

8 Ways to Improve a Question

By Warren Berger

How do you improve a question? I'm sure there are many potential answers to that, but in thinking about it, I came up with these eight ways to take an existing question and make it better:

Open it up. If you want something more than a yes or no answer, take a closed question and open it up by starting the question with words like What, Why, or How. So instead of asking *Have things changed since last year?*, it is better to ask: *How have things changed since last year?*

Close it down. There are times, however, when closing a question (so that it elicits a simple “yes or no” answer) can help you identify a built-in faulty assumption. Before spending too much time wondering, *Why are we having this problem?*, you may want to ask: *Is it a problem?*

Sharpen it. Precise questions will tend to yield better answers. Instead of “How will current changes in the market affect us?” better to ask, “How will the rise of e-commerce in the market affect us?”

Add a ‘Why’ to it. I'm a big believer in getting to the “question behind the question,” and that means asking not only about “What,” but also the “Why” behind the “What.” So instead of just asking, “What trend are you most concerned about?” ask “What trend are you most concerned about—and why?”

Soften it. Questions can be confrontational. It can help to add a softening phrase at the beginning, one that indicates the question is based on genuine interest, not criticism. So instead of, “Why are you doing it that way?” ask, *“I’m curious to know: why are you doing it that way?”*

Neutralize it. By this I mean, make sure the question is neutral—with no agenda, no attempt to lead someone to a desired answer. Leading questions may work for prosecutors and interrogators, but generally should be avoided. Terrible leading question: “Isn’t this new regulation a problem?” Slightly

better: “Is the new regulation a problem?” Better still: “What do you think of the new regulation?”

Smarten it up. People worry that if they ask questions at work it may make them seem uninformed. One way to deal with that is to do some homework on a particular question, before you ask that question. Then, word your question in a way that shows you’ve given this issue some thought. “I’ve been doing some research on X, and I’m wondering, How might our organization explore ways to use X to our advantage?”

Simplify it. I'm a big believer in asking fundamental questions—even if they might seem naïve. “Why are we in this business?” “What business are we really in?” “How do we define success?” These questions must be asked from time to time for purposes of clarity. Understand that if you ask fundamental questions all the time, you may drive your colleagues crazy. But every once in a while, it’s good to take a sophisticated, complex question and think about how to break it down to something much more basic.

It’s your turn!

Create 8 questions that you have about the Driving Question of our Project.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____