



Better questions are the answer

By Lindsay Tighe, Director, Inspirational Coaching Pty Ltd

- Using the skill of asking better questions to empower people can benefit individuals and bring great results for an organisation
- Often, we take responsibility for making choices for people when they should be making the choice themselves as they have more direct knowledge
- If you disagree strongly with their response and it is essential to take a particular course of action, consider using leading questions rather than imposing a solution

Human beings tend to have a pre-programmed response to be advisers, suggesters and tellers, particularly when our roles are defined in such a way to encourage us to take this approach. We are frequently designated as being the experts in our fields and as such there is a natural tendency to respond in an advisory way.

As professionals in your roles you are often perceived as the fixer of problems. Indeed it is likely to be interpreted from your job role or title that you are an adviser or consultant, which then results in people having that expectation of you. Quite rightly there is the requirement to take on the role of 'expert' given that you do have expertise in the field, but is always giving advice really solving the problem in the best way and are people engaged and empowered in the process?

As a person who is passionate about asking better questions I'd like to explore in this article the benefits and techniques of asking questions in preference to typically advising, in the hope that it will inspire you to use this approach on a more

frequent basis. To put it bluntly I am going to suggest that you stop telling and start asking more!

Ask questions to draw on people's own potential

Deciding between responding in an advisory or questioning way tends not to be a conscious choice, due to the pre-programmed adviser response and I would like to suggest in this article that responding in a more questioning way is a good thing to do in more instances than we realise.

In situations where people look to you for advice or where they have an issue that they are looking to resolve, I suggest that you do not immediately go into adviser role, but take a breath and remind yourself of their resourcefulness.

In my professional role as a coach I am frequently astounded by how wise, knowledgeable and resourceful people really are. Very often it isn't that people don't have any ideas that is the issue, it is that they are not encouraged to bring them to the table and work through them to find solutions. Sir John Whitmore in his book *Coaching for Performance* suggests from research that up to 60 per cent of people's potential isn't used in many workplaces. If we consistently take a more telling approach in our communication it isn't surprising that this statistic will remain true in many of our organisations.

Think for a moment

When responding to requests made of you a good starting point has to be to do a self-check as to which is the best place to respond from. In an ideal world I suggest that you be conscious that you wish the person to take responsibility to solve the problem themselves, at least as a starting point for the conversation. One thing I am sure of is that once you have advised there is no way to undo the advising.

If you question and you find that an advisory role is required then you can still go there, but only if it is really required. Until you ask some questions you actually won't know! By taking a moment before you reply I trust that you will recognise that responding by asking questions designed to enable them to enable themselves will be a natural choice to make, and one that in the many cases will facilitate a better outcome.

Why a better outcome, you may ask?

First, they actually have more direct knowledge about the situation than you do, and so are more likely to know what will or won't work. They understand the nature of the personalities, culture and intricacies better than you that will influence potential solutions and advice given.

Second, they know themselves best and know what will and won't feel comfortable in actions to carry out. We all can think of situations where we have been given advice about how to do something that we know will work perfectly for the adviser but for whatever reason just won't work for us, so enabling the person to find their way, is critical to a successful outcome.

Third, it has been proven that when someone gets their own idea or insight from your question it releases chemicals into the brain similar to adrenalin and endorphins, which means not only do they feel good about the answer, they are far more motivated by the idea than if they had simply been told what to do.

A balance between telling and advising

I recognise that there are still times during these conversations where you may need to bring your role as expert to the table, particularly where there may be policies and procedures to be aware of or potential legal aspects to be considered. That said, I still feel that putting this information on the table as 'food for thought' rather than as a directive, wherever possible, means that the employee is still empowered to make the choice about the actions they will take, bearing in mind the information you have shared.

Of course in practice we frequently find that conversations require a mixture of telling, advising, asking and empowering, with the critical step in the asking being using questions to enable the person

to make the final decision for themselves, based on the information shared. All too often we end up taking responsibility for making choices for people when they should be making the choice themselves. Questions enable us to do this really well. Here are some examples of great questions to use.

- Based on our discussion, what do you think is going to work best for you in this situation?
- What steps will you take to make this happen?
- When will you implement these steps/ideas?
- How else can I help or support you?
- Would it be useful for me to follow up with you to see how you have gone? If yes, when should I reconnect with you?

There can sometimes be a fear that responding by asking questions may appear as though you are being unhelpful, but with the right approach I have no doubt that this apparent obstacle can easily be overcome. Indeed, I find that although I haven't provided the expected advice people still thank me for my help and often feel that I have provided advice when I haven't — proving that the 'tell response' is expected but not always needed!

What if you disagree?

Consider when it is appropriate to jump in with advice if the response you are getting from the person differs from your own. Generally, if someone offers an idea that differs from our own we have a tendency to correct their idea by telling them what we would do in the situation particularly if we believe that there is an absolute black and white response.

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However, before jumping in to correct I ask that you consider two things. First, there are many ways to get the same results. If the answer is not absolute, sometimes enabling the person to go with their preferred approach is the best answer. Second, if the answer really is absolute, rather than jumping in to correct, I urge you to keep asking questions, this time to be the proponent of leading questions.

By leading questions I mean we are using questions to prompt thought and answers that will enable the person to get to the correct answer. It is far more powerful to use this approach in preference to telling as it enables the person to establish new neural pathways (new thoughts) which they are then able to access again in the future when faced with similar situations.

Motivation and engagement for stronger organisations

I'd also like to suggest that there is an added benefit in using a more questioning approach that will motivate you further to do more of it. By role modelling using

questions to empower people, you will support them in building confidence and feeling more engaged and motivated with the decisions made, given that it is primarily them making decisions. This will enable them in turn to build a more empowered and questioning culture in their organisations which then releases the potential of staff throughout the organisation, which has to be a great outcome.

While this article has explored this skill in the context of professional roles, I would like to suggest that this is a fabulous skill to use in any context of your life, whether it be in your role as partner, friend or parent; it works just as powerfully.

Remember that by asking questions rather than responding from our habitual advisory space, we enable the other person to build confidence and capability and start to fulfil their potential. I challenge anyone not to want to achieve those outcomes in their relationships!

Lindsay Tighe is the author of *The ANSWER — Improve Your Life By Asking Better Questions*.
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