

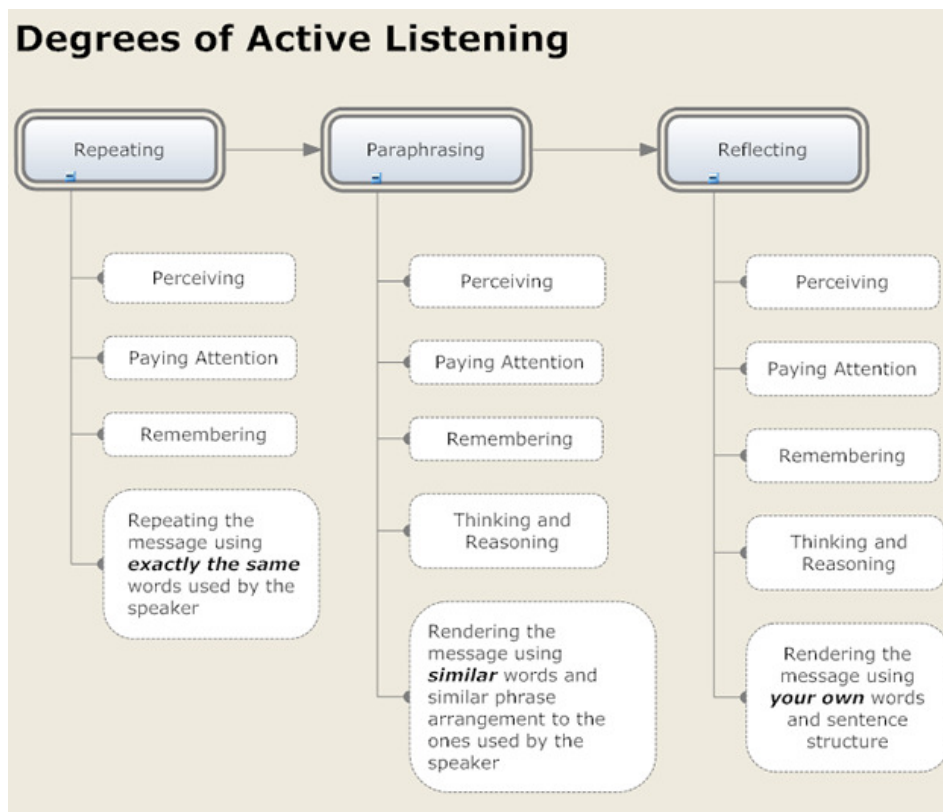
# Active Listening & Effective Questioning

## Active Listening

Listening is a conscious activity which requires attention. Rather than *waiting to speak*, you need to listen attentively to fully understand the other person. Remember, there is no point in asking a question if you do not intend to listen carefully to the answer!

Listening fully - or actively means putting everything else out of your mind and acknowledging the other person so they have feedback that you are listening properly and valuing what they have to say<sup>1</sup>. Understanding and valuing does not mean agreeing; active listening is particularly valuable in situations of conflict<sup>2</sup> or disagreement where if the other party feels you understand their viewpoint, an atmosphere of cooperation can be created which increases the possibility of resolving the conflict.

Active listening is a structured way of listening and responding to others:



Source [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active\\_listening](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active_listening)

Some of the key skills for active listening include:

- Listen with your whole body:
  - Face the other person and use an open posture to establish rapport
  - Use eye contact and facial gestures to demonstrate your attention
  - Be still and resist fidgeting

<sup>1</sup> For more on **communication theory** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1066\\_Communication\\_Theory.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1066_Communication_Theory.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> For more on **managing inter-personal conflict** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1041\\_Managing\\_Conflict.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1041_Managing_Conflict.pdf)



