

Tips for Mastering the Art and Science of Asking Effective Questions

The art and science of asking effective questions is critical to helping clients succeed and becoming a trusted advisor. The questions we ask of others and of ourselves largely determine the quality of our interactions, the effectiveness of our solutions, the exactness of our evaluation and the breadth of our creativity. As you master skills for asking effective questions, you will enter into more mutually beneficial and long-lasting relationships and will create more value for clients and yourself. MAHAN KHALSA

Based on Mahan Khalsa's book, *Let's Get Real or Let's Not Play*, these tips are only meant to share the framework for asking effective questions. If you would like a deeper and more comprehensive understanding and application of the content, please read Mahan Khalsa's book or contact the Sales Performance Group for sales training information at [1.800.707.5191](tel:1.800.707.5191).

Introduction

To help clients succeed, we first need our clients to feel comfortable sharing information openly and honestly with us. The questions we ask and how we ask them, in large part, can determine our client's level of comfort and trust in us—and their willingness to share valuable information.

So what makes an effective question or one question more effective than another?

An effective question is one that leads to a desired outcome or result, which should always be to help clients succeed in a way they feel good about. In doing so, we become trusted advisors, which ultimately is the key to differentiating ourselves, adding value, and making our numbers.

To evaluate the effectiveness of a question, we can ask ourselves: Will this question or set of questions elicit answers that:

- ▶ Define what success means to the client—specific criteria or outcomes.
- ▶ Share specific information or data that go to the heart of the client's issues and needs.
- ▶ Clarify the client's values and realities—what matters most to them.
- ▶ Identify what they're up against.
- ▶ Reveal who and what is being affected by the problem or opportunity.
- ▶ Establish the decision-making process—what, when, who, and how.
- ▶ Magnify possibilities for innovative solutions.

One thing we've discovered with certainty is that anything we do that makes the customer more successful, inevitably results in a financial return for us. JACK WELCH

Questioning and listening are two sides of the same coin.

Tip #1: Intent Counts More Than Technique

Take heart. While you work on your questioning techniques, know that your intent is most important. The more honestly you want to help a client succeed the more likely they are to share their beliefs about what that success is. Consequently, your ability to find the right solution and their trust in adopting it go up as well. Ironically, it is in our own most selfish interest to focus on the interest of the client first.

So, whose agenda are you on? Is the intent of your question to help your client get what they want, in a way they feel good about or is it to get you what you want in a way you feel good about? Get crystal clear about your intent before you pick up the phone or walk through that door, because it's going to affect everything else that follows.

Tip #2: Be a Good Listener

When you ask a question, how well do you listen to the answer? Studies show that the best sales consultants listen 70% of the time and leave 30% of the time talk. Business development is largely a "receptive and an observant mode" activity. Unfortunately, most of us do the opposite and spend 70% of the time advocating (pitching) and only 30% listening for understanding (inquiry).

Listening is a matter of choice and concentration. You must choose to listen actively and focus your complete attention on the other person. To become a better listener, do the following:

- ▶ Focus on a person's answer—not on your next question.
- ▶ Listen with your ears for auditory communication; watch with your eyes for visual communication.
- ▶ Sense with your intuition the real meaning of a person's communication. Can you see a difference between what someone says and what they mean?
- ▶ Expand or exit the communication when appropriate. Don't cut it short of understanding or prolong it past interest and attention span.

Judge a man by his questions, not by his answers. VOLTAIRE

Tip #3: If You Feel It—Ask It.

Often a question forms in our mind and, for whatever reason, we don't ask it. We then have to guess about the answer. If our intent is to help clients succeed, we have both the right and the obligation not to guess about the key elements of that success. From the words our clients use to describe their desired success to the criteria they use to evaluate our proposed solution, we need to be very careful not to guess or assume. When you "feel" a question, ask it. You'll be astounded by how often clients come back with something very different than what you expected, or something very useful and valuable.

Asking gives our clients a chance to explain themselves and think about what they're trying to achieve, and it in turns gives us the opportunity to learn more. Instead of mutual mystification, we get mutual understanding.

Whose agenda are you on—your client's or yours? Asking leading questions only serves your best interest, not the client's.

Tip #4: Avoid Leading Questions

Leading questions can be manipulative, and frequently come over as "salesy."

The problem with leading questions is that they tend not to get information or understanding; rather, they are designed to get a desired agreement:

- ▶ You wouldn't want to do it like that would you?
- ▶ Sounds like this is causing you significant pain, right?
- ▶ If our solution were to generate an additional \$1 billion in revenue, you'd probably want it wouldn't you?

