

The art of asking open questions

There are times when a closed question (can be answered with a single word answer) is appropriate when you need specific information or clarification is needed. There are also semi-open questions that are useful for getting information – i.e. they are open in question format but the scope is closed (e.g. What sales strategies have you used in the past?).

Open questions are a valuable tool for Board Members and Mentors. They can open a discussion and can help you explore and discover unanticipated answers and important insights. Have you ever worked with someone who has come with a very specific challenge (e.g. How to increase online sales), but when you have explored further you have unearthed that the challenge posed is a symptom rather than cause (e.g. unclear target customer or value proposition, lack of data on product sales or costs). Good open questions are not leading or biased.

Open questions have many benefits

- **Rapport building:** Asking an open question and then really listening to the response is a great way to build rapport.
- **Problem-solving:** They can support someone to come up with solutions themselves.
- **Challenging assumptions:** Even where obstacles are real, the right open question (often an If question) can prompt a new perspective.

- **Increase motivation and confidence:** Encouraging a future looking discussion around how it will be to take next step or what good looks like.

Open questions often start with What, Why, If, Who.

Below are some examples of open questions that might be useful when working with your business leader.

Discovery about a challenge or problem

- How do you think it needs to be altered?
- How does the other person/department see the issue?
- How is this a problem?
- What are the consequences of this course of action?
- What are the effects of this on others?
- What are you expecting to happen and why?
- What are your fears about the situation?
- What concerns or worries do you have?
- What do you normally do in such situations?
- What effect does this have?
- What isn't happening now?
- What problems does this cause?
- What seems the biggest challenge?
- What would you like to change about this?
- Why are you doing it that way?

And what's been tried already

- What have you thought about already?
- What have you tried so far?
- What would happen if you...?
- What's stopping you?
- Who else might you talk to?
- Who have you consulted/talked to?
- Who have you involved so far?

Looking at the individual (within the challenge or solution)

- How is this making you feel?
- How would you like the other person/people to respond?
- What are the pros and cons of your behaviour?
- What are the pros and cons of your behaviour?
- What are your fears about the situation?
- What do you believe about others?
- What do you believe about yourself in this situation?
- What effect are your beliefs having on your actions?
- What skills do you need to develop to deal with this?
- Why are you doing it that way?

Exploring the goal state

- How can you improve the situation?
- What do you hope to achieve?
- What do you want to be different?
- What does GOOD look like to you?
- What opportunities can you see?
- Is there another way of working?
- What is another way of working?

Exploring immediate thoughts on next steps

- How else might you work?
- How will you go about it?
- What happens if you do nothing?
- What will you do next?
- What would be the most useful thing to work on?
- What would you like to do ideally?

Taking exploration of a challenge, solution, next steps a little deeper

- What exactly...?
- How exactly...?
- Why...?
- What's at the back of your mind?
- What worries you most?
- What excites you most?
- What else would you find most helpful?
- How can we help you?
- What would be helpful?
- What were/are you assuming about it/them?
- If you weren't assuming that, what would be different?
- What are you expecting to happen and why?
- What are the consequences of this course of action?

Facilitating learning

- What have you learned about yourself/your usual way of approaching problems like this?
- What have you learned from this?
- What more do you have to learn?
- What would you do differently now?

