

AN e-BURST OF INSPIRATION FROM THE BEST BOOKS

Terry J. Fadem

**CREATE
YOUR PERSONAL
QUESTIONING STYLE**



Press Delivers *elements*

FINANCIAL TIMES

Create Your Personal Questioning Style

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There is a single unanimous recommendation from all sources on questioning: If you are asking in person, speak clearly. Include voicemail in this recommendation, too. Although you might not be physically present, your electronic residue is, and it represents you.

These are basic and commonsense recommendations. Yet, due to habits or lack of attention, they are not always practiced. Consider, for example, this case of the CEO of a new business.

Whenever she was about to ask a member of her staff a question, any question, she folded her arms—literally, every single time. Her staff automatically braced themselves. She asked good questions, and they were highly skilled. However, the arm-folding habit always made them edgy and defensive. It took almost a year to break her of this habit.

The manner of the question, the way in which it is asked, and the actual communication of the question are all just as important as the substance of the question.

1. Speak clearly.
2. Display confidence in your question.
3. Maintain good posture and pay careful attention to your own body language.

4. Avoid overstressing of certain words unless you mean to stress them.
5. Avoid superlatives unless you are leading to a conclusion.
6. Avoid exaggeration and hyperbole.
7. Use humor for a purpose, not just to be humorous.
8. Be brief; get straight to the point.
9. Know when to stop asking questions.
10. Listen carefully to the response. You may need to follow up or probe immediately.

What Was That You Said?

According to Stanly Payne, whose wise council guided market researchers for many years, a question changes depending on where the emphasis is placed.

Question	Meaning of the Emphasis
How <i>could</i> you say that?	Reprimand, as in, "How dare you say such a thing."
How could <i>you</i> say that?	Other people might say it, but not you.
How could you say <i>that</i> ?	You might think it, but saying it is another matter.
How could you say <i>that</i> ?	Incredulity expressed over what it was you said.

The same question can have different meanings depending on where the emphasis is placed. I mention that point here so that you are consciously aware of it, and so that as you consider the phrasing of your next question, you can think about adding meaning by using emphasis rather than words.

I chose the "how could you say that?" example in this section deliberately. It was one of the standard habit questions of a manager I

once worked with. He always asked the shortest possible questions and packed in as much meaning as possible. It was his way of challenging people even though he was a nonconfrontational manager. The technique worked most of the time.

Consider where the emphasis is placed when you ask a question. Can you add more meaning by using emphasis?

Can You Use a Raised Voice?

There are many right ways of asking a question. A military drill instructor may yell questions in the face of a raw recruit.

Drill instructor: Mister, what happened to your shoes? **DID YOU SHINE THOSE SHOES WITH A BRICK?**

Raw recruit: (He responds by sweating profusely, while holding back a smirk because, after all, shining your shoes with a brick is a funny concept.)

Drill instructor: What are you laughing at, Mister?

A business manager should not yell in the face of a new employee—no matter how dull his or her shoes are. That said, sometimes a raised voice might be required. Some people recommend against raising a voice under any circumstances. I am not one of those people.

I believe it is permissible to raise your voice as long as you follow these simple rules.

1. Use a raised voice so infrequently that people will comment, “Wow. I never heard a raised voice before.”
2. Avoid using the raised voice with groups, because it creates an “us versus them (you)” mentality (unless that is your objective).

3. The incident must be of sufficient gravity. Others who are within earshot must perceive you to be entitled to raise your voice.
4. Ask the question by speaking (yelling) directly at the person, looking him or her in the eye.
5. Do not hold back. If you are going to do it, do it like you mean it.
6. Try to use rhetorical questions. You are not really looking for answers when you yell, are you?
7. Avoid yelling contests. Deposit your rhetorical question and leave, without slamming the door.
8. Do not yell questions out of anger. Yell them out of purpose.
9. Maintain your self-control. Do not overdo it. Get it over with quickly.
10. Remove yourself quickly and allow the object of your ire to decompress.

Can I give you an example of when this manner of questioning might be used? Yes. What do you do, for example, when a person violates a direct mandate of the company, not once but three times? I can recall yelling only one time at the office, and it was because of this situation.

One of the more senior managers in my organization had thought better of a company decision even after we had a full discussion with our legal department. The decision was to end a business relationship with another company and to do it quickly and directly.

This smaller company had approached us to produce materials for a new type of construction product they intended to manufacture for outdoor use. Although we had technology that did work, and our research laboratories were able to turn out material that promised to be

potentially useful, the business did not look economically attractive to us. The decision not to produce the material was made just as it was for many others.

A month later, I discovered the decision had yet to be implemented. This was not the raised-voice time. That happened six months later, after discovering it had still not happened. It wasn't a moment that I felt good about. Although I had been lied to repeatedly, I felt it was a failure of my management that it had occurred. I had assumed, improperly, that the matter had been resolved.

My questions went something like this.

Me: Steve, I never did hear the final response on your interaction with Universal Outdoor Flooring. What happened?

Steve: You haven't heard because I haven't told them.

Me: You what?

Steve: They don't know yet.

