

INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

LEADERS & SUCCESS

Ask Smart Questions Like A Professional Interviewer

MOREY STETTNER

- 07:00 AM ET 12/13/2024

To get the facts and make sound decisions, leaders need to ask smart questions. That requires [tact and self-awareness](#).

If your questions sound accusatory or biased, you'll learn less from respondents. They won't open up if they feel judged or worried about bearing bad news.

Asking good questions involves multiple skills. It's important to choose neutral wording that gives others the leeway to provide an honest, unvarnished answer.

Voice tone also matters. If you convey earnest curiosity, you invite more revealing replies.

Brevity works to your advantage. [Barbara Walters](#), the late broadcast journalist, disliked posing three-part questions because she knew interviewees would ignore two of the three parts and only address their preferred talking points.

To formulate the best questions, be succinct. How do you make your questions more effective and substantive?

Seek To Learn, Not Win

Some people treat questions as tools to bludgeon perceived adversaries. They want to score points by showing how smart they are or how they feel superior to others.

"Early in my career, I practiced law and found that questions in a courtroom are weapons to trap people," said Willie Pietersen, author of "Leadership — The Inside Story" and other books. "But in business and in life, the best questions invite others to think more deeply."

Ask Smart Questions And Stimulate Debate

The way you phrase your question can either provide a [springboard for healthy debate](#) or snuff it out. The key is avoiding "gotcha" questions, especially in staff meetings.

"If you ask 'Did you do this and this like I said?' and the person didn't, all you'll get is 'oops' as a reply," said Pietersen, former CEO of Lever Foods, Seagram USA and Tropicana. "Now everyone's embarrassed and no one learned anything. Gotcha questions are all about exercising power and dominance" rather than sparking a productive dialogue.

It's better to ask, "How's that assignment going? What have you learned so far?"

Open The Door

Think of asking questions as approaching a closed door: You can either open it wide or keep it mostly shut and slither through.

"The best questions are open-ended," said Paul Brown, a professor of entrepreneurship at University of Utah Eccles School of Business. "That's better than leading questions like, 'I'm on the right track, aren't I?'"

Keep Cool And Ask Smart Questions Gently

If you're anxious or upset, your question can stoke panic or [trigger defensiveness](#). Take a breath and compose yourself beforehand. "Take as much emotion out of the question as possible," said Brown.

Avoid asking in a desperate tone, "We need to raise revenue. What's your pricing strategy?" Instead, calmly ask, "What are some options as we explore a new pricing strategy?"

Brace For Hard Truths And Ask Smart Questions

Before seeking details and facts about a mishap, prepare to hear what you don't want to hear. Accept [stinging replies with aplomb](#).

"There are questions that help us think more strategically or make better decisions," said Pietersen, a professor of management at Columbia University Graduate School of Business. Digesting hard-hitting or upsetting answers without flinching enables you to lead more forcefully.

Watch Your Timing

Just because you ask a carefully worded question in an engaging tone doesn't guarantee you'll get a [forthright answer](#). Timing can make or break you.

"Don't ask a question when people are fatigued or under a lot of pressure," Brown said. "Note their mood. If they are highly distracted or nervous, that might not be a good time to ask. And if they're eager to leave a meeting on Friday at 5 p.m., that's not an optimal time" if you want to dig into the details.