



Competency #2: Facilitating Discussion

Introduction:

It is well known that leadership involves communicating with others. However, it is easy to misunderstand leadership communication as a single, two-lane road – leader to followers and followers to leader. Yet some of the most powerful communication you will engage in as a leader is less like a two-lane road and more like threads of a web. According to that model, each person in a group communicates with all the others.

Good leaders strengthen the web by facilitating discussion in which everyone participates. Done well, group conversation can draw out creativity, insight, and even transformation that doesn't happen the same way in any other setting. In this module you will learn the basics of facilitating discussion in a learning group or a service team. We will focus especially on the most important skill for facilitating discussion, asking questions.

Character: Attentiveness

Leaders demonstrate close attention to others' thoughts, interests, and desires by listening well.

Competency: Facilitating Discussion

Facilitate discussion in such a way that everyone engages and takes their next step spiritually.

Objectives:

- Install the disciplined habits of an attentive listener into your life.
- Summarize how good questions dispose people to learn and to respond favorably to your leadership.
- Practice writing the nine types of questions given in the question development dial.
- Observe a leader in a situation where they are asking questions to take note of the questions and what you learned from watching the leader.
- Apply the five types of follow-up questions in your conversations at home, at work, and in ministry.



Deepen Your Character: Attentiveness

I remember a sign from what I was a child that used to appear at railroad crossings, especially ones that didn't have a gate to come down when a train was coming through.

The sign said, "Stop, Look, and Listen." It wasn't just good advice for drivers – it's pretty good advice for leaders too. Being a leader involves a good deal of responsibility. It is easy to get caught up in the flow of events and rush of things to do. When pushed along that whitewater stream, we are prone to become inattentive to the people around us. Attentiveness means devoting close attention to others' thoughts, interests, and desires. Attentiveness is a crucial character trait for leaders, because when they attend to the people they lead, those people are much more likely to attend to what the leader has to say.

The first and fundamental behavior of attentiveness is listening. A good listener hears what a person says and also uses their sympathetic creativity to deduce what someone is thinking but not saying. A good listener receives what the person has to say on their own terms without muddying it up with the listener's own assumptions. A good listener also does not interrupt the speaker by cutting the person off or by getting lost in their own thoughts. The importance of attentive listening is summed up concisely in a couple of proverbs from two books in the Bible.

Scripture:

As you read the following Scripture, meditate on what the author wishes to communicate, and answer the questions below. Allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you and challenge you as a leader about how you can develop your character so that you are attentive in your everyday life.

Proverbs 18:13

To answer before listening – that is folly and shame.

James 1:19

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak.

From what you have observed in life, what consequences might you experience when you speak too quickly?

Why is attentiveness such an important trait for a leader to develop in their character?



Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is “quick to speak, slow to listen” and 5 is “quick to listen, slow to speak.”

When someone else is speaking, what kind of thoughts tend to distract you from what the person is truly saying?

What discipline or habit would help make you a more attentive listener?

Now that we have examined the character trait of attentiveness, we can begin to work through the core competency for this module: *Facilitate discussion in such a way that everyone engages and takes their next step spiritually.* As you read what follows, note how attentiveness can undergird a leader’s competency of facilitating discussion.

Develop Your Competency: Facilitating Discussion

Preassessment

Before proceeding, complete the assessment below. In the final module of this training guide, you will retake it as a post-assessment to measure your transformation and growth in this competency.

The following proficiencies demonstrate mastery of this module’s competency. For each of them, give yourself a grade of A, B, C, D or E to reflect your actual level of competency today. Giving yourself an A+ indicates you are model for others to follow. An E indicates no mastery.

Proficiency:	Preassessment:
Value the power questions have to produce transformation in the lives of participants.	
Write a series of questions that follow a progressive thought pattern	
Ask questions in a way that generates the engagement of everyone in the group.	
Ask follow-up questions that deepen the insights of the group.	
Be comfortable with silence, giving the group time to process their thoughts.	