- Let the other person do the talking:
  - Be quiet and actively encourage the other person to talk; promote their willingness to communicate;
  - Avoid interrupting;
  - Avoid pre-judging what's being said (rather, make sure you focus on understanding precisely what the speaker means);
  - Avoid starting to think about your answer or response (wait until the speaker has finished - active listening is hard work and needs 100% of your concentration);
  - Don't finish their sentences or fill in the blanks – no matter how tempting!
- Notice non-verbal communication ie, body language, tone and pitch of the voice – listen for feelings and emotions<sup>3</sup> as much as facts and words.
- Be comfortable with silence. Staying silent gives time and opportunity for the speaker to share extra information. It may feel odd initially, but you will be amazed how often more information emerges after a moment's silence.
- Listen inquisitively and strategically:
  - Inquisitive listening - actively looking for interesting 'bits' of information in what is being said that will help formulate a solution or answer;
  - Strategic listening - going beyond the words to understand the speakers real motivations and driving forces and/or needs. This involves listening 'between the lines' and hearing the things that were 'not said' as well as those that were.
- Use questions effectively (see below).
- Reflect back the information you receive to illustrate your understanding and provide opportunities for clarification. Use paraphrasing, acknowledgment and reflective statements.

Some common mistakes made by people who think they are actively listening, but aren't really, include:

- Cursory listening; just going through the motions but the listener is either multi-tasking or not really interested in what's being said.
- Shallow listening; the listener believes they already know what the speaker is leading to and already knows the answer or what they are going to say next. This type of listening is often underpinned by arrogance and the listener fails to hear what is actually being said.

Active listening takes time and focus to achieve; used effectively it opens up a whole new level on which to communicate and build relationships.

## Effective Questions

Albert Einstein said, "*If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.*" Far too many people focus on having the "right answer" rather than discovering the "right question"<sup>4</sup>. In Germany, the job title *Direktor Grundsatzfragen* translates as "Director of Fundamental Questions." These are the people who are always thinking about what the next questions will be. The German understanding and appreciation of *Grundsatzfragen* stems from a culture that highly values philosophy and the ongoing questioning of priorities and the meaning of life. We can all benefit from adopting this approach to thinking, which makes asking effective questions a key skill to develop. A powerful question:

<sup>3</sup> For more on **emotions** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1008\\_Emotional\\_Intelligence.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1008_Emotional_Intelligence.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See **Good questions outrank easy answers:** <https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2011/05/21/good-questions-outrank-easy-answers/>



- generates curiosity in the listener
- stimulates reflective conversation
- is thought-provoking
- surfaces underlying assumptions
- invites creativity and new possibilities
- generates energy and forward movement
- channels attention and focuses inquiry
- stays with participants
- touches a deep meaning
- evokes more questions.

It has the capacity to spread beyond the place where it began into larger networks of conversation throughout an organization or a community. Powerful questions that travel well are often the key to large-scale change.

But this is not straightforward; whilst asking and answering questions is part of everyday conversation for all of us and we might think that questioning is a natural skill that we all possess; it is not as easy as we assume. Questions need to be designed to help the other person reach a conclusions, or to provide information and insights helpful to the discussion.

There are a range of question types that can be used for different purposes. Some questions provide structure, others direct flow, and some help us to reach closure. Question types include:

- **Open questions**, to gather information and facts, for example "What are your concerns and worries about this situation?"
- **Probing questions**, to gain additional detail, e.g. "Can you explain why that matters?"
- **Hypothetical questions**, to suggest an approach or introduce new ideas. An example might be "If you could get additional funding or resources, how might that help?"
- **Reflective questions**, to check understanding, such as "So would you prioritise the most critical areas for attention first and make sure that everyone knew what was most important?"
- **Leading questions**<sup>5</sup>, to help a person reach a conclusion or have an 'idea' that you feel will be beneficial; a few well planned questions can very often lead the person towards the idea and instead of responding to your request, they have their idea of how to help you be more successful.
- **Deflective questions** to defuse an aggressive or defiant situation by redirecting the force of the other person's attack instead of facing it head-on. 'Attacks' are synonymous with dissatisfaction, insubordination or resistance and prevent you from moving forward. Dealing with a strong objection by responding with similar force creates conflict. Deflective questions help to transform the negative situation into a collaborative problem-solving<sup>6</sup> occasion. Some examples include:
  - Dissatisfaction: I'm not happy with this project!
  - Response: What can *WE* do to make it right?
  - Insubordination: I have major concerns. I won't do it!
  - Response: How can *WE* address your concerns?
  - Resistance: I disagree with the approach!
  - Response: If you were to do it, what would be your approach?

