

Life's Paradox

uncommon reflections of life matters

Perceptive Intelligence: How do you ask the "right" questions?

By Dr Yvonne Sum, BDS Hons, NLPTT, APMC
International Speaker & Personal Coach

I remember a time when I was 15 years old and I had just had a personal crisis at school. I had been an emotional wreck and sobbing with mum and my best friend for a whole day. That evening, Dad returns from his day at work and my mum gently motions to him that I needed to have some time alone with him. Within 15 minutes, I felt totally understood and listened to. I had a few options on how to deal with the issues at hand – remarkably, all generated by me with a few prompting questions from Dad. My spirits had lifted. I had a plan. I was smiling by the time I skipped off to get ready for dinner.

My father is one of those people who seem to have an uncanny ability to glean what you are thinking. He gets to the bottom of things by just asking a few simple questions. Perhaps you have had the fortune of interacting with someone like that. I have since met others in diverse contexts ranging from health professionals, facilitators, teachers, preachers, managers, mothers, therapists, counsellors, coaches, who seemed to do that seamlessly.

I used to think this was a talent endowed at birth – until I discovered that it is a skill that can be learnt. The benefits were limitless. When I first used it as a dental professional, I



found it particularly useful to cut to the chase with patients in the limited time we get to verbally connect with them before we embark on a procedure. In my communications with clients, colleagues & business associates as a facilitator/trainer/coach, it is imperative to realize the “hidden” meanings to minimize misunderstanding. You can bet that with personal relationships where emotions can cloud judgement – it is useful to have a conversational tool to uncover issues quickly which honours the opinions of those involved.

“Be interested, not interesting.”

I remember this quote from salesman extraordinaire, Walter Hailey, at a business conference in the 1990s. People essentially could not care less how much you know until they know how much you care.

So Walter talked about asking our customers questions about themselves, and to learn to clam up about wanting to talk about ourselves! Yes, people do like talking about themselves –so let’s create a space for them to do just that.

And it all starts with Questions. Not just any question – it’s not an inquisition! Questions actually help build rapport and forge a certain level of understanding between the parties involved. Questions unveil the needs and explore values and concerns whilst allowing the opportunity to build on the understanding and the relationship.

Questions are a cornerstone to communications success – be it in business, professional or personal relationships. The skills of asking the “right” questions weaves through the whole communications process.

The quality of the question determines the quality of the response and hence the information received. Asking Quality Questions can help you get to the bottom of what people are actually meaning in their communications. Quality Questions make you think before you ask them. Quality Questions can reveal the ‘hidden’ message in any utterance. Quality Questions open up new possibilities and direction of the communication.

The Meta Model

Quality Questions are derived from the NLP Meta Models (“Meta” meaning to be “above” an issue, to see the “bigger picture”, to be removed, be disassociated and hence

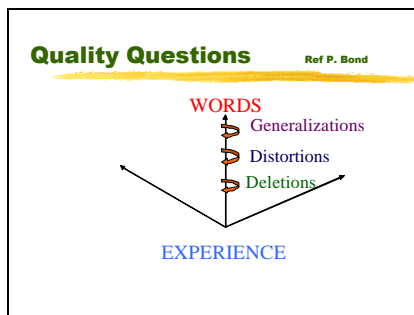


be objective) as a series of questions to explore and expose what the person is really thinking and how they make meaning of a situation. It requires you to consider specific information you wish to recover, which determines the direction and emphasis of where you want the conversation to go.

Generalizations, Deletions, Distortions

When we speak, we generalize, delete and distort information. Sometimes the information missing is essential for a clear understanding of what is really being said. The person who can recover the ‘missing’ information, whilst maintaining rapport is the person who leads the conversation.

The focus of attention in a conversation determines what is being spoken. Hence, by shifting the focus by enquiry through Quality Questions, new insights and valuable information can be uncovered. You can change someone’s perception by asking appropriate questions to recover information which has been generalized, deleted and distorted.