Me: Are you going to call them now while I wait here in your office? Or do you want to come by my office in ten minutes and report on the call? **OR DO YOU WANT TO BE FIRED? RIGHT NOW?**

I gave him three alternatives and then walked out of his office, leaving him with alternative number two to do or number three to consider. Steve popped in my door ten minutes later—job done. I asked him to put a letter to legal, copying me, and send it with a return receipt to the other party. I no longer trusted him, and I told him so.

My judgment not to follow up after the first delay was poor, although I had a hard time believing that an experienced upper-level manager with more years in the business than I had would have done

this. The underlying condition that caused the raised-voice incident was making assumptions and then not asking questions.

Although I support the possible use of a raised voice, according to the rules stated previously, it also behooves a manager to do whatever is possible to anticipate a situation such as this and prevent it from arising in the first place.

What Is Your Personal Style for Asking Questions?

Most managers have a general style when questioning people. It is their default mode. It's a habit. If a manager consistently uses one style, people start to rely on it. This is positive because it presents a consistent face for people to react to. Consistency is valuable in normal business settings. A consistent style, however, may be just as much of a problem for a manager as habit questioning.

It might preclude the ability of the manager to gain new perspectives or react to new circumstances. For example, if a manager always takes a neutral stance, others may be influenced to do the same. This is neither good nor bad—but people have a great tendency to emulate the successful managers that are promoted through the corporate system. Imagine a whole business full of neutral managers. How would they get anything done?

I used to watch a group of managers play a game called "Monkey." No one offered an opinion or would accept responsibility for any problem that was not directly under his or her control. The problem, or answer to a question asked by the boss that was about a business problem, became the monkey. They would shuffle the monkey around the table so that it would land on anyone's back but their own. One member of the group would actually dance this virtual monkey around the table as if it were a marionette, prompting chuckles

among the group—uproarious laughter as if it actually landed on someone. Most often, the “monkey” was left forlornly alone, waiting, festering into a great ape of a problem.

This stalwart team was led by a manager whose style was 100 percent neutral. He was never flustered, nor did he ever appear to be swayed one way or another by any argument, no matter how persuasive it might be. He maintained neutrality because he was overly concerned about what the business leaders above his level thought. His management team adopted this style. “Monkey” was their game.

Problems started to pile up over the course of his two-year tenure. Lower-level managers and staff were constantly paraded in before the management team to present solutions, proposals, and projects for consideration. Everyone believed this guy was destined to become a corporate officer, and his style was being adopted by many people (to the detriment of revenue and earnings). The “Monkey” game ran full time until he received an offer from a competitor and left the company. I can only assume that he continued to be the Switzerland of managers.

Neutrality is, of course, only one style of asking questions and practicing management. The list in the following table is a general description of questioning styles as opposed to management styles. Some may be practiced as one in the same. The neutral questioner may indeed be the neutral manager just as much as the intimidator may be a style that works both ways, too. The objective is for each manager to know the style that is most comfortable for him or her and to then consider, when the circumstances are correct, adopting another approach by adopting an alternative style or styles.

Questioning Styles	
Neutral	Controlled or relaxed demeanor, unresponsive to answers
Intimidator	Intense, put stress on respondent, body language is in your face
Investigator	Examiner, search for details, a “leave no stone unturned” attitude
Interviewer	Opinion taker, uses lots of open questions to draw people out
Interrogator	It is you versus whomever, extreme focus on the respondent
Commander	Asking as if launching or firing from a gun turret podium or throne
Grabber	Asking as if rummaging around the closet
Quibbler	Argumentative through questions, edgy
Conductor	Directing the conversation through questions
Magician	Holder of the hidden agenda; respondent is guessing

Your style of asking is a combination of qualities represented by the labels in the preceding table. Rapport must be established with the respondent if you want the best answers. Each of these types of styles will generate different relationships. Even the intimidator develops a rapport with people. It just takes longer to get it established. One style has a distinctly negative influence and should be practiced with care: the magician.

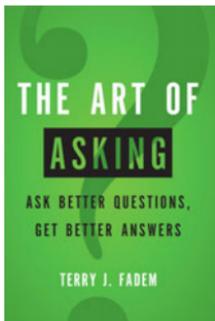
Hidden agendas kill trust. If questions communicate a hidden purpose, or appear disingenuous in any way, the trust that is a complicit part of asking questions for managers will disappear. Magician questioners pull the proverbial rabbit question out of the hat to surprise their “witness.” Use this with great caution, and if you find it necessary to employ, use it so sparingly that it is truly a surprise. A chief technology officer used to buy a different set of laboratory technicians coffee every morning. He used this opportunity to gather intelligence that he would use at key moments to ask challenging questions of his staff

about yesterday's experiment that went awry. No one appreciated his magic act.

Answers will become guarded, and all of your skills as a questioner will be reduced in their effectiveness. If used consistently over time, you will be left with your rank and title as the only means to elicit answers.

To maintain their effectiveness, all styles should be based on these four basic qualities:

1. Be genuinely curious.
2. Practice your style actively by maintaining interest throughout the interaction.
3. Use patience—even a patient interrogator can get a lot of mileage out of his or her questions.
4. Project integrity.



If you liked this Element, you might like the book by Terry J. Fadem, *The Art of Asking: Ask Better Questions, Get Better Answers* (ISBN: 978-0-13-714424-2).



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