



## The Art of Asking Open and Honest Questions

By asking such questions we provide another person an opportunity to gain access to their inner wisdom. We set aside the compelling desire to be a problem-solver in order to support the other person in this counter-cultural way. Here are some guidelines:

- An open, honest question is a question with “no answer”: it freely invites a response. In other words, the questioner could not possibly anticipate the answer to it. *What surprises you? What moves or touches you about this? What inspires you? What was easy? What was hard?*
- The response to an open question is not directed to the questioner. Instead, the responder has space to hear the voice of their inner teacher and explore whatever is evoked and can be spoken aloud.
- Open questions are never in the control of the questioner. The question is ‘placed’ in the center – a bounded, sacred space that we all protect. From there the one responding can receive the experience offered by the question and open to whatever the inner teacher reveals in response to it.
- Ask questions directed to the person as well as to the situation, about feelings as well as facts. *Have you ever had an experience that felt like your current dilemma? What, if anything, did you learn from that prior experience that feels useful to you now? How do you feel about the experience you just described?*
- Open questions are not analytical. They are not asked for the sake of understanding or explanation. They are not asked to satisfy the questioner’s curiosity nor to seek information for analysis or clarification. They are explorations in wonder.
- An open question stays literally faithful to the person’s specific language: use words the person is using, not what you think they might or should be feeling. *You said this was an impossible situation. Could you say more about what this means to you? What did you mean when you said you felt frustrated? as opposed to Don’t you ever feel angry?*
- Ask questions that are brief and to the point. *What were your expectations or hopes? How does this work for you? What questions do you have? What is the hardest aspect of this situation? What is the easiest aspect?*
- Open questions do not need justification, explanations, or rationales for asking them. Such unnecessary “introductions” can allow you to insert your own opinions or advice, or call attention to you, none of which help the other person.

- Open questions don't ask for yes-no answers, implying right or wrong. Consider reframing: *Don't you think it would be helpful to talk to her?* to *What has been most helpful? Least helpful?*
- Open, honest questions offer an opportunity to explore the present inner landscape more than the outer facts of the past or speculation about the future.
- Use images or metaphors that the person might relate to or have already used. These can often open windows that more direct questions do not. *If you were writing a book about this experience, how would you name this chapter? If you were using a roadmap to navigate this issue, what would be on your map – the destinations, the rest stops, the detours? What's the weather like at the crossroads?*
- If you're not sure about a particular question, sit with it, be patient, and wait for clarity to discover "the question under the question."
- Trust your intuition, even if your instincts seem "off the wall." Listen deeply to the story and allow questions to come from your heart rather than your head.
- Know when to use open, honest questions. These questions are not appropriate for all situations. There is a time to give information, to make a decision, and to share your own opinion and experience. However, a Courage & Renewal retreat is not one of those times!

*Learning to ask open, honest questions is challenging. We may slip occasionally into old fixing and advising habits and need forgiveness from others and from ourselves. As the old saying goes, "Forgive and remember!"*

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