
How to Listen and Ask Questions for Effective Teamwork



By John Young , Director, RedElephant (INSEAD EMCCC '15)

Good ideas and solutions often arise when we ask open-ended questions.

In the course of helping organisations and teams develop more effective ways of working, I have found that many of the obstacles to delivering value quickly to customers originate from mental models and assumptions that have been internalised. These mental models and assumptions largely exist and operate outside of our awareness. Listening and asking questions can help drive these concepts to the surface.

Listening and asking questions helps me create the partnerships needed to realise more effective ways of working and ultimately help companies serve their customers better and faster. I have found that open-ended questions, when asked with sincere curiosity, spur deeper thinking. This is true for people on both sides of the question – the questioner and the person to whom the question is posed.

How questions help

At its most basic level, asking open-ended questions and listening to the responses helps surface risks earlier in a project. **Edgar Schein**, Professor Emeritus at the MIT Sloan School of Management, argues that lower-ranking employees often detect risks before more senior managers. Because of this, Schein says in his book *Humble Inquiry*, managers need to learn how to ask more and tell less. He argues that curiosity and humility are key ingredients for developing better questioning skills.

Asking an open-ended question is an expression of interest in another person's thoughts, ideas and ways of looking at the world. It is also an acknowledgement of one's own limited understanding of a situation. Asking an open-ended question and truly listening to the response demonstrates one's desire to develop solutions through a collaborative approach.

A conversation naturally unfolds with an exchange of open-ended questions and listening, even if the topic is sensitive. In these conversations, challenging business problems or sticky team dynamics are often untangled, good ideas emerge and the appropriate next-step of a problem presents itself. These ideas are not top-down dictated ways of working but developed in partnership with people who have a deep understanding of the problem at hand.

As I have gotten better at listening and asking questions, I find that I am less compelled to promote a theory or belief. I interrupt less. I don't try to shape the story to fit a desired outcome or narrative. I also become more sensitive to the nuances of a situation.

Staying grounded

Developing better listening and inquiry skills has opened my eyes to how many so-called "solutions" have little to do with delivering value to a customer, but are in fact a salve to anxiety. Whether in a large global company or a small start-up, unconscious dynamics often have a detrimental effect on a group's ability to effectively and efficiently solve problems. This, in turn, prevents the group from delivering value quickly to customers.

These skills have helped me develop a greater capacity to remain grounded when a team I am working with can't seem to resolve a problem. I am less prone to push for something resembling a solution just for the sake of feeling like we've resolved the matter. Although asking questions when faced with the pressures of product development and delivery, or validating a business

idea, can feel like you are pulling on a thread that will unravel the whole sweater, this capacity to “hold” anxiety and continue exploring the matter at hand invariably delivers more useful and actionable outcomes.

In several cases, I have seen a team that would try to introduce a process for a problem that didn’t exist yet. Listening and question asking helped me get a better understanding of what was compelling the push for new processes: The team had been unfairly blamed for previous failures and the new processes are a solution to prevent the misdirection of such blame again.

Armed with this insight, I have been able to work with a senior manager to help reduce the culture of blame, increase psychological safety and develop a more cohesive and collaborative working environment. How? By asking questions and listening to the concerns and desires of all the parties involved. Conversely, wherever management failed to address the culture of blame, the new processes that were implemented to pre-empt problems increased workload and lengthened delivery times, with little to no meaningful improvements to the product, risk management or customer satisfaction.

Dealing with defensiveness

When people are questioned about how they work, they may become defensive. Defensiveness is an important signal. It could be a warning sign that the person’s sense of psychological safety has been breached. If you feel defensive in return, it could indicate that you’re trying to push an agenda. Proceed with caution, should you proceed at all.

To develop better listening skills, try to be comfortable with silence when it enters conversation. Erik van de Loo, co-director of INSEAD’s [Executive Master in Change](#), argues that there can be an “emotional colouring” to silence in groups. Sometimes it is reflective and thoughtful. Other times it may hold confusion, fear, frustration, etc. Being sensitive to this emotional colouring can lead to valuable insights.

I still find really listening to someone else’s perspective difficult. Too often, I catch myself not listening as well as I could, usually because I want to push my own agenda. However, I now catch myself much earlier and can more easily find a way back to being present with the individual or team who I am working with. INSEAD was instrumental in helping me develop these skills within a business context. As counterintuitive as these practices may seem,

to date they are some of the most powerful tools I have experienced for facilitating meaningful, lasting change that leads to the faster delivery of value to customers.

This blog post is based on John Young's upcoming book, Delivering value faster through listening and inquiry.

John Young is the Director of RedElephant and a graduate of INSEAD's Executive Master in Consulting and Coaching for Change, now known as the **Executive Master in Change**.

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