Nonleading questions allow for open, mutual exploration. World-class consultants know that additional insight into complex business issues frequently relies on the discovery of differing opinions and perspectives, so leave yourself and your client open to all possibilities.

Asking permission to ask questions sets expectations.

Tip #5: Gain Permission to Ask Questions

Sometimes consultants feel they're entitled to ask clients all sorts of questions. In fact, we need to earn the right to ask questions. For example:

- ▶ We agreed on some key issues that we need to touch in today's meeting. Just to make sure we fully understand your perspective, would it be okay if we asked you some questions first?

Ask one question at a time—wait for the answer. Give people sufficient time to respond to questions. Let them find their answer!

Tip #6: Ask One Question at a Time

So often we fall into the trap of asking multiple questions in one breath. The problem with asking more than one question at a time, is two-fold:

- ▶ First, more than one question may confuse the client about which question to answer, making it difficult for them to focus on one issue at a time.
- ▶ Second, the client may skip potentially important questions as they attempt to answer either the question they remember or the easiest question, and they may not yield the most important information.

Effective questions are really those that offer a path towards additional insight, and help explore new territory. An effective question will probably require the client to go into the hard drive of the brain to search for the information requested. As this is taking place, allow for silence, and don't rush to fill your own discomfort with additional questions, reasonings, or further explanations.

Next time you're with a client, practice becoming comfortable with silence.

If we're going to get to solutions that exactly meet our clients' needs, we're going to have to ask some tough questions—questions to which often a little voice in our brain says, "Oh you can't ask that. That might offend them." Our IQ will allow us to know which hard questions need to be asked, and our EQ will allow us to ask in a way that builds rapport with our clients.

Tip #7: Ask Hard Questions in a Soft Way (High EQ Softening Statement)

An effective business relationship is really achieved by combining the skills based on IQ (intelligence quotient), EQ (emotional quotient), and XQ (execution quotient). IQ is the capability to bring business intellect to the table, asking the hard questions. EQ is the capability to quickly create a "container of safety" for clients, so you can ask "hard" questions in a "soft" or acceptable way. XQ is the capability to execute with discipline. It's the fusion of IQ/EQ/XQ that really achieves trust, effective dialogue, and delivery of effective results.

Here are some examples of softening statements that help establish the EQ before the IQ:

- ▶ Would it be okay if I asked you a few questions relating to...?
- ▶ It sounds like this issue has a particularly high profile right now—and if I were in your shoes I'm sure I'd be sharing much the same perspective as you (EQ). What's going on in your company that specifically leads you to believe that this issue really is a problem (IQ)?

If you see it, hear it, or feel it, find a way to say it—tactfully.

Solutions have no inherent value. Solutions only derive value from the problems they solve and/or the results they produce. Understanding this guides everything else we do with clients.

Tip #8: Slow Down for Yellow Lights

One of the most important times to slow down and ask questions is when you hear something that concerns you, or you see a reaction that spells potential trouble, or you feel you are running into difficulty. Our experience in business development has convinced us that hitting a red light is failure, so when we see a yellow light, we close our eyes and speed up—hoping we make it through.

If hitting a red light is unavoidable, then we want to hit that red light as soon as possible. Intellectually, we know that; emotionally we resist it. Recognize that failure is making a red light needlessly more expensive (spending a lot more time, money, and company resources to hit the same red light that could have been reached very early in the game). So for yellow lights, slow down and explore.

Tip #9: Move Off the Solution

Have you noticed how so many of us are hardwired into offering solutions to our clients before even understanding what their real needs might be? It seems like we have a knee-jerk response—the client requests something and right away we're offering our latest and greatest. In fact, it's a mutual conspiracy between client and consultant to fall into the "solution-talk" much too soon.

The most effective business conversations happen when we're able to put solutions to one side, and instead generate a conversation around specific business issues the client has at hand. Remember, solutions don't have any inherent value—they only derive value according to the problems they solve or the results they create. Two good questions that help us move off solutions are:

- ▶ What are some of the business problems you'd like to address by...?
- ▶ What are some of the results you're expecting to generate with...?

Structuring the conversation is a tool. The tool should serve you, not you serve the tool. However you accomplish it, the ability to get out all of the issues and tackle them in some priority will add immediate value to both the client and you.

