



## Asking Open and Honest Questions

*“An open question is one that expands rather than restricts your arena of exploration, one that does not push or even nudge you toward a particular way of framing the situation.”*  
~Parker Palmer

Each of us faces a whole host of situations, challenges, and dilemmas in our work and day-to-day lives. We can find ourselves trying to deal with complicated personal/family problems, making hard decisions, asking hard questions, and/or choosing between two actions/options.

When a member of the cohort shares a dilemma with us, what is our knee jerk reaction?

*To fix? To judge? To give advice? To empathize? To lead? To solve?*

Asking honest open questions allows us to:

- Avoid jumping to a solution
- Avoid identifying the solution for the other person
- Avoid reacting
- Gain a deeper understanding of the situation and possible actions
- Value listening without judgment

Open and Honest Questions often begin with “what”, “when”, “where”, “who”, or “how” vs. “why”

### GUIDELINES - WHAT TO DO:

1. Ask questions that you can't possibly know or anticipate the answer. *What surprises you? What moves or touches you about this? What inspires you? What was easy? What was hard?*
2. Ask questions that are brief and to the point. *What are your expectations or hopes?*
3. Ask questions that are simple and straightforward. *How does this work for you? What questions do you have? What is the hardest aspect of this situation? What is the easiest aspect of this situation?*
4. Ask questions about feelings as well as facts and those directed to the person as well as the problem. *Have you ever had an experience that felt like your current dilemma? Did you learn anything from that prior experience that feels useful to you now? How do you feel about the experience you just described?*
5. Stay with the person's language - use words the person is using not what you think they might or should be feeling. *You said this was an impossible situation - could you say more about what this means to you? What do you mean when you said you felt frustrated? as opposed to Don't you ever feel angry?*
6. Use images or metaphors that the person might relate to, as to open things up in ways that more direct questions do not. *If you were writing a book about this experience, how would you name this chapter? If you were using a roadmap to navigate this issue, what would be on your map - the rest stops, the destinations, the detours?*

## THINGS TO AVOID:

- Satisfying your own curiosity.
- Paraphrasing what has been said.
- Sharing background considerations, rationales, or your own experiences.
- Drawing attention to you through long storytelling or speech making.
- Asking these types of questions in all situations.
- Asking leading questions or those with a right or wrong answer. *Re frame Don't you think it would be helpful to talk to her? to What has been most helpful? Least helpful?*

This information is based on the work of Parker J. Palmer, John Morefield, and Marcy Jackson, and inspired by the work of Parker J. Palmer and the Center for Courage and Renewal and adapted from <http://managementhelp.org/blogs/personal-and-professional-coaching/2012/01/10/practice-of-asking-open-and->

## Activity: Asking Open and Honest Questions – A Practice Opportunity

### Directions

1. Get into small groups (self-formed) and consider the shared scenario.
2. Then, on your own, brainstorm at least five open and honest questions. Try not to critique or judge as you go – just write. Your questions should aim to help the person facing this situation find answers to her/his question(s).
3. Once everyone has drafted a few questions, put the brainstormed questions into a pile and mix them up.
4. Have one member read questions, one at a time, from the pile.
5. As a group, consider and discuss if you think a given question will help the person in the scenario gain clarity to their situation, help the person get to the root of their concern, and/or help the person take action.
6. Consider which questions may not meet criteria of being open and honest because they sound more like an effort to satisfy your own curiosity, are leading, and/or may block the person's own "inner teacher."
7. Identify the three questions, which you feel will help the person experiencing this situation the most, and make a copy to perhaps use with a colleague down the road.