

Tips on the Art of Questioning/Listening

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Why is it important?

- The art of questioning is one of the most important skills for coaching groups to do public work. Unfortunately, this skill isn't typically taught in school where the focus is more on knowing answers, not on asking questions.
- This is a challenge, and made even more so by the nature of democratic action. As opposed to journalists who ask questions to get information, PA coaches' goal is use questions to **co-create a dialogue** together with their team.
- Effective dialogues help you and your team
 - Re-direct discussions in positive ways
 - Understand the meaning of their work
 - Challenge students to think more critically, broadly and deeply
 - Open up new options for action
 - Move from point A to point B
 - Enable the team to overcome being stuck on a problem
 - Engage "big ideas" like "how will our project impact the public?"
- Everyone probably has had a teacher who is skilled at asking questions and guiding discussions. They make it seem natural. Everyone also has had professors who stumble and struggle to move a class along.
- Anyone, with practice and attention, can become better at asking questions. If you are intentional: thinking in advance about your questioning stance, "watching yourself" (being reflexive) as you work and reflecting on how you did—you can improve!

How to Ask Good Questions

Though there is no step-by-step recipe for learning how to ask questions, the following suggestions can help if you are willing to learn and be attentive to yourself as you work with your group.

1. What is your questioning stance?

Before beginning any session or conversation, take some before time to think about how you want to approach it. This is called your "questioning stance"—it is your general orientation to questioning and listening. To think about your stance, consider the following questions:

- What is discussion for? You will have a different questioning stance for a brainstorm where you generate ideas than in making a decision where you narrow options.
- What are my expectations for this discussion? Many times the coaches' expectations can either help or limit the possibilities of what happens. For example, if you really wanted your team to make a decision, but they were not ready to make one, your expectations may lead you to push in that direction.
- What things about myself (skills, knowledge, mood today) do I bring to this

discussion? What things do I need to leave behind to make this work? For example, you may know a great deal about an issue, but this knowledge may inhibit discussion. Or, you may be in a bad mood, which will have to be bracketed.

2. **The Art of Listening:**

The title of this tool is “The Art of Questioning/Listening” because the ability to ask good questions depends on your ability to **listen**. Though this may sound backwards, good questions come from really listening to what members of your team are saying. Here are some tips to being an effective listener:

- Concentrate on what is actually being said, not what you think they are saying or want them to say.
- To make sure you are listening closely, it is sometimes a good idea to restate what team members say (in slightly different terms) to clarify. Skilled facilitators will use this restatement to ask further questions of the individual and/or entire team.
 - “Let me see if I am hearing you right, you think that ...” “Did I get it?”
 - “Did others hear the same thing or something different?”
 - “How come you used this word?” “That is interesting?”
 - “It sounds like you are also talking about power ...”
 - “What do others think about this? Do you all agree or not? Why?”
- Be attentive to important or “a-ha” moments in the conversation, and then ask questions about them. “A-ha” moments can be those good or bad moments, breakthroughs, or points of confusion (a useful way to think about “a-ha” moments are times when you think to yourself in the moment: “alright!” “oh no!” “finally!” “I don’t follow,” “what do you mean by _____?”).
- Pay attention body language, attitude, and comporment (i.e. what is not being said) as a way of listening to the conversation.

3. **Linking Questions / The Art of Co-Creating Dialogue**

By carefully listening, you will be better able to **link** questions together and co-create a dialogue. Remember the goal is not to get better answers but deeper questions and better dialogue. Thus, any answer, no matter how good, can be followed by another question and can be redirected to the rest of the team. When dialogue occurs, students will start to play off of each other and the coach will no longer be the center of the discussion. This is a goal of effective facilitators.

Here are some tips to link questions together:

- Try to **avoid** questions that will **stop discussion** (yes or no, right or wrong questions, sometimes why questions).
- Ask questions that involve plural answers like “what **kinds of things** can we do to address this problem?” These types of questions open up alternatives, allow multiple responses, and encourage more thought.
- Ask what other students think about their team-mates’ responses.
- Imagine possibilities:
 “What if ...”
 “Imagine that we were in charge, what would our project look like?”
- Play devil’s advocate. Make sure that you let the group know that you are playing devil’s advocate to help them see the other side.

4. **Reflecting on your questioning/listening**

After you have completed a session, take some time to reflect and evaluate on your questioning and listening.

- How well did you think you listened to the group? Were there any moments where you did not listen well?
- What were the moments when questions really worked and didn’t work? Was there a particular line of questioning that was effective in opening up discussion for the whole team?
- How did your team members respond?

By being attentive to questioning and listening, you can improve over time. Highly skilled facilitators are able to reflect on their performance in the moment—they are able to “watch themselves listen and question” while listening and questioning