Center for Leadership & Educational Equity

Southern Maine Partnership Guide to Good Probing Questions

Developed by the Southern Maine Partnership.

Many of the structured conversations or protocols currently used in education include a period of time for "probing questions." This Guide offers one approach to defining and constructing probing questions that has been informed by the work of educators in Southern Maine Partnership schools.

There's no way to assure that a probing question will be a good one — that is determined by its impact on the receiver. But we can increase the likelihood that a probing question will be good by following the ideas in this Guide.

What are the attributes of good probing questions? Good probing questions:

- Are for the benefit of the receiver and the colleagues and students they impact
- Deepen and expand thinking and conversation
- Sustain thinking beyond the moment
- Are relevant and important to the receiver
- Keep learning at the center
- Help foster a sense that participants are a community of learners
- Are concise
- Elicit a slow, reflective response
- Are exploratory - they do not contain explicit recommendations or directives
- Are non-judgmental - neutral rather than positive or negative

A few more words about judgments may be helpful

Judgments are expressed in a variety of ways including word choice, "tone" of voice, and body language. Our tendency to judge may or may not be natural or hard-wired, but it's clear that we can choose when and how we express our judgments. The expression of judgments, positive and negative, play a significant role in most clinical supervision and evaluation processes; this should NOT be true within the Probing Questions portion of a protocol. It's especially important to guard against asking probing questions that contain an expression of negative judgment, e.g. "Why, in heaven's name, did you do that?", or "Don't you think you should at least try to...?" The expression of negative judgments often puts people in the "danger zone," where they tend to shut down. If a negative judgment is expressed, the problem can usually be pointed out by another participant or the facilitator, and it can often be addressed with a simple, "I'm sorry," followed by moving on.

What should people keep in mind when constructing a probing question?

- Assume that the receiver intends well in their work as an educator.
- Think of yourself as an advocate for the success of the receiver.
- Prepare your question carefully before you ask it.
- Internally check your question for relevance to the receiver's original questions and focus.
- Remember the concentric circles of comfort, discomfort, risk and danger. Don't avoid discomfort and risk, but make questions appropriate to the trust level of the group.

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Examples of suggestive but still probing questions:

a. What's another way you could...?
b. What sort of impact would there be if you...?
c. What would it look like if you...?
d. What might you see happening if you...?
e. What would have to change in order for...?
f. What would happen if...?
g. What could you do that might cause x to...?
h. Have you considered/explored/looked into/thought about...?
i. Would it be possible to...?
j. Is there a way to...?
k. How would it work if you...?
l. Do you think there needs to be...?

4. Examples of good exploratory probing questions:

a. What criteria did you use to...?
b. How did you decide/conclude that...?
c. How was _____ different from _____?
d. What's your hunch about...?
e. What do you think the connection is between _____ and _____?
f. How might your assumptions about x have influenced your thinking about y?
g. When have you done/experienced something like this before?
h. In your heart, what do you feel is right?
i. What evidence exists that...?
j. How do you know that...?
k. Do you think the problem is _____ or _____ or something else?
l. Do you know of any successes in the past in similar situations that could give you insight into this situation?
m. Why is this a dilemma or problem for you/from your perspective?
n. Is there something in this situation that raises some fear in you?
o. What was your decision-making process?
p. How did you decide to do it that way?
q. If you were x, how would you see this situation?
r. How is this situation different than...?
s. Why do you think this happened this way?
t. What do you think is the reason for...?
u. What did/do you hope? expect? wish?
v. What's your perception or analysis of...?
w. If time, money, etc. were not an issue...?
x. Who (else) could help with this?
y. What (else) could you try to help this situation?
z. Why did you choose to do it this way?
aa. What was your intention when...?

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