<sup>5</sup> For a demonstration of the art of **leading questions** watch this video clip from the UK 'Yes Prime Minister' TV series – its an oldie but a goodie..... spend couple of minutes watching an expert: <https://youtu.be/G0ZZJXw4MTA>

<sup>6</sup> For more on **problem-solving** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1013\\_Problem\\_Solving.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1013_Problem_Solving.pdf)



- **Closing questions**, to bring agreement, commitment and conclusion, e.g. "When will you talk to your team and the client about this?"

Questions are not neutral:

- Asking 'leading questions' when you are seeking information closes off options;
- Whereas asking 'open questions' when you are intending to move a person towards the conclusion you want them to reach can be counterproductive.

Hypothetical, reflective and leading questions help generate ideas, motivate people and develop insights, they are particularly useful when leading knowledge workers<sup>7</sup>. Other question sets are designed to gather information. To be effective, you need to know the objectives of the questions you are asking and then design the questions to support the objective.

### Information gathering

The purpose of most questions is to gather information or requirements<sup>8</sup>. These questions are often used in a structured *question funnel*. The funnel starts very wide, with open questions to consider a broad range of possibilities, then it uses probing and hypothetical questions to fill in missing information, increase understanding and suggest additional ways of thinking about the situation. Finally the question funnel focuses things down by using reflective questions to ensure that all the main issues have been considered, and ending with closing questions to produce an agreed way forward.

Each of these steps involves answering questions, but to get the right answers we must ask the right questions. Some of the skills of effective questioning include:

- Asking open ended questions - Open ended questions such as "How do you think this re-structure may impact your department?" provide far greater insights than closed questions such as "How long have you worked with Harry?" Closed questions will deliver Yes/No answers or flat facts such as "Two years".
- Don't be afraid to wait for the complete answer!
- Use active listening.....
- Avoid leading questions and 'why' questions (these can cause people to become defensive) focus on 'what' and 'how' questions that elicit facts and information without appearing to blame.
- Pre-plan the questions you are likely to need some examples of typical questions include:
  - Questions to identify an issue:
    - What seems to be the trouble?
    - What do you make of \_\_\_\_\_?
    - How do you feel about \_\_\_\_\_?
    - What concerns you the most about \_\_\_\_\_?
    - What seems to be the problem? (*not: 'Why did this go wrong?'*)
    - What seems to be your main obstacle?
    - What is holding you back from \_\_\_\_\_?
    - What do you think about doing XXXX this way?
  - Questions to elicit additional information:

<sup>7</sup> For more on **leading knowledge workers** see: <https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2013/08/08/leading-knowledge-workers/>

<sup>8</sup> For more on **requirements gathering** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1071\\_Requirements.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1071_Requirements.pdf)



- What do you mean by \_\_\_\_\_?
- Tell me more about \_\_\_\_\_
- What else?
- What other ways did you try so far?
- What will you/we have to do to get the job done?
- Outcome focused questions (can help resolve a conflict once the issues are understood):
  - How do you want \_\_\_\_\_ to turn out?
  - What do you want? or What is your desired outcome?
  - What benefits would you like to get out of X?
  - What do you propose?
  - What is your plan?
  - If you do this, how will it affect \_\_\_\_\_ ?
  - What else do you/we need to consider?
- Questions to elicit action:
  - What will you do?
  - When will you do it?
  - How will I know you did it?
  - What are your next steps?
- Questions to define a risk, issue or problem:
  - What is the uncertainty?
  - How uncertain is it?
  - Why does it matter?
  - How much does it matter?
- If necessary test the reliability of the person by asking questions to which you already know the answers. This is important in several areas:
  - To test the reliability of a person's memory (or perceptions); if they correctly answer the test questions you can reasonably expect other answers to have a similar level of reliability. It is important to remember everyone's perceptions of an event will be different and no-one's memory is perfect.
  - To graduate subjective answers. What do you mean by an 'expensive meal' and does the other person have similar perceptions. Depending on circumstances 'expensive' may be \$50, \$100, \$200 or even \$500. Knowing someone believes something is 'very important' is of no value unless you understand what they mean by 'very important' compared to merely 'important' and/or 'extremely important'.

