USING QUESTIONS WHEN FACILITATING

Questioning is a technique used by facilitators during workshops, meetings or one-on-one mentoring – it's an alternative to presenting information and answers. It's about asking the individual or group you're working with a question, or series of questions, to enable them to find their own solutions to the challenges they face.

Questioning has (at least) two clear benefits over the more traditional way of presenting information or solutions to a group:

Depth of learning: by working out the answers for themselves workshop participants learn more deeply. A series of well-chosen questions enhances learning and encourages a depth of thinking that a presentation can rarely achieve.

Interaction: asking questions throws the spotlight back onto the group. It asks participants to think through the answers for themselves. By creating more interaction it can lead to a higher quality of discussion. Interaction has the added benefits of keeping people more engaged, energized and it suits more learning styles.

An example:

You want to help an inexperienced group gain some skills at giving media interviews. You could give them a presentation on top tips for interview technique. Or you could ask them questions:

Think of an interview you've seen or heard recently.

- Did the interviewee come across well?
- What made the interview a success?
- What did they do that was less successful?
- What do you think might have worked better instead?

So, to summarize, you think that a good interview...

WHEN TO USE QUESTIONS

When the group is reflecting on, or interpreting, an experience (e.g. 'debriefing' a roleplay):

- What happened?
- How did you feel?
- What made you feel that way?
- Is that what you expected?
- What would you do differently next time?
- Did you feel listened to? Why (not)?
- What about everyone else?

Example:

The meeting that you're facilitating has just come up with a lot of ideas for a community festival. Asking the group a series of questions will help them to narrow down these ideas to a few options to investigate further.

Questions could include: "Which of these options fit with our objectives? How much time/energy are these going to need? What do we have most enthusiasm and energy for?"

When you want to draw out principles or criteria from an exercise to see how they might be applied in a real situation:

- Can you see any themes emerging here?
- Where do you think you might use these ideas?
- How do you think you could put them into effect?
- What possible problems do you need to be aware of?
- Where do you go from here?

HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS

Here are some strategies to ensure your questioning gets good results:

Have a clear aim: What learning are you trying to achieve? Ask questions that reflects this.

Plan your questions: Prepare in advance – you can't always predict where your questioning might take you, but having a few prepared questions to get you started makes all the difference.

Use open questions to explore issues. Open questions are questions that cannot be answered by a simple “yes” or “no” answer. They start with words such as “Why...?” or “What happened?”

Open questions encourage people to give more detailed answers and take away the option of saying 'no'.

Example: open questions

Instead of saying "Would anyone like to take the minutes?" (a closed question to which the reply could be "no") you might ask "Who's going to take the minutes?" (an open question that doesn't take no for an answer).

Use closed questions when you want to deliberately restrict options.

Example: closed questions

"Would you like to stop now, or go on for another 15 minutes?" excludes the possibility of going on for more than 15 minutes.

But the open question: "When would you like to end the meeting?" could leave you meeting for another hour or more!

Choose the right words: There's a big difference between “How did you feel?” and “What did you think?” Are you wanting to discuss emotion and experience (the first question), or ideas (the second question)?

Draw on people's existing experience to help them find solutions to a problem – “Does this remind you of anything in your everyday life? How do you deal with it then? How might it apply here?”

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU DON’T GET AN ANSWER…

Have a Plan B: Have an idea of what to ask next to provoke an answer or to take the group deeper into an issue.

Break the issue down... If you don't get a response to a broad question, break it down and ask a series of specific questions. If “what have you learnt about communication?” doesn't work, you might ask: “Well, what happened in the roleplay when the 'police officer' approached you?

- What was it about the way you were approached that made you feel that way?
- Was it the way they spoke to you?
- OK, so you think that their body language was important? How important?

...**Or ask a broader question:** Sometimes when you start with a specific question you won't get an answer. Try going back to the big picture before returning to your specific line of inquiry. Broad questions can warm people up for the specific learning, and give them time to reflect.

Rephrase: If you don't get an answer try rewording the question. Avoid repeating the same question – if participants couldn't or wouldn't answer it the first time, they probably won't just because you say it again!

HOW *NOT* TO ASK QUESTIONS

There are circumstances in which asking a question can be the wrong approach, or we can ask a question in an inappropriate way. Here are some of them:

Not enough thinking time: Give your participants time to think before expecting the answer!

Putting people on the spot: Think twice before asking a specific individual when you could just as well ask the whole group. Some people find being put on the spot very stressful.

The 'right' answer: If you're looking for a very specific answer, be very careful about asking your question. There are several dangers. Anyone that answers and gives you a 'wrong' answer may feel disempowered or stupid, and you may come across as being condescending too!

Leading questions: If questioning is useful to get people thinking for themselves, then asking a leading question can undermine this. Phrase your questions carefully: you might not always get what you hoped for – value what you get, and use other questions to bring you back on track.

Rhetorical questions: If you're going to ask rhetorical questions (questions to which you're not actually expecting an answer), be clear that that's what you're doing. You may confuse people and they'll be nervous about answering future questions.

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