients, this counselor suggested a number of keys to asking effective questions. I believe that many of these will work as well for you at home, work or in the classroom as they do in a counselor's office:

1. Avoid closed questions that lead to a yes or no response. First things first; the purpose of a question *not* to get an answer. Rather the purpose of a good question is to open dialogue and encourage thought and reflection. In their book *The Art of Powerful Questions* Vogt, Brown and Isaacs state: "Questions open the door to dialogue and discovery. They are an invitation to creativity and breakthrough thinking". If a question leads to a response that shuts down the conversation, it is a wasted opportunity.

2. Never start questions with the word 'why'. If you start a question with the word 'why', you will tend to set up an adversarial situation ie "Why did you do/say that?" Typically, a 'why' question backs the respondent into a corner and will make them feel they need to justify their behaviour, beliefs or attitude. The response will often take one of two forms; either they will *attack* you for asking the question (it's not my fault, you wouldn't understand, how dare you ask me that etc) or they will simply *play the game* - they'll tell you what they think you want to hear.

By simply starting questions with words like *who, what, when, where* or *how* rather than *why*, you will avoid many of the conflicts and dismissals you would otherwise receive.

3. Ask one question at a time and keep questions short and sharp. If you ask 2 or more questions at a time, the respondent will likely become confused and won't respond for fear of looking foolish.

4. Never ask loaded or leading questions that imply a prejudice e.g. 'Do you listen to deafening music like all young people?'

5. Ask questions with an enquiring, curious and interested tone. Questions that interrogate, embarrass or have the goal of 'catching out' the respondent will destroy vital rapport and trust. e.g. 'When are you going to take charge of your life and look for a job?'

Using phrases like 'Tell me about that', 'What do you mean?', 'Can you elaborate for me?' gives the respondent permission to think and learn out loud. Well-asked questions have the unique potential to bring underlying assumptions to the surface and lead to self-reflection.

6. Never ridicule or dismiss a response. An incorrect or misguided answer is simply an opportunity to ask another question. It is crucial that respondents feel safe to suggest an opinion or have a go.

7. Answer a question with a question. If your child or student asks you a question that is designed to catch you out or to test you, respond with a question of your own. It's no wonder that many parents and teachers describe their homes and classrooms as 'out of control'. After all, the first lesson any salesperson learns when going out in the field is that whoever is asking the questions is in control of the conversation. If your students or children are asking all the questions and you are giving all the answers, it is easy to see who is controlling (let's call it 'leading') the conversation. The challenge is to respond to their questions with questions of your own that are not patronizing, trite or insincere.

8. Be genuine. If you are not interested in the response, don't ask the question.

9. Recognize that all questions have an impact regardless of the response. Sometimes the best questions will be dismissed immediately by the respondent only to prompt thought and consideration after the fact.

10. Reduce your expectations of what constitutes a 'good response'. Sometimes a grunt is an answer. Be grateful for that and respond positively and respectfully.

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Questions are indeed the answer. Regardless of whether you are an employer, a parent or a teacher, questions are the key to unlocking your young people's creativity, imagination, and capacity to reason. If you can get good at asking questions, you are more than halfway there.



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