

by Alison Wood Brooks and Leslie K. John

# THE SURPRISING POWER OF QUESTIONS

*Asking questions is a uniquely powerful tool for unlocking value in organizations: It spurs learning and the exchange of ideas, it fuels innovation.*

## A Foreword

Much of an executive's workday is spent asking others for information — for example, or questioning a counterpart in a tense negotiation. Yet unlike professionals such as litigators, journalists, and doctors, who are taught how to ask questions as an essential part of their training, few executives think of questioning as a skill that can be honed — or consider how their own answers to questions could make conversations more productive. Missed opportunity! Questioning is a uniquely powerful tool for unlocking value in organizations: It spurs learning and the exchange of ideas, it fuels innovation and performance improvement, it builds rapport and trust among team members.

The good news is that by asking questions, we naturally improve our emotional intelligence, which in turn makes us better questioners — a virtuous cycle. In this article, we draw on insights from behavioral science research to explore how the way we frame questions and choose to answer our counterparts can influence the outcome of conversations. "Be a good listener," Dale Carnegie ad-

## Don't Ask, Don't Get

vised in his 1936 classic *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. "Ask questions the other person will enjoy answering." More than 80 years later, most people still fail to heed Carnegie's sage advice. When one of us (Alison) began studying conversations at Harvard Business School years ago, she quickly arrived at a foundational insight: People don't ask enough questions. In fact, among the most common complaints people make after having a conversation, such as an interview, a first date, or a work meeting, is "I wish [s/he] had asked me more questions" and "I can't believe [s/he] didn't ask me any questions." Why do so many of us hold back? There are many reasons.

People may be egocentric — eager to impress others with their thoughts, stories, and ideas (and not even think to ask questions). Perhaps they are apathetic — they don't care enough to ask, or they anticipate being bored by the answers they'd hear. They may be overconfident in their own knowledge and think they already know the answers (which sometimes they do, but usually not). Or perhaps they worry

that they'll ask the wrong question and be viewed as rude or incompetent. But the biggest inhibitor, in our opinion, is that most people just don't understand how beneficial good questioning can be. If they did, they would end far fewer sentences with a period — and more with a question mark.

Recent research shows that asking questions achieves both. Karen Huang, Michael Yeomans, Julia Minson, and Francesca Gino scrutinized thousands of natural conversations among participants who were getting to know each other in some way. They told some people to ask many questions and others to ask very few. For example, when quizzed about their partners' preferences for activities, high question askers were more likely to be able to guess correctly. Among the speed daters, people were more willing to go on a second date with partners who asked more questions. In fact, asking just one more question on each date meant that participants persuaded one additional person to go out with them again.

Asking a lot of questions unlocks learning and improves interpersonal bonding.

Questions are such powerful tools that they can be beneficial — perhaps particularly so — in circumstances when question asking goes against social norms. For instance, prevailing norms tell us that job candidates are expected to answer questions during interviews. But research by Dan Cable, at the London Business School, and Virginia Kay, at the University of North Carolina, suggests that most people excessively self-promote during job interviews. And when interviewees focus on selling themselves, they are likely to forget to ask questions — about the interviewer, the organization, the work — that would make the interviewer feel more engaged and more apt to view the candidate favorably and could help the candidate predict whether the job would provide satisfying work.

For job candidates, asking questions such as “What am I not asking you that I should?” can signal competence, build rapport, and unlock key pieces of information about the position. Most people don’t grasp that asking a lot of questions unlocks learning and improves interpersonal bonding. In Alison’s studies, for example, though people could accurately recall how many questions had been asked in their conversations, they didn’t intuit the link between questions and liking. Across four studies, in which participants were engaged in conversations themselves or read transcripts of others’ conversations, people tended not to realize that question asking would influence — or had influenced — the level of amity between the conversationalists.

