

A MANAGER'S GUIDE TO ASKING POWERFUL QUESTIONS FOR BETTER FEEDBACK

Asking questions isn't as easy as it sounds.

How to design and ask the most effective
questions to get effective employee feedback.

Weekly10





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What are Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions are a mindset.

All too often we ask a question without really knowing its purpose.

But asking Powerful Questions during employee surveys, 1:1s, weekly check-ins, performance reviews, and during meetings gets you richer, more insightful feedback.

Our Powerful Questions process helps you plan your questions or survey to make sure that you're getting what you need out of it.

We'll walk you through the science behind asking questions (page 6), examples of powerful questions (page 4), and how to ask better questions at work (pages 9 and 10). And just as importantly, what to do with the answers you receive.

However, the thinking around Powerful Questions can be used at any time, and we'd encourage you to apply it in scenarios outside of work too.

The philosophy of Powerful Questions is all about understanding three key things:

01

Why are you asking a question in the first place?

02

What will you do with the answer or feedback it generates?

03

The science (and art) behind asking questions.



10 Powerful Questions to get you started

Powerful Questions can really help you to understand how things are going for your people. They show where blockers might lie, what unseen issues there might be and who's doing a standout job.

Powerful Questions for engagement

Want to know how your people are feeling? Start an employee feedback process in your team or business using weekly check-ins that ask questions 1-5.

01

What success(es) have you had this week?

02

What challenges have you faced this week?

03

What support do you need from us to help you out?

04

Is there anyone you'd like to shout out for their great work and effort?

05

Is there anything else you'd like us to know?

Powerful Questions for performance

Every manager has a different style. Give them – and therefore the people they manage – a consistent framework for more effective 1:1 meetings with questions 6-10.

06

What's challenged you this week/month /quarter?

07

What's gone well or not so well for you since we last spoke?

08

Do you feel confident/happy in how you're progressing?

09

What do you want to have achieved by our next 1:1?

10

What can I help you with between now and the next time we catch up?



Why are questions important?

Ask a doctor, teacher, journalist, or lawyer about the importance of questions, and they'll speak passionately about how asking questions is critical to doing their job well.



As a manager, you'd probably say that asking questions helps us know where we're at. Accurate, but not all that useful. And that's no slight to managers.

It's simply the case that asking questions has more intrinsic importance in some professions than others. As a result, those professions are trained in how to ask questions effectively.

The rest of us aren't.

Asking questions at work is a powerful tool for unlocking value:

- It spurs learning and the exchange of ideas
- It fuels innovation and performance improvement
- It builds rapport and trust among team members.

And it can drive greater employee engagement when feedback is used to improve workplace cultures and processes that benefit all.

But few of us think of questioning as a skill that can be honed—or consider how our own answers to questions could make conversations more productive.

The good news is that by asking questions, we naturally improve our emotional intelligence and gain insight into how to ask questions well. Both of which makes us better questioners—a virtuous cycle.

Nir Eyal, author of 'Hooked' tells us quite simply that the key to getting better at something through habit is frequency. The more often we practice something, the more effective we become.

The more we ask powerful questions, the quicker our habits become behaviours, which in turn helps our colleagues develop too.

The science and art of asking questions

For some, asking questions comes easily. Their natural inquisitiveness, emotional intelligence, and ability to read people puts the perfect question on the tip of their tongue.

Psychologists and behavioural scientists have studied how and why we ask questions since the 1950s. Here's a round-up of their findings.



Questions have two purposes

Questions are asked to achieve one of two things: liking (managing how people see us) and learning (information exchange).

Manager takeaway

These map well with employee feedback (to learn from our people) and employee experience (to change perceptions and attitudes).

Questions build strong bonds

Asking questions is linked with social liking. The more people ask questions the more likely they are to be liked and trusted by others.

Manager takeaway

Manager who frequently ask how things are going within their teams rated higher than those who check-in less frequently, particularly when it comes to trust.

Questions build credibility

Asking questions makes you look smart, self-confident, interesting. It also shows that you're interested in the other person.

Manager takeaway

Demonstrate your expertise and experience without coming across as conceited or boring.

Open-ended questions are best

Closed questions can make us feel like we're being forced to choose, and introduce bias or manipulation. Open questions offset this feeling and can also invite more details.

Manager takeaway

Ask questions that encourage your team to open up and dig into the detail.

