

Pocket Guide to Probing Questions

The distinction between clarifying questions and probing questions can be difficult to understand for participants new to exhibitions. So is the distinction between probing questions and recommendations for action. The basic distinctions are:

Clarifying Questions are simple questions of fact. They clarify the dilemma and provide the nuts and bolts.

They have brief, factual answers, and don't provide any new "food for thought" for the presenter. The presenter doesn't have to think much before responding.

Some examples of clarifying questions:

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

Probing 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 saying "Don't you think you should ...?" you've gone beyond probing questions. The presenter often doesn't have a ready answer to a genuine probing question.

Hints for crafting probing questions. Try the following questions and/or question stems.

- Why do you think this is the case?
- What would have to change in order for...?
- What do you wish...?
- What's another way you might...?
- What would it look like if...?
- What do you think would happen if...?
- How was...different from...?
- What sort of an impact do you think...?
- What criteria did you use to...?
- When have you done/experienced something like this before?
- What might you see happening if...?
- How did you decide/determine/conclude...?
- What is your hunch about?
- What was your intention when?
- What do you assume to be true about?

Example: At a CU exhibition, you just heard your colleague share his research and plan for the company to spend less money on duplicating costs.

As a participant at the exhibition you are preparing to respond to what you heard. You could:

Make a recommendation that implies judgment. (This is not a good idea.)

1) "You could have called a staff meeting and had them come up with solutions rather than provide the team with answers right away."

Make a recommendation disguised as a probing question. (Sneaky. Also not a good idea.)

2) "What would happen if you called a staff meeting and asked them to brainstorm possible solutions?"

Ask a real probing question.

3) "How do you think staff view this problem? What might they want to see happen?"

Ask an even better probing question.

4) "What would have to change for staff to see themselves as part of the solution?"

Since probing questions are the hardest to create productively, we offer the following suggestions:

- Check to see if you have a “right” answer in mind. If so, delete the judgment from the question, or don’t ask it.
- Refer to the presenter’s original question/focus point. What did s/he ask for your help with? Check your probing questions for relevance.
- Check to see if you are asserting your own agenda. If so, return to the presenter’s agenda.
- Sometimes a simple “why...?” asked as an advocate for the presenter’s success can be very effective, as can several why questions asked in a row.
- Try using verbs: What do you fear? Want? Get? Assume? Expect?
- Think about the concentric circles of comfort, risk and danger. Use these as a barometer. Don’t avoid risk, but don’t push the presenter into the “danger zone.”

Remember: There is a difference between offering feedback and asking probing questions.

Your classmate will also be asking for a specific kind of feedback at his or her exhibition. For example, she may ask you to offer feedback on the process she used during her project, or for specific feedback on the quality of her presentation. It is important to provide that feedback.

In addition, it is important to ask probing questions that take them someplace deeper—someplace they might not think to go unless you asked them about it.

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
- empower the person with the 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
- move thinking from reaction to reflection
- encourage taking another party’s perspective