

Data Gathering – Techniques of Questioning

As counselors we want to ask clear and relevant questions to gather data about a person's situation and to help them think. The type of questions determine what information is received, which is important to bring clarity so you can give clear wisdom and guidance. By intentionally applying the appropriate technique of questioning, you gain specific information that will help you Speak the Truth more effectively.

❖ Closed-Ended Questions

Closed questions are questions that can be answered with a minimal response (often as little as “yes” or “no”). They can help the counselor to focus the client or gain very specific information. Such questions begin with: is, are or do.

For example:

1. Is that your church?
2. Are you living alone?
3. Do you enjoy running?
4. Are you feeling better today?
5. Are you happy?
6. Do you have a pet?

*Note: you will need to transition from close-ended questions or the conversation can end quickly and as a counselor you want it to keep going.

❖ Open-Ended Questions

Open questions are those that cannot be answered in a few words, they encourage the client to speak and offer an opportunity for the counselor to gather information about the client and their concerns. An open question asks the respondent for his or her knowledge, opinion or feelings. Typically, open questions begin with: what, why, how or could. "Tell me" and "describe" statements can also be used in the same way.

1. What has brought you here today?
2. Why do you think that situation happened?
3. How did you handle that in the moment?
4. Could you tell me more about...?
5. Describe that circumstance in more detail.

How? Can invite the counselee to talk about their feelings.

What? Can bring clarity to facts and information.

When? Can clarify the timing of the problem, including what preceded and followed it.

Where? Can reveal the environment, situation or place that the event took place.

Why? Can bring reason to the problem/situation

*Note: “why” questions can sometimes provoke feelings of defensiveness or the need to justify themselves in some way, so be selected in asking and reassuring as you walk them through the situation.

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❖ Funnel Questions

This technique involves starting with general questions, and then drilling down to a more specific point in each. Usually, this will involve asking for more and more detail at each level. It's often used by detectives taking a statement from a witness:

"How many people were involved in the fight?"

"About ten."

"Were they kids or adults?"

"Mostly kids."

"What sort of ages were they?"

"About fourteen or fifteen."

"Were any of them wearing anything distinctive?"

"Yes, several of them had red baseball caps on."

"Can you remember if there was a logo on any of the caps?"

"Now you come to mention it, yes, I remember seeing a big letter N."

Using this technique, you are walking through one situation, re-living it, and gradually focus in on a useful detail. Information that you would unlikely get back just asking an open question such as "Are there any details you can give me about what you saw?"
Tip: Start by using open-ended questions then as you target an area progress to using funnel questions.

❖ Probing Questions

Probing questions help gain clarification to ensure you have the whole story and that you understand it thoroughly. At times the counselee can try to avoid details, that hinders you from identifying the root of the problem. Ask them to give examples or thinking through from another perspective.

1. Can you give me an example of that?
2. How could you have handled that situation differently?
3. What exactly do you mean when you say...?
4. What is the connection between... and...?
5. What's another way you might...?
6. What would you need to change in order for...?
7. What could you ask... to better understand their point?
8. Exactly what evidence exists to prove ... or had you believing that's true?
9. What was your intention when you said/did...?

A good probing question: Allows for multiple responses, avoids yes/no responses, empowers the person being asked the question to solve the problem or manage the dilemma, instead of passing blame, stimulates reflective thinking by moving thoughts from reaction to reflection, encourages looking at different perspectives, challenges assumptions, evokes more thoughtful questions and is more concise.

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❖ Leading Questions

Leading questions attempt to direct the respondent to a particular solution or thought. Without directly telling them the truth or solution, you ask questions to lead them there.

Note: this should be done with much care, if used the incorrect way it can be self-serving, manipulative and dishonest.

1. With an assumption – "How late do you think he will be?" This assumes that the person will certainly not be on time.
2. By adding a personal appeal to agree at the end – "Samantha is very organized, don't you think?" or "The second option is better, isn't it?"
3. Phrasing the question so that the "easiest" response is "yes" – Our natural tendency to prefer to say "yes" than "no" plays an important part in the phrasing of questions: "Shall we all approve Option Two?" is more likely to get a positive response than "Do you want to approve Option Two or not?" A good way of doing this is to make it personal. For example, "Would you like me to go ahead with Option Two?" rather than "Shall I choose Option Two?"
4. Giving people a choice between two options – both of which you would be happy with, rather than the choice of one option or not doing anything at all.

❖ Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions aren't really 'questions', in that they don't expect an answer, but really just statements phrased in question form: "Isn't Samantha's office so organized?" "Wow, wasn't that a sweet gesture?" These questions can be used to communicate your point of view, while engaging the listener in agreement.

❖ Clarifying Questions

As your counselee communicates make sure to clarify what is being said. This will help bring clarity and mutual understanding before responding. You can clarify through statements summaries or by asking simple questions of fact.

- Clarifying is non-judgmental questioning or statements
- Clarifying is summarizing and seeking feedback as to its accuracy.
- Clarifying ensures that the listeners understanding of what the speaker has said is correct, which reduces misunderstanding.
- Clarifying reassures the speaker that the listener is genuinely interested in them and is attempting to understand what they are saying.

1. Is this what you said...?
2. What I hear you saying is...
3. When...happened, it made you...
4. So...happened, did I understand that correctly?
5. I don't feel clear about...., when you said...what did you mean?

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Additional Tips:

- Give someone enough time to respond, be patient in silence to give time for them to process.
- Don't interrupt, if you think of a questions or comment, write down as they finish their thought. Clarify what they said and redirect if necessary.
- Skillful questioning needs to be matched by careful listening so that you fully understand what the person is saying, to continue guiding them efficiently.
- Remember your body language and tone of voice when asking questions. Trying to be unemotional if something become aggravating, annoyance, etc.
- Be aware and cautious of over questioning, so they don't feel like it's an interview or "20 question game". They are allowed time to share what they have processed
- Show genuine interest, clarify what you heard and ask follow-up questions.
- Build the relationship, maybe you start slow and build up to more pointed questions verses being direct in first session.
- Don't assume anything. Including whether they fully know the gospel.

Practice:

- Take a case study in one of the ETC chapters and write out a question that represents each of the different questioning techniques.
- Take a case study in one of the ETC chapters and write out 10 or more data gathering questions, you'd like to know more about. What can you ask to dig a bit deeper or bring additional clarification?
- Take a case study in one of the ETC chapters and write down 5 leading questions on where you want the counselee to arrive. Maybe it's walking through a scripture passage together, a homework assignment, changing their attitude about a particular situation, etc. Example; "That was really nice when Sam did..., don't you think?"
- Take a case study in one of the ETC chapters and write out 5 things you'd like to teach them in Scripture. Then turn that into a leading question.
 - Example; Your thoughts - I'd like to encourage them to read a chapter of the Bible every morning. I think either Ephesians or Colossians would be a good option. The leading question you say to them – I'd like for you to read a chapter of God's Word every morning, which letter would you prefer Ephesians or Colossians?
- Do the 4 things above with different cases studies so you can arrive at new questions.
- Compare your questions with fellow classmates to see the different places you each went and different techniques you used.