

It is not
the answer
that *enlightens*,
but
the question.

Decouvertes

Q is for Questions

Which type
to use, when
and why?

Insight for you:

I've hinted throughout the book about how important questions are.

Questions are a secret, powerful ingredient for connecting you to people, for helping you understand and then for helping you to be understood yourself.

You can sprinkle questions liberally throughout your conversations; everywhere in your life. Trust me, the quality of your information; guidance; insights and decisions rely mainly on the quality of *your* questions. Both the questions you ask the people around you *and* the questions you ask yourself.

Our questions are crucial to us digging deeper, connecting with people, understanding what's going on. This principle takes up a few more pages than other principles so bear with me and know that it's going to be worth it. Understanding and then choosing my questions more carefully has been – and still is – one of the quickest ways I've built relationships, found things out, connected with people, been appointed and learned so much – and still do.

For ease I'll separate the questions you have to play with into two sections.

- Firstly – Open questions.
- Secondly – Closed questions.

With each we'll explore the differences, and when to use which and why.

<<< O p e n >>> questions

Open questions I like to think of as a space you invite someone to step into. Think of a big landscape, a wide, open space and that's the effect of an open question. You ask an open question and your listener; your reader; your audience is invited to go within and search for information; for detail. From this detail you then choose whether you want more information. If you do, you bring out another of your open (or closed) questions. Here's how.

Open questions are great for networking events; for business meetings; for cocktail parties; people love being asked about themselves, they love it when you're interested in them, quizzical about them and I promise you, you get to lead the conversation – *if you want to* – with your questions. Now there's a thought. The person who asks the questions, leads the conversation.

The difference for you after reading this principle is that you'll be choosing *consciously* now between the open/closed questions you already use – but you're probably not *really* aware of how powerful they are. Certainly I wasn't until I learned about the differences and the power of them when first studying for my coaching qualifications. You'll be 'all over them', as we say, in just a few pages.

Now if you're thinking 'yes, yes Kay questioning and all that, I know about questions', I thought it will be useful to pop this quote in here from Rudyard Kipling, one of the great storytellers and poets of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

'I keep six honest serving men: They taught me all I knew: Their names are *What* and *Why* and *When* and *How* and *Where* and *Who*.'

So, your open questions begin with What? When? How? Where? Who?

You'll notice I've left out 'Why' and you can skip to W to find out *why*. 'Why' is so important it has a chapter of its own. I've also left out 'Which' and you'll find out about that, too, as you read on.

So, asking open questions invites the person being asked the question to give you information; to go inside and search for information for you. Open questions also give you time to consider the information given to you; to consider your position; to notice what and indeed how the person is saying what they're saying *before* you decide to respond.

You buy yourself time because asking open questions makes the other person do the work. They give you information versus you either having to make assumptions or telling them what you think they think. Open questions also tell the other person you're interested in them.

Here's an example. A client wanted to know whether her business partner had decided to go ahead on a project or not. She said 'I don't want to be confrontational but I'm going to ask him, have you decided yet?' This is a closed question. More on this later but it's a *closed* question. Have you decided yet? i.e. the first answer that springs up in the mind is either 'yes' or 'no' i.e. *closed*.

Our brains automatically go off and search for the answer and unless you're aware how powerful questions are, you're automatically programmed to answer them.

So, after we discussed the differences together instead of asking 'Have you decided yet' she asked 'Where are you with your decision on XYZ project?' – now that's an open question. An open space for her partner to step into. 'Where are you with etc?' Her partner was invited to share a bit of information without the 'Yes or No' being the first answer he gave.

What's going on with your finances at the moment? *How* do you know that? *When* did you start reading this? *How* long have you been in business? *What* made you decide on your career? *How* long have you been married? *Where* did you two meet? *What's* your favourite past time? *What* do you particularly enjoy about it?

Now if you re-read those questions and run through the answers, as if we're chatting together, you'll notice how you go inside, search for information; and if you write your answers down they'll take space, they'll be more than yes/no. They have to be more than yes/no because they're open questions. Open for you to answer. Open for you to share. Open for you to give me some information.

Most people love to share information about themselves, their thoughts and decisions. Open questions will help you find out more of what you want to know and keep the conversations going and by asking them it also takes the spotlight off you and puts it on to the other person. Interesting. You then decide if you want to ask more questions. Some people call it 'drilling down' further. I prefer to think about it as more like being a sniffer dog. Finding out more.