There are many other questions and everyone with responsibility for managing people needs to know how to ask the right questions. Asking the right questions lets you hear the information you really need to understand as long as you are actively listening. You may not like the answers but need the information to move forward! It is impossible to fully resolve a problem if you don't fully understand the issues first.

Here are some questions you might ask yourself as you begin to explore the art and architecture of designing effective questions. They are based on pioneering work with questions being done by the Public Conversations Project, a group that helps create constructive dialogue on divisive public issues.

- Is this question relevant to the real life and real work of the people who will be exploring it?
- Is this a genuine question - a question to which I/we really don't know the answer?



- What “work” do I want this question to do? That is, what kind of conversation, meanings, and feelings do I imagine this question will evoke in those who will be exploring it?
- Is this question likely to invite fresh thinking/feeling? Is it familiar enough to be recognisable and relevant - and different enough to call forward a new response?
- What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?
- Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, creative action, and new possibilities or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?
- Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored?

## Sceptics:

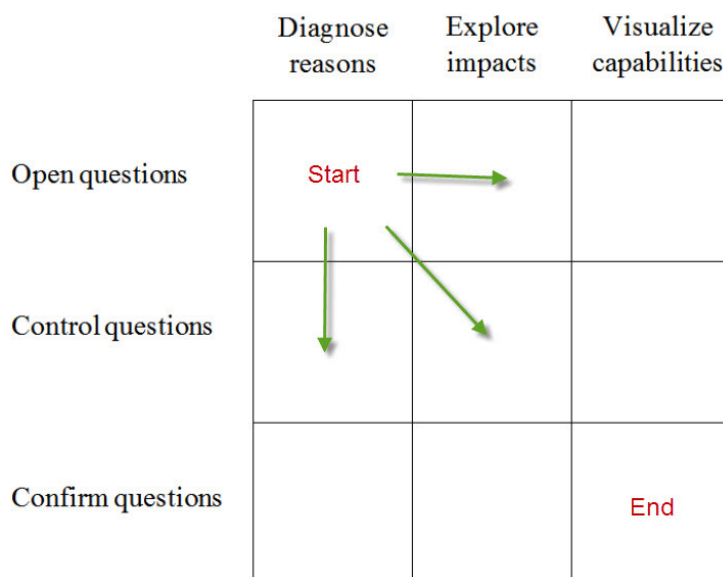
Sceptics ask lots of questions and the right type of sceptic can be very useful, especially during the planning phase where they help teams develop a strong plan and anticipate problems by challenging commonly held beliefs. But beware; there are two types of sceptic. The loyal sceptic asks the questions others avoid and force debate until problems are resolved. Their focus is on scrutinising everything to develop a robust understanding that will succeed and once satisfied support the outcome they have helped create, they are working toward success.

Negative sceptics hope for failure! They criticise everything, revisit previous decisions and continuously make dire predictions. If left unchecked this negative influence will demoralise the project team, slow progress and eventually de-rail the project. Negative sceptics are driven by personal power, fault finding and finger pointing.

Sceptics are useful and should be allowed to ‘test the scenario’ during planning – it’s better to deal with the hard questions before committing to a suboptimal course of action. This is a valuable contribution to the long term success of the work and should be actively encouraged at the right time. But the questioning needs to be positive and rooted in active listening. The negative sceptics and their stories of failure need to be removed from any position of influence as quickly as possible.

