Question styles

Using Open Questions

Open questions invite the other person to say more and help them to communicate things that are being left out of the ‘story’, whether experiences, behaviours or feelings. They can encourage someone to engage in a deeper response or exploration of what they want to communicate.

Examples include - ‘How is everything going?’ ‘What would you like to happen next?’ ‘Would you like to tell me more?’

Using Closed Questions

Closed questions reduce options for free expression and invite a limited response e.g. ‘Have you had a good day?’ rather than ‘How was your day?’ They can be used most successfully when you want to clarify something that has been said and you want a definitive answer, for instance,

“Did you say that you enjoyed wind-surfing?” You can also lead the direction of a conversation by following up on the “yes” answers. They are most effective when specific information is required. E.g. Is this a convenient moment for you?

Using Probing Questions

Probing questions allow you to dig a little deeper and find out more about a subject or topic area.

For instance, if your mentee has previously been talking about a new interest in hiking, you could use a probing question to ask what they like the most about going for long walks e.g. “That sounds like a challenge, how did that make you feel?”

Be careful not to sound like an interrogator! Questions that probe too far can make someone defensive. ‘Why’ questions invite justification and can often be experienced as threatening or accusing e.g. ‘Why did you do that?’ ‘Why couldn’t you tell them to stop?’ Be sensitive to verbal and non-verbal cues indicating that the talker is uncomfortable with your questions. Factors such as your own manner, voice tone and warmth are also important.

Using Hypothetical Questions

Use this technique if you would like to encourage someone to adopt a new way of dealing with situations e.g. “What would have happened if....”

They can also be used to explore fears e.g. ‘What do you imagine might happen?’

Using Reflective and Summative Questions

These questions can be helpful in summarising a discussion and can also act as a prompt for deciding what to do next, for example, “We’ve been talking a lot about your family situation today. Do you feel we’ve covered enough ground for you to feel confident in sitting down and discussing the problem with them?” This question provides a summary of the recent conversation. Questions can also be reflective, for instance, “I’ve been wondering whether your frustration at your friend’s requests on your time, is because you are feeling overwhelmed by your workload right now?”
Open and Closed Questions

How would you turn these closed questions into open ones:

- Have you had a good day?
- Did you do that because he asked you to?
- You aren’t going, are you?
- Are you on track with your studies?
- Do you want to pass or not?

Asking Questions

Do’s

- Focus on the other person’s agenda
- Ask questions that serve a purpose and encourage the other person to expand or explore
- Reflect back what has been said to confirm that you have understood
- Use questions with care – they can alter the balance of who is in control and divert the other person from what they were prepared to say or share with you

Don’ts

- Do not ask too many questions or multiple questions – leaving the other person feeling threatened or pressurised into saying more than they feel comfortable with
- Avoid leading questions – where it is the questioner taking the lead and imposing his or her views on the other person e.g. ‘Don’t you think it would be better if you did this?’