

Don't Let Questions Kill Your Curiosity

What happens if X occurs? And then, what about Y? While we're at it, what about Z? What if X, Y, & Z all happen at the same time? What if X & Y occur for 75% of the time, but Z only occurs 50% of the time? What if X, Y, and Z work for me, but not everyone else? What if there are variables involved that I don't even know I should be asking you about?

Questions: They can help you get exactly where you want to be, but they can also take you in the opposite direction if you're not clear about what you're asking for, how you're asking for it, and why you're asking in the first place.

A compelling or pointed question might reveal important information *to* you, but it might also reveal equally important information *about* you. Questions don't just solicit information, they also signal information.

Sometimes a question signals things like "I care enough to think things through" or "I'm curious and intrigued" or "I would like to connect with you, but I don't know how" or "I need to understand this so I can explain it to others" or "I already know the answer, but I want others to know what I know" or "I'm great at conversation" or "I'm good at reading people."

Sometimes a question can signal things like "I'm unwilling to take action unless I have a guarantee" or "I can't stop worrying about every unpleasant hypothetical scenario" or "I don't want to be here, but I'm trying to find a way to say how" or "I don't trust you" or "I don't like you" or "I have power over you and I want to watch you squirm in the face of my interrogations" or "this is how I tend to act when I don't get enough sleep" or "I'm not a very patient person to work with" or "I like to ask a ton of questions" or a host of other things.

While it isn't always easy to discern *what* every question signals, it's undoubtedly true *that* every question signals. Our questions not only shape how we see the world, but they also shape how the world sees us.

If you'd like to conduct a little experiment to see if this is true, try the following:

Walk into a jewelry store and ask "do you guys have security cameras here?"

That simple little question is almost guaranteed to modify your experience at the jewelry store.

The takeaway here is not "stop asking sincere questions lest other people see you as a nuisance." The takeaway here is that questions are never completely neutral or one-

sided. Everything ranging from the way you frame your questions to the tone of voice you use is a factor that alters your chemistry with the other party.

When we ask questions, the urgency we feel about getting a reaction or response often subverts our sensitivity to how others are affected by the timing, tone, and texture of our inquiries.

Some people use questions like pistols: they point them in your direction and give you no choice but to take them seriously: “I ask the questions. You supply the answers. Now, go fetch me some data.” While this approach can be highly effective for getting intel in the short-term, it overlooks the most powerful factor that determines our ability to get great answers in the future: relationships.

If you like asking thought-provoking questions and you’re passionate about getting to the bottom of things, then there’s nothing more rewarding than mastering the art of getting others to feel open, unsuspecting, and excited about giving you the information that you want from them.

The goal of asking a question shouldn’t be to merely obtain one piece of information in the present moment, but rather to build an enduring bridge to future knowledge. A good question is one that helps you accumulate intellectual capital while simultaneously helping you create social capital.

If your style of questioning leaves people feeling ignored, or irritated, or interrogated, they will run the other way while encouraging their friends to do the same.

How do you avoid this? How do you use questions to build bridges?

I can’t give you a skeleton key that will open the heart and mind of every person you decide to question, but I can offer you three words of advice that will get you closer to that goal than any other strategy I’ve seen: question your questions.

Are you asking questions in a way that makes others eager to assist you or are you asking in a way that makes others feel defensive? Are you paying attention to other people’s reactions when you ask questions? Do you care? Should you care?

Does this moment present you with the best opportunity to be heard and received? If you were the one answering this question, would this be a good time for you?

How much do you actually need this answer? If you had an amazing answer to this question, would it truly make you happy? Would your course of action change in some substantial way?

Are these questions your own or are you asking them for the sake of others? Are you

looking for an answer or are you looking for an exit sign? Are your questions designed to help you find your way into something or are they motivated by a desire to find your way out of something?

Are your questions moving you closer to some kind of constructive action or are they leading you further down a rabbit hole of greater restlessness?

Being honest with others about what you want to know isn't enough. **Asking questions is the complete opposite of being curious if you're close-minded and careless about the way you request information from people.** Curiosity might be a cat-killer, but it has never been a conversation killer.

If you're a true seeker of knowledge with a genuine thirst for understanding, you'll be relentless in your efforts to adopt communication strategies that are designed to keep conversations alive.

Curiosity is a beautiful thing and nothing stifles it more than a mind too stubborn to reimagine and reinvent its own questions. Be bold enough to ask whatever you want, but make sure you stay curious enough to keep exploring new and better ways of asking.