The Menu is not the Meal

The words on the menu are only the representation of the actual food that will be the meal. We cannot eat the menu and expect it to taste like the meal. Similarly, what people



say is not necessarily what they mean. There is often a deeper or hidden meaning beneath what they have uttered. They are usually not intentionally trying to hide the meaning. It is just that words in language are just a map of our experiences – and we can never truly describe fully our experience.

Eg. I come home from a 4 hour shopping experience, and I may then spend a half hour telling my best friend on the phone what I consider to be a moment to moment description of that experience. Still she can only imagine as best as she can how it really was. Words are not sufficient, even when I really wanted to let her in onto everything –as if she were there with me.

On the other hand, I can give a totally abbreviated account to my husband when he asks me: “How was the shopping, dear?” My generalized, distorted and deleted answer: “Great.” !

Content vs Process

Quality Questions can be further distinguished as Content or Process Questions – both of which recover different information.

Content Questions give you the information of “what” happened. The answer focuses on the content of a situation such as what happened, who is involved, when and why did it occur and what happened as a result? You need content when you need to understand the person better. They are questions that start with What? (including Who? When? Where?) And Why?

Eg What seems to be bothering you?
 Who is involved in the project?
 When did you realize there was this problem?
 Why do you think this came about?

Process Questions tend to give us information of the situation and circumstances that led to the situation. The answer focuses on the predisposing conditions that got us to the event. Process Questions tend to provide an opportunity to move a person from describing what has happened (content) to describing a solution to the problem or how they would like the situation to be. They are questions that start with How? And sometimes What?

- Eg How did this happen?
 How would you like it to be like?
 How would get you to your desired situation?
 What could have prevented this from occurring?

A balanced combination of Content and Process Questions would get you the most useful information about the situation. The more balanced the questioning, the more understanding you will have of the situation.

Recognizing “Fluff” Language

You may notice that when we speak, it is often expressed in “fluff” language which is vague, generalized and often unclear. Some examples of “fluff” language in conversation may include:

- I want to be *highly successful* in business.
- I need some *personal development*.
- My office is *dynamic, outstanding* and *modern*.
- He *never* meets *budget*.
- My team comprises *highly skilled, creative* and *motivated* people.
- I don’t think I can *get there*.
- My children are *losing touch* with their *values*.

How often do we just hallucinate what we think the other person is trying to project to us? And how often are we way off the mark!

To get a better understanding, we need to clarify the “fluff”: In the first example above - What does “highly successful” mean to you? Is it \$xyz net profit in one year? Is it perhaps a certain percentage increase annually of your gross production? Is it being featured in “Time” or “Fortune” magazine cover? Maybe it is about being on the Forbes-equivalent of the Top 100 in your country, or globally. Could it be simply doing what you love with whom you choose to be with and when you wish to?

We can further “de-fluff” the terms “personal development”, “dynamic”, “outstanding”, “modern”, “never”, “budget”, “highly skilled”, “creative”, “motivated” and “get there” through a series of quality questions to get to the tangible sensate specifics of what was actually meant by nominating those words.

Let us examine this analogy: You are planning to build a house. The more ideas you can get across to your architect, the higher the likelihood of designing the “right” house for you. If you just say, “Build me a house” – what are the chances that the architect’s thoughts are anywhere near what you have in mind? If you described it in more detail: say, a triple storey stand alone mansion, 6 bedrooms with contemporary built-ins, 4 bathrooms, quadruple lock-up garage, sandstone exterior, airy open plan naturally-lit interiors, using as much natural wood, stone, glass as is possible, a low maintenance garden of local shrubbery, within a ballpark of US\$900,000 to be completed in 10 months....you are starting to get closer to what you intend.

