Asking Appropriate Performance and Development Review (PDR) Questions

**Being able to ask appropriate questions is central to leading effective PDR meetings. Whether you are looking to create the right atmosphere and get a team member to open up, or lead and carefully control the discussion, this guidance will cover seven types of questions you can use to good effect along with some top tips for asking questions. We also alert you to the two main types of unhelpful questions to be avoided at all costs.**

### **Helpful questions**

#### **1. Open questions**

Open questions, as the name suggests, ‘open up’ areas in which you are interested in finding out information, but allow a range of possible replies.

**Open Questions**

* “Tell me about your current project.”
* "How do you feel the last few months have gone?”
* "What do you think about the objectives we agreed for this year?”
* "Which parts of your job are you happiest with?”

Open questions are useful to begin with; they put the reviewee at ease because they are not too demanding and they enable areas to be identified which may be investigated further at a later stage in the discussion.

#### **2. Probing questions**

Probing questions enable the reviewer to focus on the particular areas in which they are interested.

**Probing Questions**

* "Tell me how you dealt with that query.”
* “How much time do you spend on drafting reports?”

Probing questions help to obtain specific detailed information and are often used to follow up after open questions.

#### **3. Reflective questions**

The most useful form of reflection is phrased as a statement rather than as an identifiable question. They begin with phrases like,

**Reflective Questions**

* “You seem concerned that . . . ”
* “It sounds like . . . ”

Reflective questions are extremely useful for obtaining explanations for attitude and opinions in detail, or to gain a deeper understanding when the reviewee is showing emotions. To be effective in the use of reflection, you need to listen carefully to what is being said, interpret it accurately and respond accordingly.

#### **4. Closed questions**

Closed questions force the reply towards a precisely defined area and usually elicit a one- or two-word answer.

**Closed Questions**

* “Do you enjoy meeting clients?”
* “Have you had sufficient training to enable you to produce the report?"

Closed questions are useful to check out and confirm facts or to regain control of the interview.

#### **5. Key word repetition**

Although not strictly a question, key word repetition is another way the reviewee can be encouraged to say more. When asked with a questioning tone of voice, this will normally be sufficient for them to expand on the point.

**Key Word Repetition**

* “You say that you like working with people?”
* “You enjoy design work?”

#### **6. Statement repetition**

Also known as the ‘broken record technique’, repeating statements can be a good way of asking questions or making a point if you feel the person hasn’t heard or taken in what you have said. State the point as many times as necessary in a calm and direct manner.

**Statement Repetition**

* “Do you feel challenged in your role?”
* “Yes, and do you feel challenged in your role?”

#### **7. Summary**

Again, like reflective statements, not really a question, summaries are concerned with interpreting a response, but rather than reflecting emotional content, they concentrate on factual content.

**Summary**

* “So, what you are saying is that although you enjoy working on the projects, there are some aspects which you find mundane?”
* “As I understand . . . ?”

Summary questions can be used to review briefly, to summarise, to check your understanding of the facts, or even to clarify the reviewee’s own thoughts. Summary questions can also prevent a drift from the purpose of the discussion and allow you to regain control smoothly.

### **Unhelpful questions**

#### **1. Avoid leading questions**

Be careful not to ask leading questions. Some people will try to give the answers that they think you want to hear, rather than the answers they would truly give if they had not been influenced in any way, e.g:

“You will be able to produce that report, won’t you?”, or

“I presume you are confident that you will have the figures for the 15th of each month?”

**For a genuinely truthful answer, do not pose leading questions.**

The above questions can be phrased as non-leading questions by re-wording as shown below:

**Instead try…**

* “Will you be able to produce that report?”, or
* “How confident do you feel about getting the figures for the 15th of each month?”

#### **2. Steer clear of multiple questions**

Multiple questions are questions that contain more than one question, e.g.:

“Do you feel satisfied in your role? Do you feel overloaded with work, because I could review project assignment methods?”

Multiple questions often confuse the person to whom you have asked the question. People tend not to answer all parts, but usually answer the first or the last part and forget the others.

The best way to overcome this problem is not to ask multiple questions but to ask each question separately, eliciting an answer before posing the next question.

Multiple questions can also lead people into making false choices e.g.

“Do you want more contact with customers? Or maybe you would prefer to stay in this department?”

This could lead the person to think that these are the only two options available. However, there may be other options such as moving department without having more contact with customers. They may even be able to do both, i.e. having more contact with customers while staying in the department.

Make sure the questions are asked clearly and all the options are made available when seeking a decision.

**Questioning FAQs**

#### **How do I know if I have the right balance between talking and listening?**

The aim of questioning is for an informed understanding of the appraisee’s performance, morale, aspirations and how you might work together more effectively. The more experienced and accomplished the manager is, the more comfortable they are at questioning and listening rather than talking.

**You have two ears and one mouth; use them in that proportion.**

Your team member is likely to be reassured, if during the review, facts are regularly confirmed, reflected and summarised.

#### **How can I prevent my well-intended questions sounding like an interrogation?**

Ask questions in an inquisitive manner and not in a challenging way. Do not show approval or disapproval in your questions – show curiosity and a desire to learn about the person’s position.

Allow your team member some thinking time before they respond – they may not have considered your question before and need time to gather their thoughts. Avoid jumping in to break the silence.

#### **Their body language is telling a different story …**

Observe and interpret the details of your team member’s non-verbal signals (gestures, facial expressions, movement of limbs, blinking, coughing) and tone of voice, all of which can reveal their emotional state. Consider what they seem to be trying to communicate. What can be inferred from the way information is communicated and the words used?

Reflective questions can be helpful for exploring this in more detail.

Finally, remember your own non-verbal signals. Be aware that it is quite natural for us to unconsciously ‘mirror’ or copy another’s body language. Instead, take a moment to check how you are sitting, how calm your hand movements are, your pace of voice, etc.