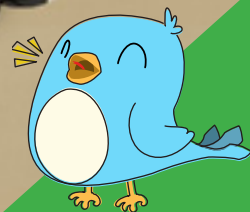
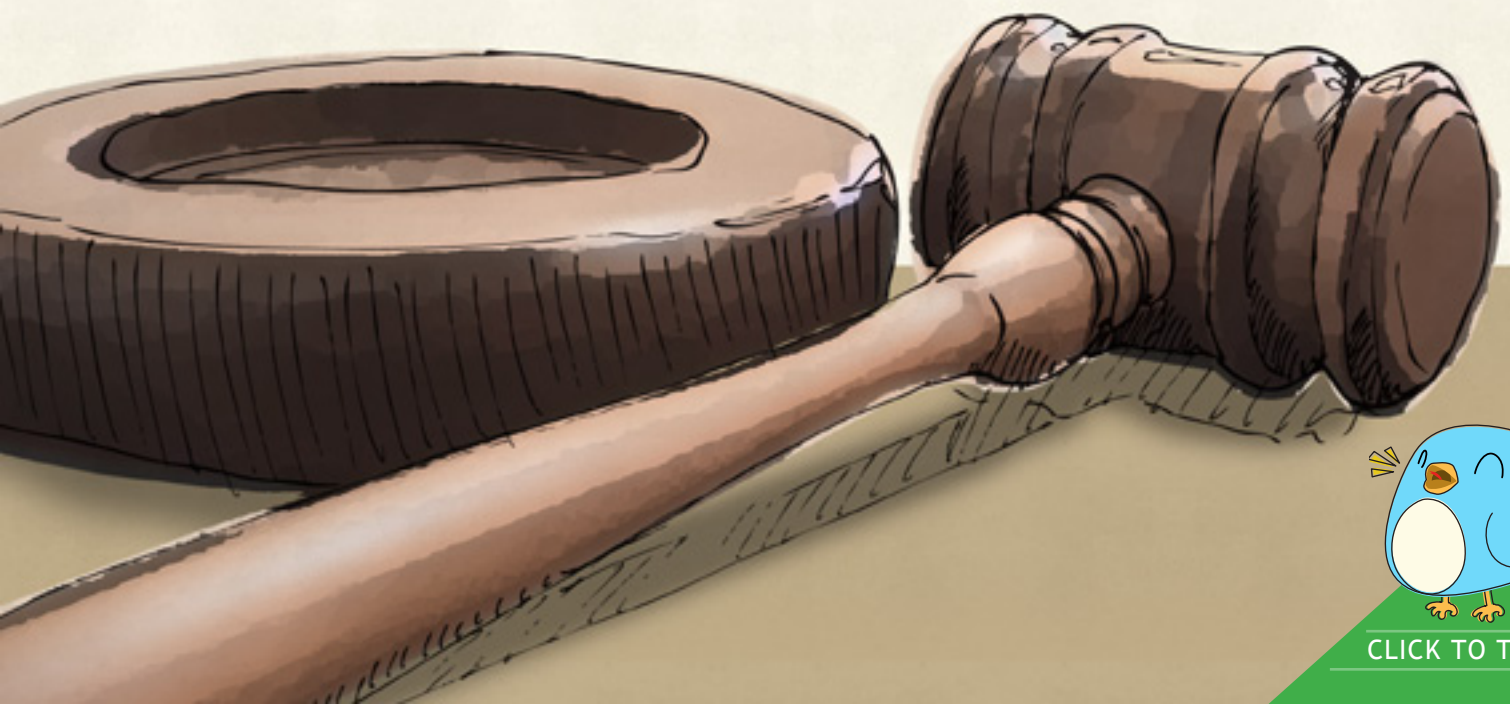


TO MAKE WISE JUDGMENTS, IT'S WISE TO FIRST UNDERSTAND

How to ask questions, listen and learn -
before making a final judgment.

By Ken Revenaugh



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Too often, we begin to pontificate, offer opinions and attempt to solve problems without taking the time to truly understand the situation at hand. Intellectually, we know the best approach involves asking the right questions, discovering the details, being patient and listening to the full story, but often that is not how problem solvers in corporate America proceed.

Dr. Steven R. Covey, author of the international bestseller, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People", explains that, in order to be an effective person, you must "First, seek to understand." As your mother may have told you, "You have two ears and one mouth for a reason." One of my mentors encourages me to ask

"There is a real art to asking questions."

colleagues to "Help me understand." Before jumping to conclusions, I collect as much information as possible and don't simply judge a book by its cover.

In my training workshop, "Communicate to Win!" we take an in-depth view of the process of collecting information to make the best decisions.

On the next page are some quick tips to consider as you learn how to ask questions in order to become a better communicator.

HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS - IT'S A REAL ART

There is a real art to asking questions. How you do it is very important in establishing effective

communication. The art of questioning lies in knowing which questions to ask when. Master this art, and you open the door to greater knowledge and understanding.

Jack Welch, the legendary former CEO of General Electric, believes business leadership is all about knowing which questions to ask subordinates. Welch thinks asking questions and getting the right answers is the crux of successful managing. To understand the strategic issues within each of GE's businesses and to see where these business units were going, Welch asked these five "open-ended" questions:

1. What does your global competitive environment look like?
2. In the last three years, what have your competitors done?
3. In the same period, what have you done to them?
4. How might they attack you in the future?
5. What are your plans to leapfrog over them?

