

Career Savvy People Skills

How
to
use

**Mental
Pickpocketing**

to get to
the truth
without
seeming
to ask
questions

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INTRODUCTION

People don't always tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth! (Does that come as a surprise?)

It's easy enough to ask questions, and, most of the time, most of the people will do their best to express the truth . . . the truth, that is, as they perceive it. But not always.

- Sometimes you're working with "nice" folks who try to tell you what they think you *want to hear*, or to tell it the way they *believe things should be*.
- Sometimes distortion comes from perspective: an individual may see things through their own mental window, and that window may be clear in some ways, distorted in others.
- Some tend to *embellish*, maybe by telling you more than they really know.
- Some have their *own agendas*, which may mean not wanting the facts—or *certain* facts--to emerge.
- And still others—shocking!—may *deliberately spin, distort, conceal, lie, or bury the truth*.

Knowledge is power particularly in organizations where your effectiveness will depend in large part on your ability to get information, and to discern the reality behind the situations taking place around you.

Getting this knowledge—getting to the truth—can be difficult because, again, knowledge is power, and—particularly in competitive situations—those in the know have a comfortable advantage over those who are *not* in the know.

So how do you cut through the fog and distortion to get to what is real? You can watch and listen . . . which is fine, if it tells you what you need.

Or you can take a more active part. You can ask questions, and then more questions. But your new questions may be no more effective than your earlier ones. Besides, the more you ask, the more you tip off what you are really after, making it easier for those who want to evade.

In this book, I'll be sharing with you techniques that I've found helpful in cutting through to clear, straight answers:

- The many uses of questions—including a variety of uses other than just collecting information or opinion.
- Ways of sequencing questions for maximum effectiveness . . . especially when the other person is not totally open with you.
- Clues to watch for when you are “listening with your eyes”.
- Ways of controlling the flow when the other person tells you a lot more than you want or need to know.

And—as promised—I'll be passing on my tips on the art and science of mental pickpocketing: methods for asking good questions without *seeming* to ask.

One: WHY ASK QUESTIONS?

We use questions primarily as tools for getting information or for probing the ideas and opinions of other people. But information-gathering is by no means the only productive way of using questions. Here are some.

1. To get information

We tend to think of questions primarily as tools for getting information from other people:

- “How do you feel?”
- “When did you ____?”
- “What did you see?”
- “Are you aware that ____?”
- “Were you at the scene when it occurred?”

But questions are not only for getting information. Sometimes a question is a useful way of giving information, or of changing the course of a discussion, or of making the other person aware of an unrecognized need.

Getting information is the main focus of this book, but before going on let’s look at a few of those “other” uses of questions.

1. To *give* information

Though we normally think of question as tools for getting information, questions can be equally useful in *giving* information, or suggesting alternatives.

- “Did you know that ___?”
- “Would it change your mind if I told you that ___?”
- “Did you read the article in *Scientific American* about ___?”

2. To confirm information

You might get a bit of information from Al, and other bits from Bonnie and Carlos. Then you put these bits together into what you feel is a plausible sequence and confirm it with Deb: “I’ve heard that _____. What’s your take on it Do you think it’s true??”

3. To confirm understanding.

- “Are we in accord on that?”
- “If I understand you correctly, we will _____?”
- “Was your take on the meeting the same as mine, that _____?”

4. To probe another person's knowledge or attitudes

At the start of your meeting with a new co-worker, you may want to test just how technically proficient they are. A few short questions can accomplish this without it coming across as an interrogation.

- “Are you familiar with the Moxan Process for _____? Have you had a chance to apply it yet?”
- “Have you been following the news about the Lahey incident? Personally, I’m not so sure that the facts really pointed that way? Any thoughts?”
- ”What are your feelings on the new _____ policy?”

5. To direct the course of a discussion.

If you're seeking information in a meeting with several attendees, it may be most effective if you can control—or at least nudge—via your questions.

6. To gain feedback on how your message or approach is being understood and received.

When you're *giving* information, it's important to be attuned to the other person in order to find how your message is coming across. Much of this feedback will come without your needing to ask, as you pick up bits of knowledge from their questions and comments, as well as by their nonverbal

responses including facial expressions and gestures. Your questions can supplement this feedback.

