In today’s episode, we’ll be talking about the various types of questions that there are and the differences between them. You may be sitting there now and thinking “Well I already know what a question is don’t be ridiculous” and you’d be right, if you didn’t know what a question was I’d be quite concerned. I won’t be taking you back to a year one style lesson where we discuss the question mark but I will be talking about the different types of questions that come up in certain roles and business situations. I believe it is important to know this not just so you can use this information to your own advantage but also so you don’t get taken advantage of! This will make a lot more sense as we go into it so without further ado…

Number one (dramatic noise): The Open question.

This whole section can actually be paired up with number two as well (dramatic noise): The Closed question.

We’re starting off fairly easy here, a lot of people already do this without knowing the name of it potentially. In fact, if you have ever played 20 questions then you have demonstrated a great understanding of closed questions. Now an open question is one that leads to an open-ended response, and likewise for a closed question for a closed response. An example of an open question would be “What do you think about this?”. That can lead to a multitude of responses and will change from person to person and may even change from day to day if you asked the same person twice. This is because it’s an emotional answer or opinion. The focus of the question is on the “you” part – the asker wants your opinion and your thoughts. The answers given might not necessarily be factual either – there’s no guarantee that the recipient is going to know the right answer to the question. So when would you use an open question? Well it could be used in a survey given to your potential or existing customers to get an impression of your company reputation and people’s opinion of you. If you just want a collection of people’s thoughts on a subject then open questions are your best bet.

Moving onto closed-questions it would be quite easy to tell you that they are pretty much the opposite of open questions as you may have already gathered by the name. The question leads to a very limited amount of responses and generally people will give the same answer any time you ask them providing they haven’t been taught something new or changed their mind the next time you ask. An example of a closed-question would be a simple yes or no question or something like “What is the capital of England?”. The answer would be London and most people would therefore say London. So with that in mind, there is some guarantee that you will get a particular answer so these questions are best used for statistics or more factual surveys.

People in sales will often tell you to ask open questions instead of closed questions. This would be during the fact-finding stage, say when a customer is coming to you for advice on what they should buy from your catalogue. These kinds of questions might be “What do you hope to use your new phone for?” or “How do you feel about this phone brand?” . It leads you to a discussion which would then finalise to a suggestion of a phone that the customer would feel suits them more. This is because it makes the customer feel that you are really catering for their needs and wants through a longer and more free flowing conversation that was more directed at their opinionated answers. Compare this to a closed question approach in a similar scenario: “What phone do you have at the moment?” and “How much storage does your current phone have?”. These questions are fine, and some customers may prefer this if they know their stuff about the product, however it narrows down your options for offering additional products or perhaps a more advanced model. So basically, if you are working in sales, ask more open questions as it could directly lead to selling more – on the flip side, as a customer if you are being asked a lot of open questions, be cautious. Know that while the products they are offering may genuinely help you in some way but don’t be led down the garden path. If you know exactly what you want or know that you want no additional products, try to keep the conversation restricted to closed questions.

Moving onto number three (dramatic noise): The Probing Question

These are the kind of questions that we ask all the time as well, particularly in a business context. They are questions that are used to gain clarification. In a Work-from-home environment these come up considerably more as we may miss a lot more information if Teams freezes for example. Perhaps you may be talking with a reluctant speaker as well who doesn’t give you as much information as you would like so a probing question becomes more necessary. An example of a probing question would be “When is the deadline for this?”. So you don’t know the deadline, and need to ask clarification in case they missed it or you missed it. Pretty simple stuff. Knowing what a probing question is can be very important - it’s usually crucial information that could make or break a project. It’s hard to find a place of work or situation at work where a probing question wouldn’t be used. To those of you who are nervous about asking questions or feel that you may irritate whoever you are asking, know that in the worst-case scenario the person being asked may be slightly bothered by a bombardment of questions - especially if it was your fault that you missed the information by going to the toilet or something like that – but that small time of slight annoyance will mean nothing if they will be much happier at the end result when it is on time and done correctly. In most scenarios, they might be appreciative if you bring up something that they forgot to clarify and then everyone they are speaking to will also have that information and you have done the group a service if anything! In the best case scenario maybe you will get a medal or something. So really just ask, there is no harm.