You will need to discover the key questions that get to the bottom of situations in your world. Some points to consider:

"OPEN-ENDED" QUESTIONS MOVE PEOPLE TO OPEN UP

Open-ended questions encourage people to talk about whatever is important to them. They help to establish rapport, gather information and increase understanding.

Open-ended questions do not lead people in a specific direction, but invite them to "tell their story" in their own words.

**"Use open-ended questions
to gather information."**

Closed-Ended Question

Do you get along well with your boss?
Who will you vote for this election?
Do you like your job?

Open-Ended Question

Tell me about your relationship
with your boss.
What do you think about the two
candidates in this election?
Help me understand your
career goals.

Use open-ended questions frequently, though not exclusively, in conversation. When asking open-ended questions, be ready and willing to listen to the response. To illustrate closed-ended vs. open-ended questions, consider the following examples:

Open-ended questions facilitate information gathering. While you could never make a list of all the open-ended questions to ask, here are some of the best ones for discovery and information gathering.

- Could you help me understand _____?
- Would you tell me more about _____?
- What are your expectations/requirements?
- How do you see this happening?
- What is it that you'd like to see accomplished?
- What does that mean?
- How does that process work?
- What challenges does that create?
- What are the best things?
- What other items should we discuss?
- What are your thoughts?
- What concerns do you have?
- How do you measure that?

“It’s critical to listen to a person’s whole story.”

LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN TO PEOPLE’S ANSWERS

Asking the right questions is important, but so is really listening to the answers. If you spend most of your time talking, you’re spending it confirming your thoughts, feelings and beliefs. When you listen to others – really listen – with compassion, you spend your time learning (about them and yourself).

Fortunately, most of us spend lot of time listening. Studies indicate that people do actually listen more than they speak. We listen to radio, CDs, television, video games, friends, parents, teachers, relatives, strangers, traffic noise, wind, horns honking, cows mooing, flies buzzing and bacon sizzling in the frying pan. Many of us, however, are not effective listeners. Therefore, given how much time you spend listening, it’s well worth the effort to improve your skills.

One struggle many people have is letting others finish what they’re saying before starting to think of how to respond. Listening is a lesson in patience. Learning to listen to a person’s whole story is critical to having a healthy connection with others.

YOU MAY HAVE TO CHANGE YOUR LISTENING HABITS

The way we listen is a habit we develop. To change or develop new habits takes time, practice and patience. If you want to improve your communication skills, you likely will have to adjust your listening habits.

“You likely will have to adjust your listening habits.”

This involves keeping some broad general principles in mind:

- Have a genuine desire to listen, making sure you have time and are not tired or impatient.
- When you truly want someone to open up to you, first listen without judgment, even if you don’t agree with that person.
- Trust another person’s capacity to work out his feelings, make decisions and find solutions. Allow others to take responsibility for themselves.
- Remember that people’s feelings shift all the time. Feelings often change as a result of new information or insight.

“You need to practice listening skills.”

SEVEN PROVEN SKILLS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE LISTENING

People have a zone of comfort, and if we cross into that zone without a specific invitation, they may feel threatened. Therefore, leave enough physical space between you and the other person (at least 18-30 inches). Then practice these listening skills:

1. Keep your body open and relaxed, not closed with arms and legs crossed. A relaxed posture will facilitate strong communication and openness.
2. Maintain eye contact to build trust and confidence.
3. Sit up, lean slightly forward and nod appropriately. These gestures indicate that you are focused and interested in what they are saying.
4. Avoid sharing your own stories and injecting, “I know.” The listening phase of

conversation means giving your complete attention to the speaker, not interjecting with your own concerns or experiences.

5. Watch for nonverbal cues. What can you learn from their body language, vocal patterns and gestures? Are they speaking quietly? Are their eyes wide with excitement or droopy from exhaustion? Are their arms gesturing a lot, or are they sitting back with arms folded across their chest? What does their body language suggest they really believe about the topic they're discussing?
6. Learn to give others the chance to finish talking before planning your response. This may create periods of silence that seem uncomfortable. Your audience will soon appreciate your desire to truly listen and your willingness to respond thoughtfully to their concerns.
7. In group discussions, practice being silent every so often. Just listen.

Remember this: People want to believe that their ideas are important. When you really listen to them, they feel supported. When that happens, they will often open up more and forge stronger connections.

**“When you understand,
you’re ready to react”**

AFFIRMATIONS

You may believe you're prepared to react, to respond. Before you do, I suggest one more important task: Use affirmations to let others know you value their input and that you'll be a good steward of their knowledge.

Affirmations are statements and gestures that recognize someone's strengths. To be effective, affirmations must be genuine and appropriate.

Examples of affirmation statements include:

- Thank you for ...
- I really like the way you ...
- That was very creative how you ...
- You showed a lot of self-control in the way you ...
- It may not seem like much, but I think it was very impressive how you ...
- You have a real gift for ...

BOTTOM LINE: WHEN YOU UNDERSTAND, YOU'RE READY TO REACT

You've asked the right questions, gained the needed knowledge and affirmed the person or group. Now you have a clear runway from which to give your opinions, thoughts, judgments and advice flight – not that you have to do this immediately. You may want to take some time to think about what you've learned. You may also want to gather information from others and research options. You get the idea – using these suggestions will improve your relationships and your ability to manage and guide others.

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