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Business Communication

The Art of Asking Great Questions

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Summary. While listening is an important skill, the art of asking questions is equally, if not more, important when it comes to learning more about your work tasks, unlocking hidden opportunities, delivering better results, and mitigating unforeseen risks. Great questions have three main characteristics:

- Great questions demonstrate that you're thoroughly prepared for a conversation. When you convey to your client, colleague, or manager that you did your homework and are aware of the broader situation, they'll feel respected and be more inclined to share information that makes it easier for you to do your job well.
- Great questions illustrate the expertise you bring to the table, without showing it off. When you try to show off, the topic of the conversation starts revolving around you. A good conversation requires both parties to get a chance to speak and understand each other.
- Great questions invite others to deepen or broaden their thinking, and challenge their beliefs. Such questions will likely be reciprocated with loyalty and trust. They can also help uncover new opportunities for you and your clients or colleagues. If you don't stretch yourselves, neither of you will grow. [close](#)

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I've worked as a consultant for a decade now, and it's been a fulfilling journey. In this role, your core objective is to understand a client's problems — not just what they're struggling with today but what's happened in the past and what their vision for the future is. Only then can you offer advice that will work for them.

Listening is a crucial skill in this respect, but asking great questions is equally, if not more, important. How else do you expect to unearth the information you need to craft solutions?

The art of asking great questions isn't just restricted to consulting. In any industry, people with this skill are seen as more empathetic. They also lower the threshold for others to speak up, increase the quality of decisions, and foster collective intelligence. Whether you're a marketing associate, a project manager, a freelance illustrator, or something else — a great

question can help you learn more about your task, unlock hidden opportunities, deliver better results, and mitigate unforeseen risks.

To figure out what it takes to successfully hone this skill, I interviewed 12 fellow consultants who hold senior positions at prestigious firms including McKinsey, Boston Consulting Group (BCG), and Deloitte.

“In your view, what’s a great question?” I asked.

Among all their answers, three consistent characteristics emerged.

1) A great question should demonstrate that you’re thoroughly prepared for the conversation.

Instead of: “How’s business doing?”

Try: “I’ve read that one of your main competitors announced an aggressive expansion in Latin America. I’m curious to better understand how that influences your firm’s strategy to increase market share in Brazil, as depicted in your annual report?”

Instead of: “What kind of a look and feel would you like the new website to have?”

Try: “I invested time to catch up on the news about your firm and I was fascinated to read that you will start selling e-bikes in Paris as well. That’s amazing! How would you like to highlight this expansion on the new website that I will design?”

Annual reports, news outlets, LinkedIn all provide contextual information that you need to ask a well-informed question. Whatever you are asking about, you want to convey to your client, colleague, or manager that you did your homework and are aware of the broader situation. As a consequence, they will feel

respected and be more inclined to share information that drives the relationship forward and makes it easier for you to do your job well.

2) A great question illustrates the expertise you bring to the table, without showing it off.

Instead of: “Do you think your managers have the right skills to lead their teams in a ‘work from anywhere’ setting?”

Try: “Over the past quarter, we helped two clients with making ‘work from anywhere’ work. From that experience, we identified two leadership bottlenecks: the capacity to encourage team members to collaborate across silos, and the sensitivity of managers to pick up on well-being signals from team members in a virtual setting. How would you assess your overall management population on those two elements?”

Instead of: “I studied marketing at the world-famous Columbia University, and I’ve worked for the most prestigious Fortune 500 companies helping them successfully implement content marketing. How ambitious is your company about embracing content marketing as an additional growth channel?”

Try: “I’m really passionate about content marketing and I would love to use the experience I gained from working with Fortune 500 companies in my last role to help our clients grow their businesses. Against that backdrop, I’m curious to understand how your company aims to position content marketing as an additional growth channel?”

When you try to show off, the topic of the conversation starts revolving around you. A good conversation requires both parties to get a chance to speak and understand each other.

Illustrating your expertise is critical. A client, for example, needs to know if they can trust you with their business. A hiring manager needs to know you’re qualified for the role. A peer needs

to feel confident in your skills (and so on). You don't need to give a lofty monologue to show what you bring to the table.

Keep it brief and impactful, casually referencing past work or skills related to the question you plan to pose. You are not saying, "I did X, Y, Z...and I have this question now." You are saying, "From my past experience doing X, Y, Z, I learned this...now it makes me wonder (insert question)."

The more you talk, the less time you have to listen to the other person and gather the information you need to generate and create solutions.

3) A great question invites others to deepen or broaden their thinking, and challenge held beliefs.

Instead of: "What I understand from our previous conversation is that you would like to improve employee satisfaction — as a lever for financial performance — through a series of workshops offered to team leaders. Drawing on your experience in the firm, what do you see as the three most important next steps to make this happen?"

Try: "What I took home from our previous conversation is that you would like to improve employee satisfaction — as a lever for performance — through a series of workshops offered to team leaders. I did quite a bit of research on employee performance and studies suggest that job satisfaction is not a good predictor of performance, work engagement is. And, although leadership plays a huge role in fostering work engagement, there are a number of other factors (such as autonomy, constructive feedback from peers, felt purpose) that increase engagement. So, I'm curious to understand how that perspective resonates with you."

Instead of: "So, you'd like to organize a biweekly, three-hour update meeting for us to share the progress on this project and to stay aligned on the steps ahead. Whom should I contact to check calendar availabilities?"

Try: “I fully agree with you on the importance of staying aligned and planning ahead through weekly check ins and update meetings. Interestingly, our firm implemented 20-minute daily stand-up meetings two years ago. At first, I wasn’t too sure these daily brief sessions would work and I worried they would be intrusive. But I have to admit they’ve helped us move forward more efficiently and quickly. Do you think you such an approach could work for your team?”

Asking questions that broaden or deepen the other persons thinking and challenge held beliefs will likely be reciprocated with loyalty and trust. They can also result in uncovering additional opportunities for you. If you stick with what the client already knows, the solution will be in that limited space. But if you introduce new ways of thinking, you might just open the conversation and trigger bigger, deeper challenges that will require work from your end to make it happen.

Many of us find ourselves worrying more about saying the right thing in a conversation, as opposed to asking the right question. I can tell you that’s a missed opportunity because personal development and growth begin when you demonstrate curiosity by asking questions. I have an unshakeable belief that asking great questions can propel your career to remarkable heights. I learned it on the job.

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