

QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

Of all the skills required of the super effective negotiator, the ability to ask the right question at the right time is probably the most critical.

Use open questions when you want a customer to explain or discuss something. Closed questions should be used when all required is a yes or no. Use both types of questions to gain better control of your negotiations. At the beginning of most negotiations you need to learn what the other party wants and needs, so you would use open questions. Later, you may need to employ closed questions to get the customer's agreement, to understand a request or just to manage the conversation and your time.

QUESTIONS WILL:

- keep you in control as the other party has to respond to your question
- slow down the conversation
- give you more information to help you to resolve the situation
- give you time to think about your options
- encourage the other party to talk
- draw out information, facts and opinions
- help to explore feelings and attitudes
- help to check understanding
- help the other party to think through the problem

A) OPEN QUESTIONS

They are useful for getting facts, opinion and feelings from the other party. Open questions can be identified by prefixes such as **how, what, why, where, who and when**. Open questions require the person with the problem to think and give a reasoned response. They provide a means of opening up an issue for more detailed and closer analysis. They are important in a problem-solving negotiations (and conflicts) in that they get the person with the problem to contribute and hence feel more at ease.

B) CLOSED QUESTIONS

Closed questions are used as a means of focusing on an issue or problem. They can often help to identify an issue more precisely. Such questions often start with: **is, could, should, would, can, will, isn't** etc. They require responses such as yes or no, i.e. to agree or disagree; confirm or deny.

C) QUESTION MIX

Getting the right mix between open and closed questions in all types of negotiations is important. If the dialogue is to encourage the person with the problem to make significant contributions, suggest ideas, etc., there will be a bias towards open questions, but most problem-solving discussions divide into a stage of exploring and analysing the subject or problem area and a stage of generating solutions, selecting one and developing an action plan. The mix in the first stage will clearly be more towards open questions rather than in the second stage. **A spectrum may be useful:**

- 1) To determine the other party's needs, uncover problems, understand requests or establish facts (use open questions)
- 2) To ask the other party to explain requests or problems (use open questions)
- 3) To ask for more information to determine a course of action (use both open and closed questions)
- 4) To get agreement (use closed questions)

D) PITFALLS TO AVOID

In addition to knowing about open and closed questions and the appropriate mix, both parties to the discussion need to be aware of the following pitfalls in questioning techniques.

1. Ambiguous or Vague Questions

These are often questions which change direction in mid-stream. They have the danger of encouraging the less confident negotiator to pretend to have understood the question rather than appearing stupid. They may cause the more confident negotiator to doubt the questioner's competence.

2. Double-Barreled/Multiple Questions

These are confusing as they are presented with two questions in one and it may be unclear which to answer, or whether to try to answer both, and may make the questioner look foolish by reacting with feelings.

3. Long Complicated Questions

These usually tax the negotiator's listening skills in that they start off as a question, then meander into a lecture and then revert (often quickly) back into a question.

4. A Staccato Style of Questioning

This is often seen by the person with the problem as a battery of unrelated questions (many closed) where no discussion pattern is evident. The other party may need to ask the questioner what he/she is getting at. Also, this style of questioning can be seen as an interrogation and does not help build a useful relationship.

5. A Leading Question

This will indicate in the question the response that the questioner is looking for, i.e. "*Do you have many doubts about the worth of the company's future plans?*"

6. A Loaded Question

This type of question implies a judgment and is likely to cause embarrassment.

NEGOTIATION - QUESTIONS - THE SKILLED APPROACH

- Good negotiators ask intelligent questions
- Be clear about the purpose your question serves before speaking
- Clarify statements and check for commitment
- As other parties answer your questions, check they comply with your agenda
- Keep questions short and simple
- Use silences, don't just fill them
- If a question is worth asking then it is worth persisting with the probe until you get an answer
- Phrase your questions clearly and neutrally