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Reflection Questions:

In what situations do you need to facilitate good discussions (in any of the various roles you play in your life)?

Think of a group you were a part of in which everyone actively participated in conversation. Who made sure everyone had a say? How did they do it?

No matter what kind of group or team you lead – even if you are just guiding one other person – there are many occasions that you want to get a good discussion going.

- For group leaders, good discussion is at the heart of the learning and bonding that happens in a small group meeting.
- For team leaders, good discussion is important whenever the team is debriefing an event, solving problems, and devising best practices.
- For those leading children or students, good discussion makes the participants feel valued and understood.

However, it's one thing to know that facilitating a lively discussion is important. It's another thing to do it. Sometimes this causes committed leaders real frustration.

Once when I was leading a training seminar on this subject, a veteran small group leader approached me. "For years I've been leading a group over breakfast on Tuesday mornings," he explained. "The problem is that I always ask questions to get discussion going, but nobody answers. Then I end up doing all the talking."

This well-intentioned small group leader was having a hard time stimulating discussion, and he needed the help that this training module provides. To his credit, though, he was on the right track, because he knew that getting people talking had to do with asking questions well. He knew that *good discussion comes from good questions*.

Over the years I've discovered there is a great power in great questions. Great questions generate not only discussion but discovery. They draw out not only information but insight. The power of conversation is transformation.

In this module you will learn to ask questions that generate insightful conversation so that people take their next step. First we'll look at why questions are important for leaders. Then I'll show



you a useful tool for generating the right question at the right level of depth at the right time. Lastly, I'll give you tips on how to ask questions to avoid common mistakes.

How would you rate your proficiency at getting a good discussion going?

What would you ask the best question asker on Earth?

Your Brain on Questions

In high school or college, did you ever take a class on public speaking? Many of us have. But how many of us had a class on asking questions? Probably none of us, but arguably that skill is far more important and practical. When we don't grasp the power of questions, we won't utilize them to impact development, innovation, and engagement of the people we lead.

The Gospels show Jesus asking questions all the time – over 300 of them! Yet this leadership proficiency that Jesus displayed long ago has since been corroborated by scientific research that reveals the enormous influence questions have on the human brain. There are three reasons why questions are so useful for leaders.

First, questions create likeability for the leader. Some Harvard researchers observed thousands of natural conversations among participants who were getting to know each other. The researchers randomly assigned some people to ask many questions, at least nine in fifteen minutes, and others to ask very few, no more than four in fifteen minutes. The people who asked many questions were better liked by their conversation partners, and they learned more about their partners' interests. In the same way, asking questions improves interpersonal connection and raises your likeability, which increases your influence on your group or team.

Second, questions create intensity in focus. They capture the mind's attention and focus brainpower on a topic.

Neuroscientist John Medina points out that research shows that we can't multitask. We are biologically incapable of processing attention-rich inputs simultaneously. So if you are able to give a person the right input, it will focus them on one thing that they must give all their attention to.

That's exactly what a question does; it triggers a mental reflex called "instinctive elaboration." This means that when the person hears the question, for a moment they cannot think about anything else but the answer to your question. In essence, you can use questions to hijack a



person's brain. Because the brain cannot multitask, when you ask a question you have created an intensity of focus. The better the question the longer and better the intensity of focus the person will have.

Third, questions create curiosity for learning. You can prime someone's brain to be more receptive to development, innovation, and engagement simply by asking good questions. A psychologist at the University of California was curious to know why we retain some information but forget other things. So he and his colleagues asked nineteen volunteers to review more than 100 trivia questions such as "What does the term 'dinosaur' actually mean?" and "What Beatles single lasted longest on the charts, at nineteen weeks?" Participants rated each question by how curious they were to know the answer.

The researchers put participants in an MRI machine that scanned the brain, and they gave participants the questions again, only this time they were allowed to see the answers too. Whenever a participant learned the answer to a question they were very curious about, the part of the brain that regulates pleasure and reward "lit up."

