

Questioning, Listening, Talking

The purpose of questioning is to gather information. Through questioning, you can learn things you didn't know and also find out how others feel. This enables you to understand, and help, your co-workers and clients. It also enhances your ability to convince or persuade.

You can frame questions in several ways. Depending on the situation, one type of question may be much more productive than another.

For instance, you can ask non-restrictive or restrictive questions. A non-restrictive question is wide open—excellent for provoking “big-picture” thinking. The responses may well lead into uncharted territory.

“What do you think about the state of the economy?” is one general example. “What can you tell me about yourself?” is a non-restrictive question that’s very useful in employee interviews. “Why do you want to change your yard?” is a non-restrictive question you might use early in a meeting with a residential landscape client.

Restrictive questions are much more specific. They can help you direct the discussion after a non-restrictive question has opened the floodgates.

For example:

- “Why did you switch your college major from math to horticulture?”
- “What are the best-selling ornamental trees at your garden center?”
- “How does the rooting percentage of this spring’s *Stewartia* crop compare with last year’s?”

Similarly, you may choose to ask open- or closed-ended questions. The difference is simple: you can answer closed-ended questions with “yes” or “no,” while open-ended questions demand a fuller response. Try to limit your use of close-ended questions since they don’t provide nearly as much information. (Asking an employee “Do you think this new system for recording labor hours will work?” isn’t as productive as asking “What do you think about the new system for recording labor hours?”)

Here’s an exercise you can use to check your reliance on closed-ended questions. Stage an “interview” with a close associate or friend—perhaps to discuss favorite sports teams or restaurants. Request that the person limit his responses to “yes” or “no” everytime you ask a closed-ended question. You’ll probably be amazed at how dependent you are

on this kind of inquiry. Once you recognize the pattern, you’re on the road to breaking it.

Probing and layering questions help you clarify the information you receive from open-ended, non-restrictive inquiries. Say you asked, “What do you think about the new system for recording labor hours?” and your sprinkler crew chief responded. “It looks good on paper, but it might not work in real life.” Appropriate probing questions might be: “Why do you feel that way?” or “Can you tell me more about your concerns?” “Would you give me some examples?” is another extremely useful probing question.

Once you start receiving answers to your questions, it becomes your job to listen effectively. In many respects, listening is the most difficult aspect of communication. A multitude of factors can interfere:

- Lack of respect for the speaker.
- Difficulty understanding the speaker (due to problems with the speaker’s verbal and/or non-verbal communication).
- Distractions (environment is not conducive to listening).
- Concentration on forming responses in advance rather than staying with the speaker. (If you’re worried you’ll be called on to respond, you may find listening stressful.)
- Speed differential. (You can absorb information six to seven times faster than people can talk.)
- Lack of interest in the speaker’s subject.
- Lack of an open mind regarding the speaker’s subject.
- Unanswered questions. (Your mind is stuck on a previous point after the speaker has moved on.)

As a listener, you can often overcome these problems through a conscious effort to follow the speaker. When you feel your attention waning, try the following techniques:

- Pose mind-broadening questions. (Periodically ask yourself, “Where can I apply this?” “How can I use this?”)
- Take notes. (Jot down an outline or key concepts; don’t attempt to get everything verbatim.)
- Watch the speaker.
- Listen for the underlying concepts; don’t get hung up on the statistics.
- Mentally summarize the speaker’s key points.
- Think ahead to where the speaker might be going (but not so far ahead you lose track of the current message.)
- Jot down questions that arise as the speaker talks. (This way you won’t forget to ask them later, and you’re free to concentrate on the message at hand.)

On average, listeners’ minds begin to wander 15 to 20 seconds after a person begins talking. If you’re the speaker, you need to be aware of your listeners’ eye contact and posture. When you sense they’re drifting away, do some thing to pull them back.

How can you help make sure listeners really receive your

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Questioning —

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message? Here are some tips for effective talking (as opposed to questioning):

- Talk with people, not at them.
- Allow others to talk. "Communication is a two-way process," says Cliff Kraft.
- Ask yourself, "What is this listener trying to learn from me?" If you understand the listener, you'll have a much better chance of reaching him on his own wavelength.
- Ask yourself, "What am I really trying to say? Am I saying it?"
- Vary your delivery. A monotone is deadly, as is an overly slow or speedy delivery. And it's difficult to pay attention when a voice is consistently squeaky or gravelly. (Many community colleges offer basic voice and diction courses that can help you improve the way you sound.)
- Use silence (in moderation). The pause that refreshes is more than an old advertising slogan: it's a useful speaking concept.

—Northern Ohio Turf

Steve Young Joins Plaisted Companies, Inc.

Plaisted Companies has announced the addition of Steve Young, CGCS, to its sales team. Steve's duties will focus on serving golf course needs relative to construction materials, topdressing materials and other agronomic needs.

Steve brings with him over 20 years of golf course experience in areas of maintenance, construction and clubhouse management.



Steve Young

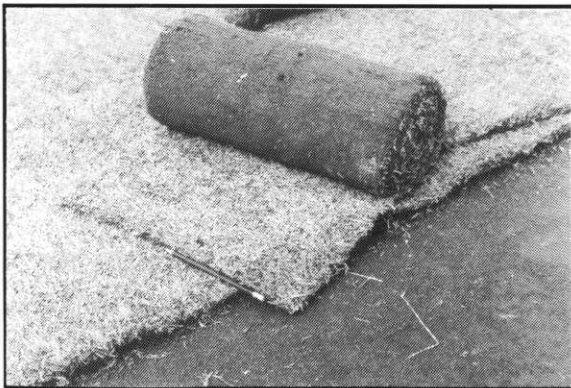
"Steve's background fits nicely with us," according to Todd Plaisted, president of Plaisted Companies. "As we expand we want to assure continued customer contact and

support. With Steve on board we are better able to achieve this."

Steve started with Plaisted Companies September 20, 1993.

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