

Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

REFLECTION AND SELF-EVALUATION – Part 3 (Continued from last issue)

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***Consider: When you tell, who does the thinking
When you ask, who does the thinking?***

GUIDELINES

Reflective questions require a thinking response. Such questions

- Are usually open-ended. They require more than a “yes” or “no” answer.
- Focus on the present or future (as opposed to the past).
- Help people learn through the process of thinking.
- Help people ask questions of themselves.
- Are framed to fit the situation and clarify.
- Often start with “What?” or “How?”

Questions that can be answered “yes” or “no” are closed-ended questions because they often close conversations. However, they can be used if they lead to *self-inquiry* or *self-evaluation*, such as, “Is your time being used most profitably?” In some instances, just asking a question is sufficient. In other situations, “yes” or “no” questions can be effective if followed up with another question which calls for a solution. Here are some examples of effective closed-ended questions:

- Is what you are doing working?
- Is what you are doing helping to get your work done? How?
- Is what you are choosing to do helping you get what you want? How?
- Are you willing to do something different from what you have been doing?
- Are you taking the responsible course? How?
- Is there any other way it could be handled?
- If you could do better, should you?
- Are you satisfied with the results?
- What do you think an extraordinary person would do in this situation?

Questions do not need to end with a question mark. For example, “Please describe to me” is an effective clarification question. Other openers are “Illustrate. . . .” and “Walk me through. . . .”

POTHOLES

Avoid asking a “Why?” question. Many times a young person does not know the reason for a behavior. Besides, such a question gives the student an excuse not to take responsibility. This is especially the case where youngsters are labeled. Even though the classification is meant to help, the label becomes a justification. “I can’t help it. I have poor attention,” is an example. Moreover,

even if the “why” were to be known, articulating the explanation is very difficult. Most important, however, *asking a “Why?” question has little effect on changing behavior.*

“Why?” questions have an accusatory overtone. If you are really curious, ask a nonjudgmental question: “Out of curiosity, why did you choose this rather than that?” Change the structure of the question to eliminate any negative inference. A negative implication can be implied in other than “why” questions such as, “When are you going to stop doing that?” Notice the unspoken demand and negative undertone. In contrast, asking “How long will you be continuing that?” is inquisitive when asked in a non-accusatory tone. Of course, the tone of the voice is critical. The adage, “What you are doing speaks so loudly that I can’t hear what you are saying” rings true here.

QUESTIONS AS STRESS REDUCERS

Stress is reduced when we ask reflective, self-evaluative questions. The reduction of stress comes about because of the position in which we place ourselves. When influencing someone, only a *noncoercive* approach is effective. A person may be temporarily controlled, but any lasting change comes only when the person *wants* to change. With this awareness, the first act is mental positioning. When practicing any skill, putting yourself in position always precedes any action. This is as true when asking evaluative-type questions as it is when holding a golf club before the swing, holding a baseball bat before the pitch arrives, shooting a basketball, holding a tennis racquet, or playing any musical instrument. The first step is placing yourself in a mental stance to employ noncoercion. You do not shout a question. The tone of voice communicates at least as much as the words. Even a horse understands this, as was reported by the trainer of Seattle Slew, the 1977 Triple Crown Winner. “Slew’s a show horse. Thousands of people visit him each year. He’s tough but kind, and he will do anything you ask him to do as long as you pose it as a question. If you give him an order, you are going to have a fight on your hands. And you’re going to lose.” (Time, April 28, 1997, p. 27)

THE SKILL

Asking evaluative questions is a skill. As with any skill, you will feel awkward at first, but the more you practice asking self-evaluative questions, the more comfortable you become, the more confidence you develop, and the more effective you are. In addition, regardless of how often the strategy is used with a person, it is still effective because the strategy is noncoercive and empowering.

Practice is the mother of skill. Thinking about a skill is not practicing it. Thinking is necessary for focus, but only the *actual asking of self-evaluative questions* will give you the skill. With this in mind, the question is asked, “How do you develop the skill?” Answered the sage, “With experience.” “But,” asked the disciple, “How do you get the experience?” Came the answer, “By asking poor questions.” Remember: you cannot learn a skill and be perfect at the same time. Each question asked is a learning experience and, if the desired result is not obtained, it should be thought of as feedback, not as failure.

KEY POINTS

Reflection is a powerful teaching and learning strategy that is too often overlooked.

When applied to oneself, reflection is self-evaluation, which engenders self-correction—the most effective route to change and growth.

The key to fostering reflection is the skill of asking evaluative questions, the most effective yet neglected strategy both in learning and in dealing with people.

Asking evaluative questions is a skill and is only developed and becomes easy through practice.

Asking self-evaluative questions reduces stress.

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