

## Improve communication skills with question probes - focused questions for job interviews

To properly interview job applicants, you need to be both an effective sender and receiver of messages. Focused questions can make communication exchanges far more revealing. ASK A GROUP of laboratory supervisors to name those key leadership skills that make an effective manager, and "good communicator" will undoubtedly rank high on the list. Ask a group of laboratory consultants to identify the root cause of most managerial problems in the lab, and poor communication will likely make the top three. Effective communication is a complex process. Much has been written about how to be an effective communicator, but most of this advice focuses on sending a message and being understood. Less frequently offered are techniques for being an effective listener.

- \* Hearing things. Improving communication requires being an effective sender and receiver of messages. In fact, most communication barriers hamper receipt and understanding of messages. For example:
  - \* Because we think more quickly than we listen, we sometimes hear what we expect to hear. We also tend to ignore information that conflicts with what we already "know."
  - \* Our understanding of verbal messages is often modified by the sender's nonverbal gestures and emotions.
  - \* A variety of interfering noises--someone down the hall slams a door, for example--can catch our attention and distract us from the message.
  - \* Words mean different things to different people; the use of jargon often hinders understanding.
  - \* We can be too quick to judge the source: One person always has something we think worth listening to; another never does.

Question probes. How do we improve our listening communication skills beyond trying to overcome these barriers and focusing attention on what is being said? The answer is by asking for more clarity through the use of question probes. Question probes can help produce information in the worst circumstances: when the message is incomplete, unclear, irrelevant, obviously untrue, or when there is complete silence. Question probes have been used effectively in applicant interviews and performance appraisal discussions, but these same probes are equally effective in everyday communication. By both checking apparently clear communications and seeking more information when the message is hazy, you demonstrate both that you are listening and that you are concerned with making sure what you think you are hearing is correct.

- \* Putting probes to work. To illustrate the use and value of question probes, consider the following scenario. You are a manager conducting an applicant interview. During the interview, you wish to learn about the aspirant's participation in continuing education (CE) activities. To do this, you pose an open-ended inquiry. Question: "Tell me about the CE activities you have attended during the last year." Response 1: "I attended some." This response is too vague to be of any value. At this point, use a completion probe to obtain more information, motivating the applicant to expand or give more details on the original response. A direct completion probe might simply be, "Can you tell me more about it?" In addition, you might help the applicant understand how much information is expected by clarifying why the question is being asked. For example, "Continuing education is an important part of life in our lab." You might also use the following completion probe: "Can you tell me the topic areas covered in each CE program you attended?" Response 2: "I participated in several good ones, as a matter of fact." This reply still leaves you without the information you need. To get more, use a clarity probe. Clarity probes help you obtain additional information on a preceding response. In contrast to completion probes, they press the candidate to explain a response that was unclear or did not make sense in the context of the question. Frequently, clarity probes ask the respondent for an example or an explanation of a specific word or phrase. Try the following clarity probe: "Can you describe the good CE programs you attended?" Response 3: "There were very few CE programs where I worked." This response does not answer the question, either. Hence, an irrelevant answer probe is useful. To probe an immaterial answer, reword the original question or clarify its objective. To refocus the applicant's attention on the original question, you might use this irrelevant answer probe: "Of those that were available, did you participate in any and how did they improve your skills?" Response 4: "Continuing education usually isn't worth going to." This response does not answer the question but, more importantly, signals a new, related area of questioning. The interviewer might use a channel probe to determine the source of this opinion about CE. Channel probes use "why" extensively. To uncover the applicant's source of opinion regarding continuing education, you might use the following channel probe: "Why do you think it's not worth your time to attend CE activities?" Channel probes help distinguish between original opinions and ones that have been adopted following frequent repetition by colleagues. The questions also help locate the source of opinions picked up in the course of reading. It's helpful to know whether a job applicant forms his or her own opinions or merely echoes those heard or read elsewhere. Response 5: "I went to everything in a 100-mile radius." A response like this begs validation. To do so, a confrontation probe is useful. Use the following to validate the answer: "That's great. Could you tell me the names of the programs and where they were offered?" Confrontation probes help when the applicant is suspected of exaggeration or of covering up important feelings or information. A probe that gently challenges the accuracy of the information can be used to validate a response. If the applicant's answers have been inconsistent, the confrontation probe might begin, "A moment ago you told me that . . . ." Response 6: Dead silence. Sometimes there is no reply to the inquiry. Normally the silence is either the result of misunderstanding the question or a feeling by the applicant that the question may reveal a potential area of weakness. A nonresponse probe can help when a potential employee fails to answer. The exact type of probe depends upon the specific reason for the lack of response. If the response was due to a misunderstanding, simply rewording the question or inquiry will usually suffice. If, however, the inquiry poses a threat to the applicant, you might want to consider reexamining the specific purpose of the question. In such cases, offer a support statement followed by a more neutrally worded version of the question. That will generally yield a response. For example, "Continuing education is only one of many things we take into account in our hiring decisions. Maybe you could tell me about the last CE you had, even if it wasn't in the past year."
- \* Purposeful questions. The ability to communicate effectively requires an exchange of information. When purposeful questions go unanswered, this exchange does not take place. One way to increase the effectiveness of communication is through the use of question probes that recenter the communication around the specific focus of the inquiry. Different question probes are useful with different types of responses. To be adept at using

these probes requires thinking about the range of potential responses or nonresponses and carefully wording a probe to get the desired information.

### About the Author

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