

The Power of Questions

By Dorothy Leeds

When I first started teaching in New York City public schools, I was intimidated. I envisioned students running wild and not paying one iota of attention. So, before my first day of classes, I thought about the teacher from whom I had learned the most and the class in which I paid the most attention. I asked myself, “What was it about that teacher that made me like her so much? What specific things did she do that kept me so interested?”

What I realized was, her students were always so engaged in every lesson that we didn’t have time to misbehave. The reason was that she made asking questions an integral part of every class. Every time we asked her a question, she threw it right back at us and made us answer. She was a tough, relentless woman when it came to making us answer the questions, but every one of her students appreciated it—especially in retrospect.

So I tried it myself. I asked my students in-depth, thought-provoking questions. My nightmare about students running wild didn’t come true. Instead, I had a successful teaching career.

When I left teaching and entered the business world as a salesperson and trainer, I retained that questioning mindset and began to research it in greater depth. My first book, *Smart Questions*, was written for managers and focused on how questions can help hire, coach, and motivate. Since then, I’ve continued to research the effect of questions. I’ve discovered that they are indeed powerful and can help us in every aspect of life. From the conference table to the dining table, questions can transform our lives.

As a trainer who’s a teacher at heart, I’m especially interested in the use of questions by instructors. With a question, we can teach and inspire change. Questions are our most valuable tool. They have several powers that are essential for training success.

Questions demand answers. A question is like an electric shock to the brain. As soon as you hear a question, you feel compelled to answer. We all possess the answering reflex, which is instilled in us at an early age. By the time we become adults, we’re conditioned to answer ques-

tions. That power is so strong that all of the other powers of questions depend on it. Because questions demand answers, they can stimulate thought, persuade, and help you gain control. As a trainer, that power means that you can plan and orchestrate your training more effectively. Questions stimulate thinking. This is perhaps the most useful power of questions for trainers. After all, your job is to help people make changes.

How does change occur? It’s the result of meaningful thought, brought about by insightful questions. In other words, questions are the best way to stimulate thought, in ourselves and others. Focused thinking leads to discovery, evaluation, decision making, and planning, which all lead to change. Without

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first asking questions, change is difficult.

Many trainers fail to ask as many questions as they should because they are too involved in telling. One of the first things I do in a session is ask the all-important question, “What can we gain from learning to do this better?” That question immediately gets participants thinking about why they should be interested in learning. It helps them realize how they can benefit from the session. And it helps the trainer, because once learners understand how they can bene-

fit, they’ll be more attentive and more likely to participate.

It’s easy to assume the expert role and give trainees all of the answers. But lecturing isn’t teaching, and listening to a lecture isn’t learning. If you want to truly train people, you have to engage them. Ask, “What do you think?” That engages participants’ brains and keeps them involved. It also sends the message not to always look to others for answers—a skill that’s useful no matter what a person’s job title is.

If someone disagrees with you on a point, squelch your first—and natural—instinct to defend yourself. Ask the other participants what they think. Use thinking questions such as, “In what ways could I be wrong?” “In what ways could I be right?” “Which makes more sense to you and why?” You’re not there to defend your position; you’re there to facilitate thinking and learning.

Asking trainees questions is like creating an oral essay. It helps you discover how the participants process information, how they process information as a group, and how they’re likely to use the information later.

Questions make people discover for themselves. People believe in and learn from things they discover for themselves. If you believe something emotionally, you’re more likely to make a change. If your belief is half-hearted, you’ll be less motivated to change. When trainees answer questions, they move closer to self-discovery and satisfaction.

Remember when your grade-school teachers said, “Look it up!” when you asked how to spell a word? People take pride in figuring things out for themselves. As a trainer, you’re going for that “A-ha!” moment when participants get it. Once they’ve gotten it on their own, you can be sure they will keep using it.

Questions put you in control. Maintaining control of a session is important to any trainer’s success. Questions provide the control you need to be a captivating, compelling trainer. The asker of questions is always in control because of the first power of questions: They demand answers.

For example, “If you had to choose between unlimited wealth or perfect health,

Self-Questions for Trainers

- ❑ What is the problem? Is it a training issue?
- ❑ What is the specific knowledge that needs to be learned?
- ❑ What are the specific competencies that need to be addressed?
- ❑ What are the behavioral objectives?
- ❑ How can I assure ongoing applica-