Gender influence

Research shows that men are typically more comfortable asking and answering questions in a professional setting. Whereas women are typically more comfortable asking and answering questions in interpersonal situations.

Manager takeaway

Be aware of this and be ready to step in if the conversation is being dominated.

Limit the number of questions

The number of questions being asked has a significant impact on how people answer them. Asking fewer questions leads to more questions being answered and in more detail.

Manager takeaway

Only ask relevant questions so your team know that their answer or feedback will contribute to something worthwhile.

Act on feedback

Employees are more willing to answer questions truthfully and fully if they know and can see that change will happen as a result.

Manager takeaway

Act on the feedback that you receive or let your team know why you can't or won't. This builds trust & credibility.



The impact of bad questions

If you ask questions that bore, annoy, confuse, or offend then you could be looking at some dire consequences.

Poorly thought-out questions can create a real headache for those running surveys, check-ins or 1:1 meetings because of unexpected feedback.

But it can also cause unnecessary stress, confusion and further questions from those on the receiving end of the questions.

You can waste time, money and effort implementing new policies and processes that won't impact what you're trying to change or in the extremes, make them worse!

01

Leading questions gives you inaccurate feedback that causes more issues than it solves.

02

Biased questions lead to skewed data that doesn't tell an accurate story.

03

Confused employees respond with best-guesses and inaccurate or unanswered responses.

04

Negativity towards the process impacts both the current exercise and future ones.

05

Avoidance causes delays or people refuse to get involved. It's our brain protecting us from undesirable feelings.



The 5 steps to asking Powerful Questions

01

Purpose

What are you looking to achieve? Is it a case of improving knowledge, shaping attitudes, implementing changes or something else?

Once you know, you can shape your approach.

02

Frequency

Asking questions needs to become habitual to create a workplace culture built around your people and their experiences.

Formal feedback sessions through check-ins, 1:1s or team meetings should happen weekly or fortnightly.

03

Transparency

Something of a culture shock for some, but questions need to be asked openly and answers given honestly.

Anonymity removes accountability, dissolves trust and doesn't empower managers to have frank and impactful conversations with their teams.

04

Volume

Keep questions to a minimum. If a question doesn't have a purpose then drop it.

Between 5 and 9 questions is the sweet spot of not too much to cause fatigue and enough to get some quality insights.

05

Action

Asking for feedback through questions is only half the journey.

How you act on the information people give you shapes future participation and a better workplace.

10 ways to power up your questions

Whether you're asking questions as part of a survey or poll, in a meeting or over email, it's important to work with a set of ground rules.



01

Plan your questions

Before you ask anything, outline your goals and a sequence of related questions that will help you get there.

02

Know your purpose

Every question you ask should help you gather either facts or an opinion. Know which kind of information you need and frame your questions accordingly.

03

Have an open conversation

Open-ended questions invite the respondent to talk or write – and enable you to gather much more information. “What do you like best about this company?” will return more valuable feedback than “Do you like this company?”

04

Speak their language

Use words and phrases that your listener understands, and analogies they'll relate to. For example, avoid industry jargon unless you are 100% confident they'll know what you mean.

05

Use neutral wording

A neutral question that elicits accurate information or an honest opinion – such as “How did you find it?” – is much more helpful.

Asking leading questions like “Did you enjoy the excellent presentation by Susan today?” is unproductive. Because the question expresses a glowing opinion of the event, the other person isn’t likely to say anything negative about it, even if they hated it.

06

Use follow-up questions

Build a hierarchy of questions that begin with the big picture and gradually drills down into specifics. Questions like Tell me more about that. And how did that make you feel? work well.

07

Focus on one thing at a time

To get more complete answers, craft short questions, each of which covers a single point. If you really want to know two different things, ask two different questions.

08

Ask only essential questions

If the response isn’t pertinent or won’t lead to any action, don’t ask the question. Respect the other person’s time and attention

Two tips specifically for asking questions in a meeting

09

Don’t interrupt

“Be a good listener,” Dale Carnegie advised in his 1936 classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. And ask questions the other person will enjoy answering.

Listen to the full answer to your question. The art of good questioning lies in truly wanting to hear information contained within the answer.

10

Transition naturally

Use something in the answer to frame your next question. Even if this takes you off your planned path for a while. It shows that you’re listening, not just hammering through your agenda, and it ensures that the conversation flows naturally.

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feedback impacts engagement?

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