

How to Ask Probing Questions

Clarifying questions are for the participants, and should not go beyond the boundaries of the presenter's dilemma or topic. They have brief, factual answers, and don't provide any new "food for thought" for the presenter. The litmus test for a clarifying question is: Does the presenter have to think before she/he answers? If so, it's almost certainly a probing question.

PROBING (or POWERFUL, OPEN) QUESTIONS are intended to help the presenter 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 asking "Don't you think you should ...?" or "What would happen if ...?" you've gone beyond a probing question to giving advice. The presenter often doesn't have a ready answer to a genuine probing question.

A good probing question:

- Allows for multiple responses
- Avoids yes/no responses
- Empowers the person being asked the question to solve the problem or manage the dilemma (rather than deferring to someone with greater or different expertise)
- Stimulates reflective thinking by moving thinking from reaction to reflection
- Encourages perspective taking
- Challenges assumptions
- Channels inquiry
- Promises insight
- Touches a deeper meaning
- Creates a paradigm shift
- Evokes more questions
- Is concise
- Prompts slow response

Here is a list of possible probing question stems that will help you to frame your questions:

- Why do you think this _____ is the case?
- What would have to change in order for...?
- What do you feel is right _____ or _____ and why?
- What's another way you might...?
- How is...different from...?
- What sort of an impact do you think _____ has on _____?
- When have you done/experienced something like this before? What does this remind you of?
- How did you decide/determine/conclude _____?
- What is your hunch about _____?
- What do you assume to be true about _____?
- What is the connection between _____ and _____?
- What if the opposite (insert assumption) were true? Then what?
- How might your assumptions about _____ have influenced how you are thinking about _____?
- What surprises you about _____? Why are you surprised?
- What is the best thing that could happen?
- What are you most afraid will happen?
- What criteria do you use to _____?
- Do you think the problem is X, Y, or something else?
- What evidence exists _____?
- If you were _____, how would you see this situation?