## Questioning to solve problems and create alignment:

Questioning can be a powerful technique to help solve problems and build consensus on a course of action.





The starting point is always open questions to frame the problem. Once the underlying reasons are agreed, the questioning can progress towards confirming the agreed solution or the requirements / capabilities to be developed. The discussion may not move through all nine variants of questioning but should generally progress in the direction of the green arrows, only backtracking if something was missed<sup>9</sup>.

### Negotiation Questions:

Questions are also a powerful negotiating tool. Some of the more useful are:

**Would you explain the reasons for your position?** If you can't clearly understand the other party's reasoning through simple discussions, the best way to discern the other party's position and motivations is to directly ask them their rationale for what they are offering or seeking. Once you know the other party's thought process and justifications, rather than just the outcome they desire, you can better adjust your strategy and response to coincide with their position.

**Is there any reason you can't?** This is a great question to ask when you know the other party is avoiding or rejecting your offer for no legitimate reason or not having thought it through well enough. Usually when the question is asked this way, the other party has a hard time coming up with truly legitimate reasons that effectually negate your argument or offer. In instances where the other party does have a viable objection, you now have the opportunity to directly address, and hopefully overcome, that objection with sound reasoning of your own.

**Why do you think this is a fair and reasonable term or condition?** Fair implies a proper balance of conflicting or divided interests. Reasonable means not extreme or excessive. So a fair and reasonable term or condition is one that is balanced between all parties and somewhat moderate. If you are concerned about the reasonableness of an offer, do some due diligence to research comparables. Then ask the opposing party this question to encourage them to define and defend the reasonableness of their requirement.

**Why is that point or provision important?** Understanding the significance of a specific point or provision is imperative, and can even result in an adjustment of your own position. The answer the other side provides will allow you to fine tune your strategy based on this key learning about their critical priorities and values. Understanding, acknowledging and validating the significance of the opposing party's requests can not only help you recalibrate your approach, but also create more of a team atmosphere or affinity that builds a level of trust at a faster pace.

**What part of my proposal gives you the most concern?** Discussing a proposal point-by-point, particularly specific areas of concern, allows the parties to come to small fractional agreements that may not otherwise have been reached if you discussed the arrangement as a whole. Dealing directly with the most difficult deal points in triage mode—from the most to least problematic for the other side—shows you care. This can get you past those sticking points and greatly expedite the entire process.

**What documentation or proof do you have to validate your position?** It's important to know that what is being presented is 100% factual - 'Trust but Verify'. The best way to determine authenticity is by verifying the facts through documentation that validates what is being presented. Once that ink is dry, undoing a deal, however disingenuous, is far more difficult and quite unpleasant.

**What else do you think I should know?** After you've asked all of the questions you intended and can't think of any other, but you still want to ensure you have thoroughly vetted the arrangement, asking this question may induce some other points that you haven't uncovered or considered through prior discussions and the negotiation process. There could be something you don't know that, once revealed, might actually change your way of thinking, what you are seeking, or the strategy you originally started with.

---

<sup>9</sup> For more on **problem-solving** see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1013\\_Problem\\_Solving.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1013_Problem_Solving.pdf)

For more on negotiating see: [https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1024\\_Negotiating.pdf](https://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1024_Negotiating.pdf)

## The Lens Collective:

The Association for Project Management (APM) has a publication focused on asking the ‘right questions’ to be sure you understand your project. For more information see: ***Good questions outrank easy answers*** at <https://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2011/05/21/good-questions-outrank-easy-answers/>

To buy a copy of the Collective, see: <https://www.apm.org.uk/book-shop/the-lens-collective-a-guide-to-seeing-different-perspectives-in-project-management/>



---

**Downloaded from Mosaic’s PMKI  
Free Library.**

For more papers focused on **Communication** see:  
<https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI-PBK-040.php>

Or visit our PMKI home page at:  
<https://mosaicprojects.com.au/PMKI.php>



Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License.