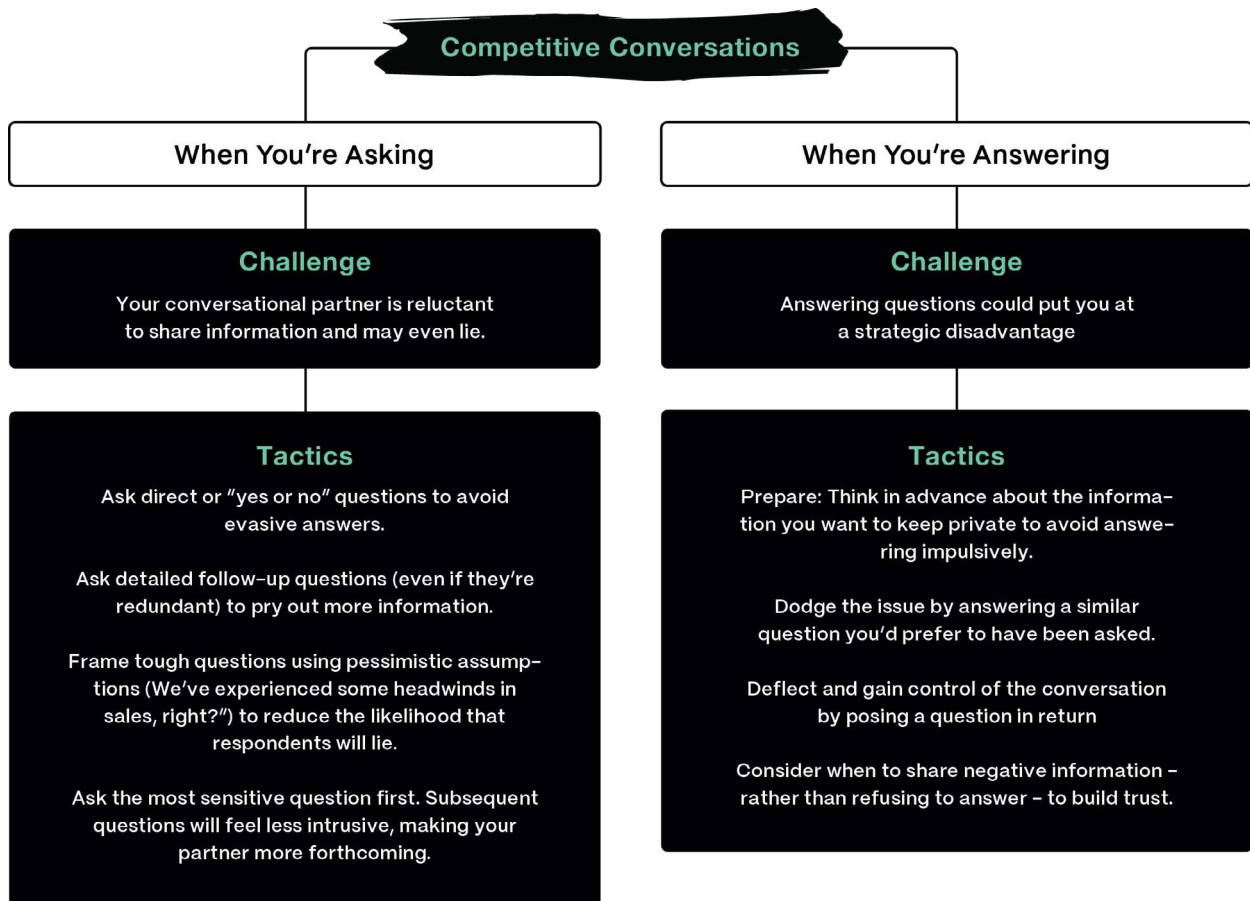
### New Socratic Method

The first step in becoming a better questioner is simply to ask more questions. Of course, the sheer number of questions is not the only factor that influences the quality of a conversation: The type, tone, sequence, and framing also matter. In our teaching at Harvard Business School, we run an exercise in which we instruct pairs of students to have a conversation. Some students are told to ask as few questions as possible, and some are instructed to ask as many as possible. Among the low-

low pairs (both students ask a minimum of questions), participants generally report that the experience is a bit like children engaging in parallel play: They exchange statements but struggle to initiate an interactive, enjoyable, or productive dialogue. The high-high pairs find that too many questions can also create a stilted dynamic. However, the high-low pairs’ experiences are mixed. Sometimes the question asker learns a lot about her partner, the answerer feels heard, and both come away feeling profoundly closer. Other times, one of the participants may feel uncomfortable in his role or unsure about how much to share, and the conversation can feel like an interrogation. Our research suggests several approaches that can enhance the power and efficacy of queries.

The best approach for a given situation depends on the goals of the conversationalists — specifically, whether the discussion is cooperative (for example, the duo is trying to build a relationship or accomplish a task together) or competitive (the parties seek to uncover sensitive information from each other or serve their own interests), or some combination of both. In the following text, we will discuss what the outcomes of positive communication are, and then list tactics that can be used to strengthen your critical perspective.





## Deciding What to Share

There is no rule of thumb for how much — or what type — of information you should disclose. Indeed, transparency is such a powerful bonding agent that sometimes it doesn't matter what is revealed — even information that reflects poorly on us can draw our conversational partners closer. In research Leslie conducted with HBS collaborators Kate Barasz and Michael Norton, she found that most people assume that it would be less damaging to refuse to answer a question that would reveal negative information — for example, "Have you ever been reprimanded at work?" — than to answer affirmatively. But this intuition is wrong. When they asked people to take the perspective of a recruiter and choose between two candidates (equivalent except for how they responded to this question), nearly 90% preferred the candidate who "came clean" and answered the question. Before a conversation takes place, think carefully about whether refusing to answer tough questions would do more harm than good.