Tip #10: Structure Your Questions (and Hence the Conversation)

Once you've Moved off the Solution, you have to go somewhere. Proceed by building a conversation that will clarify the nature of the opportunity at hand. If the business case surfaces, then move on to further qualify the opportunity. If the business case doesn't seem to be coming together, it's going to be helpful to understand that sooner rather than later.

Here's how to Structure a Conversation:

1. Get a list of the business issues the client has top of mind.
2. Make sure that list is complete.
3. Of the entire list, identify the #1 priority.
4. On that priority develop evidence and impact.
5. Summarize along the way.
6. Take each issue in order of priority (if necessary).

The greatest enemy of communication is the illusion of it.

PIERRE MARTINEAU

Tip #11: Clarify the Underlying Issues

For effective communication, you want to be sure that you and your client are on the same page right from the get-go—so don't presume you're defining a term in a similar way. In fact, ensure you're not falling into the trap of confusing fluency with real comprehension of a term.

Here's a simple rule: No Guessing! Even if it seems too obvious to ask the question, even if it seems like you should really know the answer already, test out how mutual everybody's understanding is of a term or concept before embarking on a conversation. A couple of good No Guessing questions might be:

- ▶ Just before we go any further, could you help me understand how you're defining...?
- ▶ You know we've come across lots of ways to define -----.
We've seen it defined as ----- in this type of industry, as ----- in this other situation, and as ----- in this particular case. Just so we're all on the same page, how would you define ----- within the context of your business?

Rather than jumping into the first few issues that surface, practice patience and discipline to ask, “What else?”

Tip #12: Get Out All the Issues (Define the Playing Field)

Find out the client’s key business issues by simply asking:

What are some of the business issues you’re facing that are driving an interest in----?

By doing this, you avoid falling into the “solution-talk” trap, and focus instead on the client’s specific business issues.

More than likely the client will bring up those issues that are top-of-mind. But to be sure, follow up with the question, “Anything else?” This helps your client go one step further than top-of-mind and give a more complete list of issues. You’ll find that often the most important issues only surface after you ask “anything else?”

If you don’t ask a client which issues are the most important, you risk focusing on an issue that is not the most important issue.

Tip #13: Prioritize the Issues

This is a key part of the Structure the Conversation skill that helps you dedicate precious time to the client’s business issues in order of priority. Asking for the #1 priority helps both you and the client focus on what really matters most. Your ongoing questions will also help confirm that the #1 priority really is just that, or whether you need to be tackling a different issue all together.

The bottom line is, “Show me the data!”

Tip #14: Ask for Evidence

Just like lawyers who need evidence in order to prove a case, you need evidence to build a compelling business case. You have to prove together with the client that there really is a problem or opportunity, and clearly establish the criteria for success.

Use “how,” “what,” and “where” questions to gather evidence.

HOW specifically does this show up as a problem?

WHERE does this show up as a problem?

WHAT is going on in your company that proves this really is a problem?

HOW would you know that you were being successful?

WHAT measurements would prove success?

WHERE would indicators of success actually show up?

Impact answers the question, “So what and who cares?” Although, our EQ would ask those questions with a little more tact; nonetheless, that’s what we want to know.

Tip #15: Explore Impact

Now that you have evidence, get the financial impact. You don’t have to do a rigorous financial analysis—just back-of-the-envelope math is fine. What you’re looking for is rough estimates, ballpark figures, orders of magnitude.

Here’s a set of questions that help quantify evidence into a financial impact. Let’s take an example of a client who wants to increase call center productivity. You might ask:

1. *How do you measure productivity in your call center?* (Calls per hour, per caller)
2. *What is your productivity now?* (5 calls per hour)
3. *What would you like it to be?* (7 calls per hour)
4. *What’s the value of the difference?* This is where the back of the envelope math kicks in:
 Additional calls per hour (2), multiplied by
 Amount of callers in the center (10), multiplied by
 Hours in the day (8), multiplied by
 Average revenue created per call (\$100)
 $2 \times 8 \times 10 \times 100 = \$16,000$
5. *Over time?* (What’s the client’s typical business horizon or plan...1 year? 5 years?)
 $\$16,000 \times 30 \text{ days} \times 12 \text{ months} = \5.76m .
 With an annual \$5.76m impact, you’ll find out pretty quickly if the client finds this worth pursuing.

The first time you test your price with a client should not be when you present your proposal.