This area of the brain releases a chemical called dopamine, which gives us a "high" feeling and stimulates us to seek more of the same pleasure. Dopamine also enhances the connections between cells that are involved in learning. So when participants were tested later, they remembered more answers to questions they were more curious about.

A person's curiosity is influenced by how much knowledge they already have when they encounter the question. If a person already knows everything about the question – they've known the answer so well for so long that there is nothing new about it – their curiosity remains low. At the opposite extreme, if a person knows so little about the question they can't begin to understand it, much less answer it, their curiosity stays low as well. The sweet spot is in the middle, when someone knows enough about the topic to understand the question well but they don't immediately know the answer. When a question stretches someone just beyond what they know into something they don't, then the person becomes highly curious.

The big takeaway is that the right question stimulates curiosity, satisfied curiosity releases dopamine, and dopamine secures learning, development, and innovation. Just giving answers or orders doesn't do it; we give up learning leverage that way. If we sow answers in a field that has not been fertilized with curiosity, the seeds of our knowledge will be unproductive. But when we use questions to prepare the soil of the learner's mind with curiosity, we create a field of thinking that is fertile for discovery and insight.



Asking Well

So far we've looked at why questions are important for facilitating a discussion that changes the people who take part. We've also explored different kinds of questions that we can use to take people progressively deeper into transformation. But without knowing more about how to engage people with our questions, we won't get the discussion we hope for. So here are five best practices for using questions to facilitate discussion.

1. Ask Simply

For a discussion to begin, someone has to go first in answering a question. But for someone to answer a question, they have to understand it. And in order to understand it, the question has to be simple enough to stick firmly when it is spoken.

“Simple” means a few things. First, the question should have the shortest words possible. Second, it should have the fewest words possible. (Note: These two rules often conflict with each other, so use good judgement.) It usually should also have the fewest clauses possible. So you don't want to say, “[1] What would you do [2] that fits the qualifications [3] that we listed [4] in order to accomplish our goal?” Instead you could ask this simply worded, one-clause question: “What approach might fit our list?”

Asking simply also means not asking two questions at once. Yes, there are exceptions to this, especially when the first question is to jog someone's memory and the second asks them about the thing they remember. (“Who had the biggest impact on you, and what did they teach you?”) But in general, asking compound questions confuses people and leads to no answer or poor-quality answers. Beware of jamming two ideas into a single question too (“Where did you see the best example and worst example?”).

Finally, ask the question and then close your mouth! Don't continue on by rephrasing the same question in different words. Don't repeat the question. Don't answer your own question. Don't conclude with, “So, uh, what do any of you think?” Simply say the question in one breath and let it stand on its own in silence until someone answers or asks for clarification.



2. Ask Genuinely

To facilitate discussion, do not ask a question if you don't honestly want to know whatever people are thinking. I don't mean that you would be sneaky or dishonest in how you ask questions. Instead I mean that we're all tempted to use questions to steer the conversation in the direction we want it to go.

When we're standing in front of a class, we might ask a question looking for a particular "right" answer and nobody minds. That's because we're not really trying to facilitate discussion but convey information in an engaging way; that's what everyone expects us to do. But in a true discussion, leading questions are conversation killers. They turn a discussion into a lecture; either no one will respond or someone will answer and then silently wait for you to continue. There's a difference between arranging questions for progressive depth and styling them to elicit particular answers. You can check yourself by considering whether your question assumes that the person you're asking with you ("How can we get more of this thing that all of us like?") or whether you are looking for confirmation of your opinion ("Don't you think that...?"). Be careful – often leading questions are phrased in a much more subtle way than these examples. Most importantly, by taking on the role of facilitator, you are giving up the role of ordinary participant. One of the rights you're giving up is the right to debate, maybe even the right to express disagreement unless a lively discussion on a topic has been rolling for some time. If a person says something you disagree with, let the rest of the group respond to it.

