

## The art of the follow-up question

As a student of Precision Questioning and Answering you have probably noticed that inquiry deepens conversations, sometimes in unexpected ways. This month we had lunch with an executive from a semiconductor company, we'll call him Ted. In the middle of our Moroccan chicken salads, Ted asked a direct, and very precise, question: "What class of problems does Precision Q+A help solve?"

The answer to that question might be the basis for a Skill Sharpener in the future, but there's something else to address about that question before jumping into the answer. Ted's question was an invitation to deep discussion. It wasn't an attempt at polite social conversation or small talk—it was thoughtful and deeply intellectually engaging. Some people think of Precision Questioning and Precision Answering simply as skills—and as forms of conversation they do rest on skill-based techniques for deepening intellectual work. But these forms of discussion are also embedded in deep human values about honesty, candor, curiosity, and discovery of what is worthwhile and meaningful in our work.

As you might imagine, Ted didn't just ask one question over lunch. His initial question led into an intriguing and powerful conversation with many follow-up questions. This month, we want to suggest that you think about your capacity for asking follow-up questions, and that you work toward the art of asking follow-up questions in the same thoughtful, engaging, and intense manner as Ted did. This kind of inquiry involves mindfulness and attention to what is happening in the moment as well as questioning skill.

To build your skill and your mindful attention to following up, here are five suggestions for ways you can deepen your capacity to sustain inquiry into a subject.

### 1. Take your questions seriously

Many situations call for conversation that puts others at ease, and in most of these situations we ask questions without stopping to wonder too much whether or not our conversation partner answered the question that we asked. In those situations questions are just a means of getting talk flowing. When you begin to take your questions seriously, however, something shifts in the discussion. You actually want to know what your conversation partner thinks about an issue, or you care about how they approach a subject. You feel yourself become invested in whether or not your conversation partner is really addressing your question, and as you become invested, new angles open up in your thinking. When your conversation partner offers an answer and you are taking your question seriously, you will often naturally think about a follow-up question because your intellectual curiosity has been sparked.

### 2. Notice the difference between intellectual intensity and emotional intensity

Something notable about Ted's question over lunch is that it was asked with very little emotional intensity, and therefore without creating a sense of aggression or of contest between us. But it was asked with a very high degree of intellectual intensity! Intellectual

intensity is often conveyed by interest in the subject, eye contact, posture, and a palpable sense of seriousness or determination to look at the issues on the table. You might not immediately be able to sort out the difference between intellectual intensity, which comes through in experience as engagement with an idea, and emotional intensity, which comes through in experience as the expression of excitement or anger. Whether or not you can tell them apart, however, there is a significant and important difference between these kinds of intensity. As you learn to ask follow-up questions, you will begin to notice and master this difference. When you mistake intellectual intensity for emotional intensity, you may easily misinterpret someone who asks precise follow-up questions as intimidating or angry when they are actually just seriously engaged in the ideas.

### **3. Monitor the effect of your intellectual intensity on others**

Intellectual intensity isn't an everyday experience for many of us, and as a consequence we may feel like we are being "grilled" when someone asks us a series of follow-up questions. Sometimes in a workshop people say that Precision Q+A feels like being "on the witness stand," because they are familiar with the intellectual intensity or drama of a courtroom. When you are seriously engaged in an idea, it is easy to lose touch with the effect that follow-up questions have on others. Is your conversation partner able to understand and respond to your intellectual intensity? If so, Precision Q+A can feel like a graceful and wonderful dance of two minds exploring ideas. If not, you might be deeply engaged while your conversation partner gets irritated or defensive.

### **4. Listen more carefully**

Often in everyday conversation we are thinking about what we want to say while other people are talking. Even in response to a question, you might catch yourself forming your next question instead of listening to the answer. When the intellectual intensity of a conversation rises and you are deeply engaged in a subject, you can't cease listening. A follow-up question that deepens a conversation follows authentically from the answer to the previous question. You cannot know what you will ask until you have fully and carefully heard the other person speak. The art of follow-up questions hinges on more attentive and mindful listening.

### **5. Pace yourself**

By now it is probably obvious that if you are deeply engaged—you are listening carefully to your conversation partner, and you are taking your questions seriously—the pace of the conversation may not be lightning fast. You might need time to think about something that has been said; you might need time to formulate just the question you want to ask. Your conversation partner might need a moment to reflect and gather his or her thoughts before answering you. Keep a pace that allows you to think, to articulate your questions well, and to offer your best thinking on the subject at hand. The art of follow-up questions demands a pace that accommodates the intellectual intensity of the conversation.

## THIS MONTH'S PRACTICES

To help you work with the art of the follow-up question, we suggest two practices this month, which will help build your awareness of the five aspects of the art of the follow-up question.

### Practice 1: Focus on Column 3 of Four Columns

In your Precision Q+A workshop you had the experience of using Four Columns to deepen your thinking about an issue related to your work. Return to Four Columns this month, maybe with a different issue, but focus especially on filling in Column 3 of the 4 columns. This is often where people find that they must push themselves into underlying issues and articulate follow-up questions that hold the promise of deepening their thinking. As you focus on Column 3, practice taking your questions seriously. If you really mean it, you really want an answer, how does that change the questions you are asking? Does that alone bring to mind even more questions you might want to ask?

### Practice 2: Return to Precision Q+A with a partner, and raise the intellectual intensity

In your Precision Q+A workshop you had a chance to engage deeply with another person. Set up a session of Precision Q+A with a partner in your workplace, even if you don't have a looming decision, just to practice asking and answering questions with deep intellectual intensity. Choose a subject you care about, and be mindful of your ability to ask follow-up questions. Use a slow pace in the conversation, allowing yourself time to articulate follow-up questions. Use this interaction as a training ground for learning to show intellectual intensity by engaging with ideas without necessarily also bringing emotional expression and emotional intensity to the table. Be particularly mindful of the following things:

- Are you thinking instead of listening as the other person talks?  
If so, gently bring your focus back to listening.
- Are you rushing yourself or feeling uncomfortable with pauses?  
If so, lightly allow yourself to breathe and think instead of speaking right away.
- Are you seeing defensive posture in the other person, like crossed arms or stepping away from you or leaning back in their chair?  
If so, simply offer an expression of genuine interest in what they are saying or pause to help your conversation partner re-engage with you in a more genuine way.
- Are you asking questions that you don't particularly care about?  
If so, playfully find ways to take your questions more seriously and deepen your engagement.
- Are you beginning to be anxious, emotionally riled up, angry, upset, or excited?  
Emotional intensity often goes along with intellectual intensity, but it isn't the same thing. See if you can stay engaged in the conversation while regulating your excitement or reining in your anxiety. Practice differentiating these two forms of interaction.



Did you notice something interesting about yourself and the art of the follow-up question? Write to us at [QuestionMaster@vervago.com](mailto:QuestionMaster@vervago.com).

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