Tip #16: Ask About a Budget or Investment Range Early

If you walk out of a meeting with a client and you don’t know how much they’re thinking of spending, and they don’t know how much you’re thinking of charging, you are both guessing. No guessing! The client has a range—it may not be explicit or conscious, and it’s there. And you have a range too. The question is whether their range is going to overlap with your range. If it’s not, you probably can’t do business.

When you address budget, you are only talking about value justification. You’re not going to give the client your fees or price, and you’re not asking them for the specific dollars they have in a budget. Your intent is to understand if there is congruence

between what they think it's worth to solve the problem and what you think is necessary to solve the problem. You might ask about budget in any of the following ways:

- ▶ *Have you thought about a level of investment for this project?*
- ▶ *Have you established a budget for this project?*

If the deal is more of a self-funding/value-based opportunity:

- ▶ *Have you had any thoughts on how to financially structure this initiative?*

When you encounter yellow lights in response to your budget question, use the three-part response to turn the yellow light to red or green.

1. *I don't know how much this will cost you (every client situation is unique).*
2. *Other companies in similar situations, trying to achieve these kinds of results, tend to invest between X and Y.*
3. *Can you see yourself falling somewhere in that range?*

It does not take much strength to do things, but it requires great strength to decide what to do.

E. HUBBARD

Tip #17: Find Out What They Will Do to Decide Before Asking Who Will Decide.

You'd probably like to know right from the start who is responsible for making the final decision, yet when you begin by asking who makes the decision(s), you run at least two risks:

1. Each person you talk to will likely consider him or herself as a key decision maker, which may shut the door to talking to others.
2. The client may be wary of sharing too much about their decision-making process too soon.

To get accurate information and to help clients feel safe about sharing decision process information, begin by getting information about what they'll be doing to make decisions—specifically, the steps they'll take, the decision they'll make in each step, and when they'll make each decision.

Our goal is to never make a presentation or a proposal to people whose criteria for judging you are unknown to you. No guessing!

Tip #18: Get the How from Who

Your intent should be to help enable a decision in the client's best interest. Once you understand what the client will do, it's critical to understand how they'll arrive at the point of decision. Find out the criteria each stakeholder or decision maker will use to make a decision. Try questions such as:

- ▶ What are some of the criteria you'd be looking for to determine whether or not you had a solution that would exactly meet your needs?
- ▶ From your particular perspective, what are some of the key issues you'd like a solution to address?

Avoid using "why" because people tend to justify or defend in their response to "why."

Tip #19: Ask How and What Rather Than Why

It's better to ask "how" and "what" questions, rather than "why" questions. "Why" questions tend to point the finger and elicit defensive answers. With "how" and "what" you're likely to generate better understanding and explanation of the nature of the opportunity.

You might ask "how" and "what" questions such as:

- ▶ How do you know this issue is a problem in your organization?
- ▶ How specifically does this problem show up?
- ▶ What specific proof would you be looking for to confirm that this issue was being addressed successfully?
- ▶ What would let you know that your desired results were achieved?

Every client works within an ecosystem, so helping them succeed depends on your knowing, "Who or what else do these issues affect?"

Tip #20: Ask Who Wins and Who Loses

When working with clients, you often find individuals in the client's organization whom you consider your champion. Others may act as your detractor. Knowing who's who is vitally important. To assess your relationships, begin by asking your immediate counterpart:

- ▶ Who or what else might be affected by the development of this project?
- ▶ Who might stand to gain or lose from the development of this project?

World-class consultants seem to have the knack for identifying then tackling the real question behind the question.

Tip #21: Ensure You Answer the Real Question

People usually ask a question for a reason. It is often helpful to understand the reason before answering the question. Let's imagine the following two scenarios playing out:

1. **Client:** "Are you working on many other projects at this time?"

Consultant: "Yes, we are working on quite a few large deals right now."

Client: "Too bad, we won't be able to work with you. Last time we had a consultant he was so busy working on other things, he didn't give us the focus we really needed—and we don't want to repeat the same mistake again. Sorry."

2. **Client:** "Are you working on many other projects at this time?"

Consultant: "No, we're focusing on a few projects at a time."

Client: "Too bad. We won't be able to work with you. We really need a partner who is highly visible, and has a high profile in the community. Sorry."

The skill of redirection helps get to the question behind the question, before we place ourselves into a corner:

Client: "Are you working on any other projects at this time?"

Consultant redirects: "I'd certainly be happy to share relevant information with you. And before I go too far, I'm sensing you're asking the question for a particular reason. Can you help me understand what that reason is?"