

FEEDBACK QUESTIONS: HOW TO AVOID A DEAD END

Asking effective questions is the key to gaining constructive feedback. That's not an easy task. Truly meaningful and illuminating questions are incredibly tough to orchestrate. Indeed, professionals regularly ask me for help in the development of useful feedback questions.

You face two major issues in creating effective questions: substance and format. Deciding what you want to find out is all about substance. Figuring out how to phrase a question is format. Most professionals have a sense of what they want to find out, but because they give format little consideration, their questions fail to achieve their objective. Format can increase your control. When you probe with smartly-formatted, open-ended questions you not only control the topics, but you also provide better opportunities for response.

As a result, when I'm interviewing for feedback, I avoid all "dead-end" questions and structure my request in open-ended fashion. I want responses that make it possible for me to "hitchhike" and gain further clarity. It's the initial word in the question that usually determines the feedback you get. This simple chart can help you think about your question format:

Dead-end	Both	Open-end
Are?	What?	How?
Do?		In what way?
Can?		Why?
Will?		
When?		
Where?		
Which?		

Suppose you're asking for feedback about your teamwork: "Are roles and responsibilities clear enough on our team?" You began with a dead-end term, and have formatted the question for either a yes or no. Instead, reformat the question with an open-ended term: "How can we do a better job of clarifying roles and responsibilities on our team?" Or, "What suggestions do you have to improve team member responsibilities?"

Although an open-end format may result in the respondent saying, "Nothing else needs to be done," or "I don't have any suggestions," generally, my question forces her to think more deeply about the issue. Most managers detest giving feedback. As a result, they will readily give you a simple "yes" or "no" when given the opportunity, and you shouldn't allow them that.

A question always sets the parameters of the feedback—and wide open parameters tend to be far more useful. Open-ended questions are very good at inviting another to share her point of view, provide constructive feedback, or even problem-solving feedback.

Over the years, I've learned to test my questions. Not only do I catch myself asking dead-end questions, but I'd be willing to bet that 95% of the time we all automatically ask dead-end questions. The weakness of yes/no or dead-end questions is that they give the respondent only two options, both of which are of

little value. If the subject is important, I want quality information to support constructive feedback. I cannot achieve that with dead-end questions.