

Are you avoiding asking?

So let's say you are sitting in a meeting, and a question forms in your mind. Do you ask it? In the months that preceded the tumble of housing markets, the growth of unemployment, and the freezing of credit, we know that countless people in any number of businesses attended meetings where they failed to ask crucial questions. If more people had asked better questions, would it have made a difference? We don't know, of course. But we strongly suspect that more people asking better questions might actually matter quite a bit!

People fail to ask questions for many reasons, most of them having to do with social inhibitors. We worry that we might look stupid. We worry that we might step on the bosses' toes. We worry that we might put a colleague in an uncomfortable position. We worry that no one will know the answer to our question. We worry about how we'll come across to others.

When you watch particularly skilled questioners, you will see that they have practiced ways to overcome these social inhibitors. Masterful questioners don't let those nagging worries stop them from stepping into the conversation—and yet, they don't ignore those worries either. Particularly skillful questioning takes the subtleties of the social situation into account while at the same time ramping up the intellectual work in the room.

One technique that you will see masterful questioners use to overcome a social inhibitor is a "preamble," a short introductory phrase that has the effect of clearing a pathway for the question by acknowledging what is going on in the social situation. You choose the preamble that will recognize and smooth the social worry, followed by the question that gets to the intellectual point. Here are some different kinds of worries you might face, accompanied by some appropriate preambles you might try:

ASKING IMPERFECT QUESTIONS

When you are worried that you can't articulate your question very well, but you think it is an important issue to discuss, use a quick acknowledgment of potential flaws in the question, such as:

- I might not be wording this correctly, but....
- I'm having difficulty articulating this, but....

THE QUESTION MAY TAKE THE GROUP IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION

When you are worried that your question may open up a whole new realm of discussion, and this may not be appreciated by your colleagues, you can try preambles such as:

- I don't mean to throw us off-track, but....
- This may need a separate conversation, but....

YOUR IMPRESSION WITH THE GROUP

When you are worried that your question may create an undesirable impression, you can gain a lot of social ground by simply acknowledging that potential before asking the question. In this case preambles might sound like:

- This may seem a bit awkward, but....
- This might sound nit-picky, but....

A COLLEAGUE'S DISCOMFORT

Sometimes we edit our questions not to manage our own impressions but because we feel reluctant to put a colleague into a difficult situation where they may be unable to answer. Again, you can gain a lot of social ground by expressing empathy for your colleague in a preamble followed by a question that drives the intellectual work forward. These preambles often sound like:

- I know we may not have all the answers yet, but....
- I understand this is a work in progress, and....

DEFENSIVENESS OR POWER DIFFERENCES

Most of us know when a question is likely to strike a soft spot in the work, and we may anticipate that the other person could respond defensively. A preamble can help calm defensiveness before it overwhelms the conversation. In addition, it can be difficult to ask the boss a tough question because we often think of questions as associated with power. Preambles can help with this situation too:

- I'm not clear about....
- I'm wondering about....

This Month's Practice

Imagine somebody in a discussion who is thinking about a question that seems like it could be very important, but they aren't willing to ask it. A little voice in their mind keeps saying to them: "you aren't going to word it correctly." Or perhaps they worry: "this might be a side issue, and you don't want to take the meeting off track." Then what?

The active precision questioner makes a judgment about the importance of the question and the issue. If it is potentially important, ask it now! Don't become passive, waiting for the perfectly phrased, perfectly relevant, and perfectly tactful question to pop into mind. You'll be waiting forever!

PRACTICE 1: As you answer email this week, think about the impact of your questions. Are there situations in which you have worries about asking questions? Deliberately craft a preamble that addresses your worry. First ask yourself: what is the concern you want to acknowledge with a preamble? Then phrase your preamble to

address this specific concern, and follow the preamble with your precise question.

PRACTICE 2: Identify a situation where you will be asking questions face-to-face this week. Before the meeting or conversation, think about some of the more delicate issues where you will have to phrase questions.

We're here to help. If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at QuestionMaster@vervago.com.

You may also join our LinkedIn group for Precision Q+A alumni by visiting us here at [LinkedIn](#).