And now we go to number four (dramatic noise): The Leading Question

Now people are psychologically going to prefer saying yes and answer positively. This is down to a number of factors: Firstly, reciprocation. It’s give and take. People are likely to say yes or respond well to something if you phrase things as favours or if they believe they will receive a favour in return by agreeing with you. Secondly, commitment. If a shopper tries on clothes before buying or someone places a small deposit then they have actively committed to it in some way and are more likely to buy it outright – if someone has already responded yes to a previous question then they are going to continue doing so. Thirdly, personality. If you are speaking positively and generally people find you a likeable person then they will agree with you as well. There are more factors of course but I believe these are the most important ones to consider. “Why is this relevant?” you ask. A leading question heavily plays on a person’s preference to say yes – if I was to ask “How do you feel about this podcast so far?” then that would just be considered an open question and perhaps lead to a more negative answer than I would like but if I rephrased it to “Are you enjoying this podcast?” or “You’re going to recommend this podcast to your friends, aren’t you?” then that has led you to the answer that I would like to hear… hopefully. It’s quite important to know what a leading question is not just so you know how to use them yourself but so you realise when people are trying to make you agree to something blindly. It’s good to preserve your actual opinion and let it be known if you think it would help and not be a yes man. It’s also important to note that if you are asking leading questions, people might catch on to your light manipulation.

Speaking of manipulation – number five (dramatic noise): The Loaded Question

Beyond hearing “Well that’s a loaded question, Bob” in many a court drama, I didn’t really know what a loaded question actually was before looking it up. Maybe some of you listening are the same so hopefully this description will help. A loaded question is a question (obviously) that contains an assumption about the recipient that may or may not be truthful. So you are handing someone a loaded question like a loaded gun so that they may shoot themselves in the foot with it as there is almost no correct answer to give beyond pointing out the ridiculousness of the question or by side stepping it cleverly – we’ll go into this in a moment. So the question is a trap. A fairly over the top and not very subtle example of a loaded question would be “Have you stopped stealing from the office yet?”. Responding yes, no, maybe, or you’ll never catch me alive will always imply that you were stealing from the office at some point or still doing so. However, a loaded question can be genuinely used to uncover something very specific about someone if they answer the question without thinking. If the question is a bit more light-hearted beyond potentially creating a false truth and incriminating whoever you are asking then it can be used to great effect. The question itself implies that you already knew the specific information about the recipient so they would feel some comfort providing you with further information on the topic. By answering the loaded question with sincerity, they have unknowingly confirmed the information you were after in the first place by asking the question. My head is spinning by just explaining that so let me provide an example: (office background noise) “Hey Derek, how was your meeting with your manager?” “Yeah it was good, no problems with the paperwork in the end.” “Have you stopped looking for a new job then?” “Yeah, unfortunately no one would take me on” And end scene, I know that my acting skills may have fully immersed you but unfortunately that’s not what we’re here for today. So in this case, asking “Have you stopped looking for a new job?” was asked despite not knowing that Derek was actually looking for a new job after all and then he confirmed that information without realizing. Another genuine use of a loaded question could be “What movie are we watching tonight?” which implies that there will definitely be a movie being watched even if that wasn’t agreed upon. There are plenty more ways of phrasing loaded questions that vary in the seriousness of the assumption so we need to discuss how to avoid being trapped by them.

The easiest way to avoid being trapped we have already discussed, point out that the question is a loaded one and simply don’t answer. However, if you are pushed for an answer the best way is to simply take the assumption part of the question and deny that. “Have you stopped stealing?” will be answered with “I have never stolen in my life”. If you pair the two together, it is an even stronger counter to the question “I have never stolen in my life, so why are you accusing me of this?”. It is vital that we all know what a loaded question is and how it sounds and not just because we would all like to avoid being accused of certain things when we may be innocent but also because many people ask loaded questions unintentionally and it can really damage communications and relations quite clearly. If you feel you may be one of those people, make sure that you are analysing the question you are about to ask and dissect it. Avoid assuming things that the recipient may disagree with, separate your question into a series of questions: instead of asking “Have you stopped stealing from the office?” ask “Did you use to steal from the office?” followed by “Did you stop stealing from the office?” then “What made you stop stealing from the office?” and then depending on their answers you can then decide whether or not to have them arrested.

If that individual was arrested, then during a police interview, they may be asked the following – number six: (dramatic noise) Funnel Questions