- “Is this clear so far?”
- “How do you feel about what I just told you?”
- “So I can get an idea of how well I’m coming across, will someone volunteer to briefly summarize in their own words what you understand me to have said?”
- “How do you think this applies to your job?”

Or, you may provide feedback to the other person sharing your perceptions. That feedback can have the effect of reopening the discussion:

- “You seem very guarded in your responses. Is there something you think we should talk through first so you can be more open?”
- Or, “You seemed to have a puzzled expression on your face just now. What did I ask (or say) that bothered you?”
- Or, “How do you feel my questions apply to the problems you face in this organization or in your job?”

7. To test the other person’s understanding or agreement.

If you’re getting mixed signals from someone in a meeting, you could engage them with a direct, “How do you feel about the questions I’ve asked so far?”

In most cases, you’ll get better cooperation if the other person has a clear sense of why you’re there, and of what you’re looking for. Typically, you’ll convey this as you set context at the start. But they may not fully absorb it at that time—perhaps because of distractions, including the work they need to be doing now . . . or because they don’t trust you yet.

Generally you'll get a good deal of feedback just by being attentive to their non-verbals, including facial expression, eye contact, how they sit, as well as by how complete their responses are. Do they choose their words with extreme care, saying as little as possible, or do they tell you everything you need, without being probed further?

If you find you are getting *too much* information, especially irrelevant input, see Part Four of this book, which covers topics including “Discouraging the speaker.”

8. To shape the thinking of the other person (or group); or to expand their thinking into a different direction, to try to widen their perspective, or to subtly introduce new ideas.

In some situations, the very fact that you are asking certain questions will subtly nudge the other person to adjust their thinking. For example, the awareness that you are here asking on behalf of senior managers may help this person understand the importance of the issue, and why it is in their best interest to come up with some fresh solutions. Or it may help them believe that senior managers care about their input.

In this context, you could also alert them to areas in which senior management is concerned.

By the skillful use of questions, we can often shape or redirect the thinking of others. The tone of the questions is often as important as the content, both in setting the tone as well as in gathering useful answers.

- “Do you really think that_____?”
- “But suppose that doesn’t work: what then?”
- “Have you always found John completely trustworthy?”
- “How confident are you that this supplier can be counted on for this order?”
- “Have you found that supplier totally reliable?”

9. To develop or enhance the other person’s awareness of a need.

You can *tell* the other person what they need. But it’s usually far more effective to ask questions that lead them to put those needs into their own words. If done skillfully, that gets them thinking about the practical implications of those unmet needs. It’s one thing to hear someone tell you what you need as compared to responding to a good question that challenges you to rethink and express in your own context.

It may also nudge them to recognize a need which has not been in their scope to this point. They may even “adopt” it as their own idea!

Persuading by asking

It’s important that another person recognize they face a problem or has unrecognized needs before you can be effective in trying to convince them to accept your solution to those needs. One of the best ways of developing awareness of needs is asking the right questions

Skilled salespeople are particularly adept at this. For example, if you’ve ever met with a life insurance salesperson, no doubt he spent much of the first part of the call asking questions about what would happen to your family if you are killed or disabled. A good salesperson may use a series of questions to lead you into expressing your own words reasons that you

need what he or she is selling. Among the questions they might ask are these:

- “What would happen if your income were to stop tomorrow?”
- “What would happen to your children if _____ happened?”
- “Well, if the house still has a mortgage, where will your family get the money to make the payments?”

- “It sounds as though they’d have to give up the house. Where would they go to live then?”
- “What about the children’s education? Do you have enough savings to pay for college for all?”
- “If they can’t afford college, what then?”

Obviously the salesperson could save time by simply *telling* you what insurance you need. But that would usually be far less effective than asking questions that lead you to express these needs in your own words. If done well, the questions set you thinking about the implications. Because *you* say it, it *must* be true.

10. To (subtly) suggest alternatives.

Just as the other person is more likely to be open to needs if they have themselves expressed the need, they will also be most open to other alternative solutions if they seem to have come up with that alternative themselves.

Once the need has been recognized, you may be able to suggest other ways of filling that need simply by expressing your ideas: “I think you should do _____.” Or, “It seems to me that what you need is a _____”.

