

The Art of the Question

A simple way to improve relationships and reduce stress

By George Aveling
Group CEO and International Partner
TMI Consultancy Sdn. Bhd.

Summary

1. Successful people have learned the art of the question.
2. Without realizing it, we often handle employees and family members less than effectively because of our natural impulse to tell, rather than to listen.
3. A poor manager will think that he has to have all the right answers, while a good leader knows that the secret to success is to know the right questions.
4. Conflict is handled more effectively and with less stress when the art of the question is applied.
5. Studies have shown that, by applying the art of the question, conflict is handled in a more physically healthy way.

**A powerful
secret of
success
that is good
for your
health**

Do you want to be a more effective leader, manager, colleague or supervisor? If your answer is “yes”, then read on. Or if you want to be a better spouse or parent, then this article is for you as well. In this article, I am going to bring to the top of your mind a “secret” of success that has been under your nose for most of your life. It is only now that I have acquired a few grey hairs, (which I associate with wisdom!) that I have come to appreciate the simplicity, yet the power of this “secret”. And there is one more bonus. Research shows that it is good for your health to practice this secret. So what is this “secret”? Very simply, it’s the art of learning to ask questions. If it sounds simple, it is. Read on to find out more!

I was with a Senior Manager of a large multinational organisation. We ran an emotional intelligence assessment and were discussing his results. This Senior Manager was a “no-nonsense, get-it-done” person. He rated really well along a number of categories, such as decision making and stress management, but rated low on the emotional intelligence scores of Impulse Control and Empathy.

Looking at his low Impulse Control and low Empathy scores, I asked him whether he cut-in when people were speaking to him. He said, “All of the time! I don’t have any time to waste!” He gave me an example from just that day. An Executive in his department came to his office to complain about the lack of teamwork displayed by a colleague. I asked the Senior Manager, “What did you do?” and he replied, “I told him I don’t want to hear these comments. I told him to go away and deal with it.”

We discussed the impact that this would have. The Senior Manager eventually agreed that the Executive would feel not listened to and would walk away disgruntled. Then I asked the Senior Manager how willing this Executive would be to bring other issues or feedback to his boss. He agreed that the Executive may be reluctant to talk to him about these issues in the future.

**A
different
approach**

The Senior Manager handled this situation poorly. He may not have wanted to waste his time, but his role is to get the most out of his people. His Executive, and no doubt the rest of his team, were demotivated because they could not have a dialogue with their boss. This would inevitably have an impact on the performance of the team.

That scenario is played out every day in management all around the world.

If we were to re-wind the scenario, what could this Senior Manager have done differently? Consider this approach: He could artfully use questions to understand the other person's point of view, by asking:

- Can you tell me more about your colleague's behaviour?
- What impact is it having on you? On other team members?
- Have you spoken with this person?
- Do you think that a starting point would be to have a quiet word with that person?

The Senior Manager came to appreciate that, while this approach would have taken a little longer, it would have helped him deal with the situation much more effectively. The Executive would have felt listened to and would feel that the Senior Manager had helped to deal with the problem.

**Great
leaders
have
mastered
the art of
asking the
right
questions**

By the end of our conversation, the Senior Manager started to understand why people were reluctant to talk to him and, in fact, were quite intimidated by him. He was a "teller". He came across as showing little interest in what people had to say. He had not mastered the art of the question.

It was time to leave. As I stood up, I left the manager with something to think about: *"a poor manager will think that he has to have all the right answers, while a good leader knows that the secret to success is to know the right questions."*

Conflict is handled more effectively and with less stress

And herein lies a powerful lesson. Effective people know the art of the question. They truly seek to understand the other person's point of view. We like to be around people who have honed the art of the question. We feel listened to and validated. Great leaders, top sales people and good friends have one thing in common – they have mastered the art of asking questions. They are seen to be good listeners. We feel comfortable with them, loyal to them. We feel understood by them. And we feel connected with them.

The art of the question and resolving conflicts

We all face conflict in our lives. In his book, *Hostage at the Table*, George Kohlreiser writes about his experience as a hostage negotiator, and applies the lessons learned to leadership and conflict management. Kohlreiser talks about the key role of questions to defuse a conflict, and to build a relationship – whether with someone who is holding a gun to your head, or a person in your family who disagrees with what you are saying.

Let's say that your 16 year old daughter says to you, "I want to go out until late. I am old enough, so you should let me!" Your first reaction might be to say, "Oh, no you are not! You are too young to be out all hours..." Have you heard conversations like this? This "tell-don't ask" reaction will escalate into conflict.

An alternative approach is to apply the art of the question. This might include:

- What time do you want to go out until?
- Do you want to stay out late all of the time or once in a while?
- How can we be assured that you will be safe?

Again, applying the art of the question defuses the situation. It builds a bond which makes it easier to deal with the conflict. The questions help to take the heat off the discussion and to build that bond – a bond based on dialogue.

The art of the question and personal criticism

Recall when someone criticized you. What was your natural reaction? Did you:

- ask them, “Why did you say that?”
or
- tell them all of the reasons that they were wrong?

It is a natural reaction to be defensive. The first part of using the art of the question is to take a breath, count to 3 to compose your thinking, and then to seek to understand the other person’s point of view.

In the work environment, what would your reaction be if your colleagues confront you and say, “You never keep us informed!” Instead of arguing back, take a deep breath, count to 3 and use the art of the question e.g., “I’m sorry to hear that. Would you please tell me which areas you feel that you are not informed in?” And then keep asking questions to understand the other person’s world. Once you have created a safe environment with your questions, you will be able to have a two way discussion on the issue. And you will find that if you ask questions, you will come to more positive conclusions than if you impulsively let loose with tell, tell, tell!

Asking questions lowers your pulse rate and blood pressure

The Health Benefits of Questions

Kohlreiser has indicated that asking questions is good for your health. He states that when we ask questions and listen, during times of conflict, it lowers our pulse rate as well as our blood pressure. In short, applying the art of the question helps you keep your cool! I am sure that you have witnessed people who “fly off the handle” – they go into anger tantrums during times of conflict. The simple “relaxation technique” for these people is to teach them to ask questions and to listen.

**You don't
have to
have all of
the
answers**

Life is full of choices. We can adopt a command and control – “do as I say with no questions asked” approach in our work and private lives. From my experience, this does not lead to organisations, teams nor families that are bubbling with motivation and enthusiasm. It breeds compliance, and even contempt. The alternative, based on learning the art of asking questions, leads to more open communication, more energy and more commitment. Your task for the month (and hereafter!) is to keep in front of you that saying that, in life, you don't have to have all of the answers. Rather, success comes from knowing what questions to ask. Until next month!

This is a 2011 updated version of an article that was first published in the May 2008 edition of Business Today.

Copyright © 2011 George Aveling

Share the knowledge! Please feel free to share this knowledge. You have permission to distribute and copy this article providing you acknowledge George Aveling, Group CEO of TMI and TACK Malaysia as the owner of the copyright.



Ask TMI about our leadership and development courses that equip individuals with skills and competencies on how to interact more effectively with others. These courses include *Develop Your Interpersonal Skills* and *Assertive and Self Confidence*.

We can help you excel on **implementation and application of skills in the workplace** through measurement, training, workplace application processes and coaching.

Give us a call today to discuss how we can help you!

TMI Consultancy Sdn. Bhd. (633749-K)

Unit E-3-9 Block E, Plaza Damas, 60 Jalan Sri Hartamas 1, 50480 Kuala Lumpur

T: +603 6203 4410 F: +603 6203 4458 W: www.tmimalaysia.com.my

“Your Trusted Partner in Learning, Development and Change Solutions”