Center for Leadership & Educational Equity

Pocket Guide to Probing Questions

Developed by Gene Thompson-Grove (adapted from Thompson-Grove and Edorah Frazer).

CLARIFYING QUESTIONS are simple questions of fact. They clarify the dilemma and provide the nuts and bolts so that participants can ask good probing questions and provide useful feedback later in the protocol. Clarifying questions are for the participants, and should not go beyond the boundaries of the presenter's dilemma. They have brief, factual answers, and don't provide any new "food for thought" for the presenter. The litmus test for a clarifying question is: Does the presenter have to think before they answer? If so, it's almost certainly a probing question.

Some examples of clarifying questions:
- How much time does the project take?
- How were the students grouped?
- What resources did the students have available for this project?

PROBING (or POWERFUL, OPEN) QUESTIONS are intended to help the presenter think more deeply about the issue at hand. If a probing question doesn't have that effect, it is either a clarifying question or a recommendation with an upward inflection at the end. If you find yourself asking *"Don't you think you should ...?" or "What would happen if ...?"* you've gone beyond a probing question to giving advice. The presenter often doesn't have a ready answer to a genuine probing question.

A good probing question:
- Allows for multiple responses
- Avoids yes/no responses
- Empowers the person being asked the question to solve the problem or manage the dilemma (rather than deferring to someone with greater or different expertise)
- Stimulates reflective thinking by moving thinking from reaction to reflection
- Encourages perspective taking
- Challenges assumptions
- Channels inquiry
- Promises insight
- Touches a deeper meaning
- Creates a paradigm shift
- Evokes more questions
- Is concise
- Prompts slow response

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Since effective probing questions can be difficult to frame, we offer the following suggestions:

- Check to see if you have a "right" answer in mind. If so, delete the judgment from the question, or don't ask it.
- Refer to the presenter's original question/focus point. What did they ask for your help with? Check your probing questions for relevance.
- Check to see if you are asserting your own agenda. If so, return to the presenter's agenda.
- Sometimes a simple "why...?" asked as an advocate for the presenter's success can be very effective, as can several why questions asked in a row.
- Try using verbs: What do you fear? Want? Get? Assume? Expect?
- Think about the concentric circles of comfort, risk, and danger. Use these as a barometer. Don't avoid risk, but don't push the presenter into the "danger zone."
- Think of probing questions as being on a continuum, from "recommendation" to "most effective probing question" as a way to distinguish between suggestions, advice giving, and probing questions. Consider these questions from a Consultancy, during which a teacher presented a dilemma about increasing students' commitment to quality work:
    - — Could you have the students use a rubric to assess their work? (recommendation re-stated as a question)
    - — What would happen if students assessed the quality of their work themselves? (recommendation re-stated as a question)
    - — Why should students be invested in doing quality work? (probing question)
    - — What would have to change for students to work more for themselves and less for you? (more effective probing question)

Possible probing question stems:

- Why do you think this is the case?
- What would have to change in order for...?
- What do you feel is right?
- What's another way you might...?
- How is...different from...?
- What sort of an impact do you think...?
- When have you done/experienced something like this before? What does this remind you of?
- How did you decide/determine/conclude...?
- What is your hunch about...?
- What was your intention when...?
- What do you assume to be true about...?
- What is the connection between...and...?
- What if the opposite were true? Then what?
- How might your assumptions about...have influenced how you are thinking about...?
- What surprises you about...? Why are you surprised?
- What is the best thing that could happen?
- What are you most afraid will happen?
- What do you need to ask to better understand?
- How do you feel when...? What might this tell you about...?
- What is the one thing you won't compromise?
- What criteria do you use...?
- Do you think the problem is X, Y, or something else?
- What evidence exists....?
- If you were X, how would you see this situation?
- If time, money were not an issue...?

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