Upon meeting someone new, one would ask questions. It’s human nature to want to teach so teaching someone else about yourself is a great way to get a conversation going. Generally, we start with simple closed questions and then get broader and more emotive as the questions go on. “What is your name?” would be the obvious first closed question to ask and then that leads onto more open questions like “What made you choose that career?”. It would follow the flow of the conversation. However, with funnel questions, you would start with your broad questions and narrow down the specificity similar to how a funnel starts wide and gets narrower the further down it goes. An example of a series of funnel questions would be the following: “What do you do for a living?” “Do you work nights?” “Did you see a break in?” and so on. Notice how the last question of the start of a normal conversation is quite similar to the first funnel question asked as they are both quite broad questions. So why would you use funnel questions? As I mentioned earlier in this podcast, people are more likely to say yes or answer a question and that commitment was a big factor in this. If you ask easy and comfortable questions then that person will be happier to answer them. You have begun the commitment to answering you as you narrow down, question by question, to the specific information you want that may be quite hard to answer or maybe the recipient is being quite resilient about answering. So funnel questions are perfectly used when trying to uncover very specific information from a source. This would be relevant in some sort of investigation – not necessarily a police investigation though funnel questions would definitely be used there too, but if something went wrong during a project and you want to narrow down where some of the issues came from people will likely cover themselves to avoid being in trouble. You may want this information, not so you can shout at who is responsible but so it can be avoided in future. In a one to one meeting you might ask “Where do you think the project failed?” “Do you feel your team could have done more to help the project succeed?” “Do you feel you were somewhat responsible?” “How can we help stop you from stealing from the office?” I promise I won’t reference the office kleptomaniac anymore but in this case we can see the questions narrowing down to the individual and perhaps even the problem itself so it can be resolved without directly accusing someone of being the problem and not getting a good answer from them.

Onto the next type of question – number seven: (dramatic noise) Recall and Process Questions

Anyone who is currently in a job that involved an interview process, any job seekers that may be currently going to interviews and experiencing the joy and pain involved in that process, or maybe anyone who has hosted an interview as part of their own current job would definitely have experienced these types of questions. Recall and Process questions are grouped together as they are the closed and open questions for the same purpose. These questions encourage some critical thought of some kind and might generally remind someone of school or an exam and many would dread the thought. The purpose of these questions is to evaluate the speaker though, so arguably these questions could be classed alongside any other type of question - they could have the same structure as a question we have spoken of already. Since an interview is basically one big evaluation, any people who have ever partaken would have either experienced one or asked them to another person. A Recall Question is the closed variant of the two and an example of it would be something like “What is 5x5?” or “Do you remember your password?”. They have factual answers and giving the wrong answer means that you will be evaluated differently to if you answered it right! So answering 20 to “What is 5x5?” means you will be evaluated as… bad at maths (dun dun duuuun) Of course, the recall questions will likely be more profound than this in an interview so just be aware of that. As for process questions, they will be open questions as previously mentioned so an example of this would be “Why would you be good for this role?” or “What makes you think you would suit our company?”. They elicit a considerably more emotional response in which you will need to sell yourself to the interviewer. These are definitely harder to answer as even the interviewer might not know exactly what they want to hear but if you show that you have experience, desirable skills and traits, and qualifications then the interviewer will likely accept any form of answer. Just try and keep it relevant to their question, of course. So knowing what these kinds of questions may sound like is important as the recipient because maybe you’re being asked them in a situation where you don’t want to be evaluated. Generally, the questions are inoffensive but many of us know when we are being tested. Additionally, if you are in an interview or an exam, make sure you really listen or read the question and make sure you understand it as well as possible before answering because you don’t want to be evaluated inaccurately.

And finally our last type of question - number eight: (dramatic noise) Rhetorical Questions

Who doesn’t know what a rhetorical question is? Can you imagine a world without Rhetorical Questions? They have such power, don’t they? Aren’t you getting sick of my rhetorical questions here? But yes, a rhetorical question might not be news to many of you, but they really do have their uses. For those who may not know, a rhetorical question is one that doesn’t require an answer – either because the answer is heavily implied in the question, or because there is only one correct and obvious answer to give. Besides the examples I gave at the start of this section, some genuine rhetorical questions some might use in the office would be “Isn’t it nice to have such a good team?” which would be a question with an obvious answer. There are also questions like “Who cares?” or “Are you joking?” which don’t have an answer. Some people associate a passive aggressiveness with rhetorical questions which is certainly the case for the latter of my examples, though they are of course used widely across all situations. Rhetorical questions are mentally stimulating and that is why they are used so often. Saying “Isn’t it nice to have such a good team?” is considerably more interesting to listen to instead of “We have a good team” for both the asker and the listener. It also makes both people feel like they are very involved even if one person doesn’t need to say anything at all. This is why people use it in speeches as well as they are more involving and engaging. The important thing to note about rhetorical questions is that a lot of people can phrase their point into a rhetorical question and slightly manipulate you into agreeing with them. This means that they are quite similar to a leading question. For example, if two people were having an argument about cheese and one of them said “What is the matter with people who like cheese?” then it implies that people who like cheese have an issue. Obviously, anyone who doesn’t like cheese isn’t to be trusted. So keep in mind that rhetorical questions used in the right situation are more involving and engaging but they have a light level of manipulation similar to leading questions that you need to be wary of whether you are asking the question or being asked.

So hopefully now you would consider yourself a bit more aware of all the types of questions that there are and when you should use them. You should now be a questioning, querying, quizzical machine and I expect you all to be lawyers, detectives, and other question askers very soon!