What about a business example. You need to communicate to your direct report that you need certain documentation researched and completed. If you just sent them out of the meeting with “Get the report completed to me as soon as possible”– that is totally open to interpretation by your team member. However, if you specified that “the report has to be on my desk before 5pm this Thursday, typed double spaced with font size 12 in Times Roman on a minimum of 10 sheets of A4 size white paper, bound with attached graphics on CD-ROM, whilst honouring the known budget and manpower constraints of the project”.... the chances of getting what you want is much greater.

What about a personal example. You have indicated to your significant other that it is your desire for both of you to “spend more time with the children”. Would it be less prone for misunderstanding if you specified that this would mean, say: “being seated as a family for at least two meals in a day – i.e. breakfast and dinner – during the weekdays; having at least one day of the weekend scheduled for the family to spend together; having at least a two-week long annual vacation as a family; at least one parent being home after 6 pm each weekday to help with homework; being both committed to attend children’s musical recitals, debating competitions and sports carnivals....”?

Busting the “Fluff”

So, what are they really saying, you may ask? It is important to start with the meta, the “big picture” (usually “fluff” that has been offered) and work down to the details through your quality questions. The more specific, tangible and concrete the details revealed, the clearer your understanding of what is being really communicated.

Eg I want to be *highly successful* in business.
QQ: How do you mean by “highly successful”?



I need some *personal development*.

QQ: What do you mean by “personal development”?

My office is *dynamic, outstanding* and *modern*.

QQ: Can you give me specific examples of what you mean by “dynamic”, “outstanding” and “modern”?

He *never* meets *budget*.

QQ: What are the specific figures for the budget? Is there a time when he has?

My team comprises *highly skilled, creative* and *motivated* people.

QQ: What “skills” are you meaning specifically? How do you mean by “creative” and “motivated”? Can you give me some examples so I understand better?

I don’t think I can *get there*.

QQ; Where do you want to go? How will you know when you get there, or not?

My children are *losing touch* with their *values*.

QQ: What “values” are you specifically referring to? How are your children “losing touch”? Please explain how they can get back in “touch with those values”.

Remember, the key is not to sound like an interrogator. Be interested. Be curious. Stay in rapport. The more you practice using Quality Questions, you will be amazed how easily it flows and how much more understanding you gain in the process.

So the next time you are tempted to hallucinate the meaning of another “fluff”-y statement, pause and think of what may have been generalized, deleted or distorted in the moment. Formulate your Quality Questions. Be interested. Ask the questions with genuine curiosity.

Trust now that every conversation from this point on is really an exciting new opportunity to further develop your Perceptive Intelligence.

Bibliography

- Bandler, Richard & Grinder, John Patterns of the Hypnotic Techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D., Vol. I. Meta Publications, Cupertino, California. 1975
- Bandler, Richard & Grinder, John Reframing. Neuro Linguistic Programming and the Transformation of Meaning. Real People Press, Utah, USA. 1982
- Bond, Philippa Coaching Wisdom Manual, Inform Training & Research 2002
- Hall, L.M. & Duval, M. Meta-Coaching Manual, Institute of Neuro-Semantics, 2004
- O'Connor, J. & Seymour, J. Training with NLP. Skills for Managers, Trainers & Communicators, Thorsons, London, UK. 1994

Transformational Leadership Challenge™ (TLC):

Unleashing your children's potential through you

The overall outcome of the TLC (Transformational Leadership Challenge) for actualizing parents is a simple one. This workshop (endearingly dubbed “*The Greatest Challenge on Earth*”) treats parents as leaders not only in their family, but more so as a leader in their own lives. By setting the example as a role model for the rest of the family, they become aware of how they can lead the best lives for themselves and hence be a credible mentor, effective manager, coach and leader of their families. For instance, a parent can sometimes call upon their child(ren) to do their utmost best in life to achieve their highest potential in their chosen contexts – eg. career, family, health, physical, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual. In the process, the parent may place most of their family resources in the endeavour. However, the parent themselves short change themselves on opportunities to personally develop themselves. For instance, the parent may not pursue their own love of a talent or a gift – and hence, do not maximize the potential themselves. They do not walk their talk, so to speak. As we know, children are by far the best role modelers. As is commonly said: “Monkey see monkey do!” So what message are we

truly conveying to our children when we do not “go for gold” ourselves – at the expense of letting the children savour all the opportunities? TLC truly brings that home. Live your dreams and values, and your children will follow suit – with unsolicited respect.