3. Ask Thoughtfully

Ask questions that don't have immediately obvious answers. If you ask a group of eager second-graders an obvious question, everyone will answer. If you ask any other group, no one will answer. It is true that there is a place for relatively simple (but not too simple) observation questions near the beginning of a discussion ("What instructions does Jesus give the disciples in these verses?"). These get the whole group to focus their attention on stuff that is important for the topic being discussed.

But move as soon as possible to questions that require reflection, analysis, evaluation, or imagination. When people start to answer questions like that, it triggers new thoughts in the other people in the group, and they respond as well. Pretty soon you have a crackling discussion going.



4. Ask Patiently

When you ask a question simply, genuinely, and thoughtfully, you are well on your way to a great discussion. Do you know what comes next in a great discussion? Silence. Yes, that's right. Unless you're surrounded by electric extroverts (and sometimes even then), a really good question will make the room go quiet, because people are thinking about it. That's a good thing! Let the room breathe. Remember, you've already had the question in your mind for a while; they're hearing it for the first time. If the silence continues, ride it out until it gets uncomfortable. Then ride it some more. Don't rush in to save them. The truth is that you probably feel more uncomfortable than the rest of the room does, so don't interrupt their thinking to save yourself?

5. Ask Ready

After the pregnant silence, someone will answer your terrific question. Great! But now what do you do? Unless someone darts in to respond to the person before you do (which is usually a good thing!), respond by rephrasing back to them what they said. This shows that they've been heard and it may lead them to elaborate or go deeper all by itself. Then you have a couple of options. One is to throw it back to the group by asking the question again. The other is to draw more out of the first answerer with a follow-up question. There are five kinds of follow-up questions that are good to have in your tool belt:

- Ask for **story**. (“When have you experienced that yourself?” “Who have you seen do that well?”)
- Ask for **viewpoint**. (“How did you come to look at things that way?” “What would you change about this situation?”)
- Ask for **diagnosis**. (“How would you rate yourself in that on a scale of 1 to 5?” “What would you do differently next time?”)
- Ask for **steps**. (“What are the most important steps you can take over the next ninety days?” “If you could have someone to help you, who would it be?”)
- Ask for **ideas**. This is asked to the whole group. (“What are four mistakes that people commonly make?” “What are three excuses people commonly give?”)



Becoming a Question Collector

In my mid-twenties I read a booklet by executive mentor Bobb Biehl called *Asking Profound Questions*. When Biehl described how he loved to collect questions, I was captivated. I had heard of people collecting baseball cards, coffee mugs, and rare coins, but questions? This was a new, intriguing thought to me. So I started collecting questions myself.

In addition to collecting questions, I curate questions – that is, I have found certain questions that are standbys and go-tos because they work so well. They’re always in my pocket so I can get a discussion going on the fly or move it to the next level of depth and transformation.

You too can become a master of questions who facilitates great discussions. All it takes is practice!

Of the five best practices for asking well, which do you do most easily already?

Which do you think will be most difficult for you?

What habits can you learn that will help you gain proficiency in your most challenging area?

Put It into Practice

Developing a new skill requires practice. Before you get together with your trainer, complete the following assignments to help you practice giving feedback.

1. In the next group or team meeting you participate in, take note of the questions your leaders asks. Afterwards ask your leader why he or she asked certain questions in the meeting.
2. Either pick a passage of Scripture or a service situation your team might have. Write one of each kind of question in the Question Development Dial.



3. Have some good questions in mind for a meal with family or friends and practice the five aspects of “asking well.” Observe the effect your asking has on the conversation. Evaluate yourself on how you performed in each aspect.

4. (My own I added: As you prepare for your next group/team meeting consider 4 or 5 good questions related to the content of the group/team meeting that you can use to begin the conversation. Observe how people respond to the questions and evaluate whether they were good questions to use.)

Reflect on Your Learning

In what aspect of this competency did you grow the most?

What next step do you need to take to continue to grow in this competency?