I remember splashing about in a pool on holiday and chatting with a woman who told me how she felt panicky when she went to cocktail parties, saying, 'I never know what to tell people.' My immediate response, as I splashed about, was 'what about asking them questions then? Ask people lots of open questions. People actually don't *want* you to tell them all about yourself anyway.' She looked a bit surprised, especially as we had bobbed down towards the deep end and with me being 6ft tall I was still able to stand

and she suddenly was out of her depth both physically and, for a moment, mentally.

We discussed it and giving her these types of open questions and examples of how they work and why they work, it was as if the sun came out from behind a cloud for her. She went off to her beach bag and wrote them down to use.

Now in your workplace; you can already imagine how powerful it is to be able to choose *when* to ask for information, more information, or to ask for more input about a decision or a situation when you want it. It's also a simple way to relax yourself to ask open questions, you get to settle yourself if you're feeling unsettled or uncertain. Give the metaphorical spotlight and microphone to the other person.

Where? When? Who? How? What? Your big open space that you invite people to step into.

What about 'Which?' Well 'which' tends to take you into decision-mode and so is leading into the 'closed question' territory. Which one did you pick? Which do you prefer? Which do you want me to do first? Which is it to be, this one or that one?

Can you hear in your head that 'Which' starts to pin the other person down and that's OK, that's fine *if* it's what you want. If you want more information, more detail, if you want to buy more time, then keep your questions open in that 'open space'.

>>>Closed<<< questions

Do you understand this principle? Is this simple? Have you decided to think more about your questions now? Could you start today? Will you tell anyone else about them? Can you get how important Q for Questions is? Would you be able to notice open/closed questions now?

'Yes' is likely to be the answer to all of the above. Yes or no. They're all closed questions which request a decision, a position, a 'yes' or

‘no’ answer. It’s as simple as that. If you want yes/no you ask a closed question. If the other person wants to be difficult, is anxious or is in a rush, they can just give you a ‘yes’ or ‘no’. It is, after all, all you asked for.

It’s not the *open space* of the open question, is it? No. I describe a closed question as a bit like a tunnel. You send people into a tunnel where yes or no is to be found. They *may* offer you more information after saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’, also, they may not. It’s then up to you if you ask another question. Aha.

Closed questions are important when we want to hone in on a decision. When we need to know if something’s happened, been decided on, been done. What’s so key for you here, is that you know, understand and then use the difference as you go about your business; as you go off and find out from clients what’s happening; as you ask your colleagues and friends about things. It’s the difference that makes the difference and now you *know* the difference.

Here’s a great example and I virtually shouted at the radio. A BBC reporter told us he’d interviewed a famous American actor about his recent film and what it was like filming in the English winter when he was used to Californian sunshine. ‘Did you enjoy filming in London?’ ‘Were you happy to be here for an English winter?’ ‘Do you think there’s a chance of a sequel?’ ‘Are you looking forward to seeing your family?’

You can hear how the actor could have just said ‘yes’ ‘no’ ‘yes’ ‘yes’. He could have just stopped at that if he’d wanted to be difficult, if he wanted to close the conversation down. The reporter could have asked the same essence of these questions but invited the actor into a space for him to fill with ‘What was it like filming in London?’ ‘How did you get on with our English winter?’ ‘What’s the thinking about a sequel?’ ‘How’s the family? What did they think about you being here?’ Totally different, isn’t it? Yes.

So to mix open and closed questions is the key here. Decide when you want a decision, a position, decide when you’re ready to get commitment ‘so will it be ready by Friday then?’ after you’ve asked ‘where are you with the report?’ You don’t have to pin people down to yes or no *straightaway*. If you do, then now you at least know that you are. Now you can choose.

Ideas for you to work with today:

- Remember your space or your tunnel. Notice today when you ask a closed question if you'd have preferred to ask an open one first.
- Listen to how you're asked questions by those around you. Notice how if you're asked a closed question, you could choose to answer just 'yes' or 'no'. To wake someone up, just answer, 'yes I have' or 'no I didn't' and notice their surprise. You can always carry on and fill out your answer a bit for them but notice the way the question doesn't ask you to open up, you have to *choose* to.
- When you prepare to approach someone to ask something, *think* about what you really want to know, understand or find out. Then work backwards with your questions. Some people call it 'reverse engineering'. Think what you want to find out and then work back to which questions to ask to help get you that information. Jot them down, while you're practicing, it helps to just jot your questions down, a bit like a map. I still sometimes jot down the questions I want to ask to get me to where I want to go.

Inspirations for you:

'It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers.'

James Thurber

'Quality questions create a quality life. Successful people ask better questions, and as a result, they get better answers.'

Anthony Robbins

'My greatest strength as a consultant is to be ignorant and ask a few questions.'

Peter Drucker