Respect is not automatically deserving just because you are a parent these days. That more traditional Confucian ethic is not alive and well! Respect is earned. You show children respect, and it is more likely to be reciprocated. One way to show respect is to be consistent with word and deed. In the “old days” – the boundaries were clear about what is expected of parent roles, and that of the kids. It tended to be set by social norms. Behaviour considered as “right” was more black and white then. Today, it seems it runs mostly into the grey area. Hence, each family has to clearly define what their values, goals and boundaries are, and to run their unit accordingly. There is no hard and fast rules.

As leaders of corporate organizations spend time and money planning their goals, vision, values and purpose so everybody within it understands the culture and expectations. Do we as leaders of our family unit do the same? Have we even thought about what it is we are about? What are our individual dreams? Are all members aligned in values? Do we have useful methods to communicate amongst each other about how we envision our family unit striving synergistically towards individual goals whilst respecting each other’s values? Can we all contribute towards each other’s goals whilst satisfying each other’s needs? What are our beliefs about our children – do these hold them back or drive them forward? The TLC program strives to constructively take these issues and put them into realistic Life Plans for individuals whilst being aligned to a greater Family Vision.

Review of NLP, NS as models that drive TLC

Neuro Linguistic Programming (or NLP for short) and Neuro Semantics (or NS for short) describe programs by which we naturally (and mostly unconsciously) run our brains by

default – out of habitual use of those patterns. Many of these patterns serve us – and we take them for granted. The awareness will allow the parents participating to utilize these patterns more consciously and consistently. Some of these patterns however may not always be useful. The TLC parenting workshop instils processes that will create awareness of these patterns in ourselves and provide an opportunity for the parents to discover new ways to replace or override these unresourceful patterns whenever we choose to obtain new results. For example, there may be an emotional outburst from the parent every time a teenager comes home later than expected from an evening excursion leading to further shutting down of already poor communications between parent and child. It may be useful to attempt to generate a new response to that trigger. NLP and NS can provide a variety of ways to override the habitual pattern above with a new one that may get a more appropriate result.

Another example: a parent may have a belief that there is a need to shelter their child(ren) from the world for there are too many hazards out there. The more protective they are, the paradox is – they are preventing the child(ren) from learning life skills that continue to hamper their independence and self-sufficiency. NLP and NS can intervene through one of their many belief change patterns to give the concerned parent new choices of how to protect the child from the dangers of our world by giving the children opportunities to learn self-initiated life skills of managing when their parents are not there.

The TLC program offers opportunities for individuals in each family to maximize satisfaction of each other's needs through awareness of the issues that drive each of us. Another outcome of the program is to create a Family Vision that continually develops over time through a mutual understanding of the ever-changing boundaries that affect each family unit. Hence, it is a program by which you can truly unleash your children's potential through you.

About the Author: **Dr Yvonne Sum** is a pioneer in Parent Leadership coaching. She is on a quest to co-create joyful learning partnerships between parents and children to simultaneously bring out each other's authentic best. She inspires parents to learn from our children mirroring to us what we most need to learn about ourselves and vice-versa. Through her series of **Transformational Leadership Challenge™ (TLC)** programs, Dr Sum is committed to transform leaders of tomorrow today by highlighting family values and celebrating parents as role models and heroes in life who proactively unleash our children's potential through self actualization, intentional living and powerful leadership centred on love and high purpose. She expresses this passion to bring out our authentic best through her roles as an international speaker, writer, transformational corporate facilitator, executive and parent Meta-Coach, Neuro Linguistic Programming trainer, business woman, wife and mother. Please visit www.dryvonesum.com for more information.