But sometimes directly suggesting an alternative is not likely to be an effective strategy, particularly if the other person is hostile, close-minded, or defensive.

In those cases, you can use questions as a subtle way of bringing these factors to the attention of the other person . . . without triggering the negative reaction that might result if you are more blunt. Your questions may even cause the other person to believe the idea was her or his own.

- What would happen if you _____”
- “Do you remember when the Northstar Division had a problem like this? How did they deal with it? I seem to recall that _____?”

11. To mediate differences

The right questions, asked in the right tone, can get both sides talking. If there is a genuine desire to work this out, then the more each side knows of the other’s goals, the better a compromise—or at least a tolerance—can be arrived at.

12. To convey scepticism.

“Do you really believe that?”

Or, even more strongly, “You don’t really support that approach, do you?”

Or, “I sense that _____. Am I correct?”

13. To raise doubts.

You can use questions as tools for breaking through

complacency and settled thinking feelings, and assumptions. As they think about how to respond to the question, they may also think about their assumptions, and even the facts, with fresh perspective.

14. To draw others out so they provide more detail.

“Help me understand: Why do you support that plan over the other alternatives?”

Or, “I’m still not clear on your ultimate reason for going with Plan A.”

15. To defend, perhaps by subtly drawing out the other person’s lack of awareness of the facts, or the possibilities that may flow from adopting a different approach.

“Suppose I told you that this methodology is already in use across Europe? Would that change your thinking?”

16. To make waves. Or, to bait, antagonize, ruffle feathers.

Not nice, but sometimes necessary. There are times when it is advantageous to ask questions that draw conflicts to the surface so that any subtle undercurrents or covert games can be addressed in a direct way.

Sometime the only way to get to the core issues is to get people speaking frankly. In order to do that you may need to rile them up a bit. A couple of examples:

- “George, tell me this: You haven’t been on board for any of the planning meetings leading up to this point, so why are you now so determined to change the direction?”
- Or, “I see this as a group effort, one in which we’re all largely in accord. But now I’m sensing that you and some other members of the committee are not willing to discuss it. Why is that?”

17. To get things rolling.

“Are we in accord on the process? Any objections to moving forward>”

Summary

WHY ASK QUESTIONS?

1. To get information
2. To give information
3. To confirm information
4. To confirm understanding.
5. To probe another person’s knowledge or attitudes
6. To direct the course of a discussion

7. To gain feedback on how your message or approach is being understood and received
8. To test the other person's understanding or agreement
9. To shape the thinking of the other person (or group); or to expand their thinking into a different direction, to try to widen their perspective, or to subtly introduce new ideas
10. To develop or enhance the other person's awareness of a need
11. To (subtly) suggest alternatives
12. To mediate differences
13. To convey skepticism
14. To raise doubts
15. To draw others out so they provide more detail
16. To defend, perhaps by subtly drawing out the other person's lack of awareness of the facts, or the possibilities that may flow from adopting a different approach
17. To make waves. Or, to bait, antagonize, ruffle feathers
18. To get things rolling

Two: TIPS ON INFORMATION SCAVENGING

Most of the time, the easiest, simplest, and most effective way of getting information from another person is to ask a direct question, or maybe a series of questions.

But sometimes the direct way isn't always the most productive. Perhaps they don't want to share the information you're after, or they may have a reason for misleading you. If you ask, then you likely tip off what you are really after. Once they know that, they can be more effective in obscuring what you're after.

Or, once they have a sense of what you're after, they may try to give you what they *think* you want to hear, rather than what really *is*.

Even if they do want to cooperate and be open with you, your question may have the effect of narrowing their thinking, too much, too soon. They may fail to tell you something important because the scope of your question didn't include that. They may figure that if you wanted to know that, then you would have asked. Or they may assume that's something you already know. Or the question itself may narrow their thinking, hence they overlook wider aspects.

Why be so cagy? Why play that game? Because when you ask a question you inevitably shape the answer, as the question flags what you are after.

That's when we need to go "information scavenging"—using the array of methods and—yes—sometimes tricks—needed to cut through spin and obfuscation.

