

Clarifying Questions and Probing Questions: What's the Difference?

Clarifying Questions are simple questions of fact. They clarify the situation and provide the nuts and bolts and are often asked as a prelude to providing feedback. They have brief, factual answers, and don't usually generate any new "food for thought." The litmus test for a clarifying question is: Does the responder have to think before s/he answers? If so, it's almost certainly a probing question.

Some examples of clarifying questions:

- How much time does the project take?
- What resources did you have available for this project?

Probing Questions help everyone in a conversation to think more deeply about the issue at hand. If a probing question doesn't have that effect, it is either a clarifying question or a recommendation with an upward inflection at the end. If you find yourself saying "Have you tried x . . . ?", probably what you mean is, "I think you ought to try x if you haven't already." It's a recommendation disguised as a question. If it's a true probing question, no one in the room will already know the answer to it. Probing questions demand thought.

In summary, good probing questions:

- are general and widely useful
- don't place blame on anyone
- allow for multiple responses
- help create a paradigm shift
- move thinking from reaction to reflection
- encourage taking another person's perspective
- empower the person with a dilemma to solve his or her own problem (rather than deferring to someone with greater or different expertise)
- avoid yes/no responses
- are usually brief
- elicit a slow response

Crafting probing questions. Try the following questions and/or question stems. Some of them come from Charlotte Danielson's *Pathwise* work, in which she refers to them as "mediational questions."

- Why do you think this is the case?
- What would have to change in order for...?
- What does your gut instinct tell you?
- What do you wish...?
- What's another way you might...?
- How was...different from...?
- What criteria did you use to...?
- When have you done/experienced something like this before?
- How did you decide/determine/conclude...?
- What is your hunch about?
- What was your intention when?
- What do you assume to be true about?
- How might your assumptions about...have influenced how you are thinking about...?
- What do you see as the connection between...and...?
- What if the opposite were true? Then what?
- Why is this a dilemma for you?
- Following up almost any response with a "Why?" or "What makes you say that?" can be helpful.

Note: Sometimes, the question has to be asked before you can tell if it's clarifying or probing. Something that may seem "probing" (like, 'What do you see as the most essential goal in this situation?') may be quickly answered by the responder because he/she has already thought it through (in which case the question is clarifying), or it might elicit a slower and more thoughtful response as the question triggers new ideas for the responder (in which case the question is probing).

Examples of Probing Questions

Why do you think [this] is the case?

Why is [this] such a dilemma for you?

What would have to change in order for. . . ?

What do you wish. . . ?

What's another way you might. . . ?

What might you see happening in your classroom if. . . ?

How was. . . different from. . . ?

What is the connection between. . . and. . . ?

What sort of an impact do you think. . . ?

How did you decide/determine/conclude. . . ?

What was your intention when. . . ?

What do you assume to be true about. . . ? What if the opposite were true? Then what?

How might your assumptions about [. . .] have influenced how you are thinking about [. . .]?

Why. . . ? Why. . . ? Why. . . ?

What do you suppose the significance of [this] was/is for you?