## Deciding What to Keep Private

Of course, at times you and your organization would be better served by keeping your cards close to your chest. In our negotiation classes, we teach strategies for handling hard questions without lying. Dodging, or answering a question you wish you had been asked, can be effective not only in helping you protect information you'd rather keep private but also in building a good rapport with your conversational partner, especially if you speak eloquently.

In a study led by Todd Rogers, of Harvard's Kennedy School, participants were shown clips of political candidates responding to questions by either answering them or dodging them. Eloquent dodgers were liked more than ineloquent answerers, but only when their dodges went undetected. Another effective strategy is deflecting, or answering a probing question with another question or a joke. Answerers can use this approach to lead the conversation in a different direction.

## Favor follow-up questions

Not all questions are created equal. Alison's research, using human coding and machine learning, revealed four types of questions: introductory questions ("How are you?"), mirror questions ("I'm fine. How are you?"), full-switch questions (ones that change the topic entirely), and follow-up questions (ones that solicit more information). Although each type is abundant in natural conversation, follow-up questions seem to have special power. They signal to your conversation partner that you are listening, care, and want to know more. People interacting with a partner who asks lots of follow-up questions tend

An unexpected benefit of follow-up questions is that they don't require much thought or preparation—indeed, they seem to come naturally to interlocutors. In Alison's studies, the people who were told to ask more questions used more follow-up questions than any other type without being instructed to do so.

## Get the Sequence Right

The optimal order of your questions depends on the circumstances. During tense encounters, asking tough questions first, even if it feels socially awkward to do so, can make your conversational partner more willing to open up. Leslie and her coauthors found that people are more willing to reveal sensitive information when questions are asked in a decreasing order of intrusiveness. When a question asker begins with a highly sensitive question—such as “Have you ever had a fantasy of doing something terrible to someone?”—subsequent questions, such as “Have you ever called in sick to work when you were perfectly healthy?” feel, by comparison, less intrusive, and thus we tend to be more forthcoming. Of course, if the first question is too sensitive, you run the risk of offending your counterpart. So it’s a delicate balance, to be sure.

If the goal is to build relationships, the opposite approach—opening with less sensitive questions and escalating slowly—seems to be most effective. In a classic set of studies (the results of which went viral following a write-up in the “Modern Love” column of the New York Times), psychologist Arthur Aron recruited strangers to come to the lab, paired them up, and gave them a list of questions. They were told to work their way through the list, starting with relatively shallow inquiries and progressing to more self-revelatory ones, such as “What is your biggest regret?” Pairs in the control group were asked simply to interact with each other. The pairs who followed the prescribed structure liked each other more than the control pairs. This effect is so strong that it has been formalized in a task called “the relationship closeness induction,” a tool used by researchers to build a sense of connection among experiment participants.

Good interlocutors also understand that questions asked previously in a conversation can influence future queries. For example, Norbert Schwarz, of the University of Southern California, and his coauthors found that when the question “How satisfied are you with your life?” is followed by the question “How satisfied are you with your marriage?” the answers were highly correlated: Respondents who reported being satisfied with their life also said they were satisfied with their marriage. When asked the questions in this order, people implicitly interpreted that life satisfaction “ought to be” closely tied to marriage. However, when the same questions were asked in the opposite order, the answers were less closely correlated.

## Use the Right Tone

People are more forthcoming when you ask questions in a casual way, rather than in a buttoned-up, official tone. In one of Leslie’s studies, participants were posed a series of sensitive questions in an online survey. For one group of participants, the website’s user interface looked fun and frivolous; for another group, the site looked official. (The control group was presented with a neutral-looking site.) Participants were about twice as likely to reveal sensitive information on the casual-looking site than on the others.

People also tend to be more forthcoming when given an escape hatch or “out” in a conversation. For example, if they are told that they can change their answers at any point, they tend to open up more—even though they rarely end up making changes. This might explain why teams and groups find brainstorming sessions so productive. In a whiteboard setting, where anything can be erased and judgment is suspended, people are more likely to answer questions honestly and say things they otherwise might not. Of course, there will be times when an off-the-cuff approach is inappropriate. But in general, an overly formal tone is likely to inhibit people’s willingness to share information.

## The Best Response

A conversation is a dance that requires partners to be in sync—it’s a mutual push-and-pull that unfolds over time. Just as the way we ask questions can facilitate trust and the sharing of information—so, too, can the way we answer them.

“Question everything,”  
Albert Einstein

Asking tough questions first can make people more willing to open up.