1. When feasible, *avoid* asking questions. Get it started, then get out of the way and let them tell you the story.

In Aaron Latham's novel *Orchids for Mother*, "Mother," an experienced counterspy, is teaching Paul, his protégé, some of the tricks of the trade:

"You shouldn't come straight out and ask what you want to know. It's too easy for people to sidestep your questions that way. What you should do is get people to tell you a story. Have them tell it from the beginning. That way, they don't know what you're after, so they don't know what to hide. Try again?"

“Sure,” said Paul uncertainly. But he was not sure how to pull a story out of someone, so he asked, “How do I start?”

“There’s an easy formula,” Mother said. “Try asking a question that begins, ‘When did you first...?’”

The best question may be no question at all. Sometimes it’s best just to get out of the way and let the other person tell their own story, at their own pace. Ideally, you need only set the context with a broad question like, “Tell me about ____” (or, as Mother suggests, “When did you first ____?”) then sit back and listen as they tell it in the way that’s most comfortable to them.

Allowing them to tell the whole story may seem to take more time, and it may be frustrating for you to listen to what seems irrelevant. But you will often gain back that time in other ways.

By giving them free rein, you may get a better “map” of the subject. If you turn them loose via an open-ended “Tell me about _____” they may raise topics that you may not have thought to ask about. This can open up other important areas, or help educate you on broader aspects, or problems of which you had been unaware.

Also, if you set the tone as that of a conversation rather than an interrogation the other person will typically be more relaxed and open, and may tell you more than they would otherwise.

Granted, this approach—to get the talk started, then wait and listen—is not always practical or possible. In the real world, you will often need to intervene from time to time to sharpen the focus, or to get the discussion back on track

Essential: make sure your silence is supportive, not threatening. Listen, but don’t stare, as that kind of non-responsiveness may be interpreted as either hostility or lack of understanding. Instead, use normal conversational signals such as nodding to express understanding, friendly eye contact, and positive phrases such as “Good,” “Interesting,” “I see,” and the like.

Two other related approaches that I’ve found helpful:

- Begin by asking the other person what their job is about.
- Begin by asking them share with you their perspective of a situation and the background as it evolved. (“From your perspective, what’s your sense of when and how this issue arose?”)

2. Think of your question as a seed. After you plant it, give it time to grow. Don’t plant another seed right on top of it.

“Listening is a science in itself, and it takes a lot of experience to know how to listen effectively. For example, we all know how to ask questions, don’t we? Well, not really.

“When you ask a question, drop back and be quiet so you can absorb the answer. Think of a question as a seed you plant, and then wait for the answer to grow from that seed.

“I’m constantly seeing people ask a question, then sit there fidgeting while you answer, and you know that they just can’t wait to butt back in and comment on your answer before they’ve even heard it through. They aren’t listening, they’re just scanning your response to find something that gives them another opening.”

Federal executive

If you ask a question—or if you ask someone to tell you a story—it’s essential to allow time for that seed to ripen and grow into a useful answer.

The other person may need some time to think, or to put their thoughts into words.. If you butt in prematurely with another question, or if you break in to elaborate on your first question, they won’t have time to think through the proper answer. No doubt you’ve been on the other side when someone asked you a question, then sat fidgeting in the chair as you tried to answer. It was obvious that they were eager to get an opening to interrupt your answer and grab the ball and start talking again . . . maybe to ask another question, maybe to make a comment, or even to comment on your answer while it’s still flowing. In any case, their impatience inhibits your answer.

Silence as a tool

Your silence also puts pressure on the other person. Most of us find silence uncomfortable when we’re with people we don’t know well. If you ask the question, then sit silently waiting, that silence may draw out from them the kind of information a dozen questions could not. They may blurt out the first thing that comes to mind just to fill the silence.

Learn to make silence work for you. Don’t rush to ask the next question on the heels of the first . . . especially if you sense the other person is holding something back, or is shading the truth. Let their answer hang in the air for a while—a few seconds is enough, as it will feel much longer to them if they have a guilty conscience. They may feel uncomfortable in the silence and add extra detail to what they’ve said, or add an extra qualification: “Well, actually, not *every* time, not every single time. What I really mean is _____”

Or, facing silence, they may end up contradicting themselves and giving the whole game away.

This is the end of the sample of MENTAL PICKPOCKETING. I hope it was of interest and helpful to you, and invite you to read on.

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