



# SIX TIPS TO ASKING YOUR MENTOR GREAT QUESTIONS

*This article provides six tips on asking your mentor great questions to gain optimal value from the mentoring relationship.*

Mentoring conversations usually contain an interview, a period of questions from the mentee to the mentor. The questions are crafted to draw out life experience and knowledge from the mentor which can enrich the way the mentee sees a situation. The mentor's thoughts can fuel the mentee's insights and framing of ways forward.

## 01 Are you asking enough questions?

Many of us talk to think. Thinking out loud in the presence of your mentor can help you formulate your thoughts. At the end of your waves of thinking, it is a wonderful opportunity to ask a clear question. The moment your mentor hears a question, they are thinking about it because questions trigger a mental reflex known as instinctive elaboration. So, questions can be a powerful opening to your mentoring conversations.

## 02 What is the essence of your question?

Ask one question at a time rather than questions nested in other questions. Research in neuroscience has found that the human brain can only think about one idea at a time so allow your mentor to focus their attention on one question. Also, you may find that by distilling your thinking to one clear question which is framed in language that is meaningful for you, you can clarify your own thinking on the question. And when your question is posed succinctly, your mentor is likely to grasp it and answer it to your level of interest.

## 03 Do you want advice?

If we ask for advice, we get advice. Even if we do not ask for advice, we often get advice! Advice does not help cultivate our independent thinking. When offered advice, the limbic system can trigger an emotional threat response at having our options narrowed. Nancy Kline, founder of Time to Think writes, "We know when our minds are unleashed as themselves. It *feels* different. It *is* different." Consider rephrasing your questions to invite thoughts rather than advice. Try, "What has worked for you in a similar situation?" rather than, "What should I do?" When the contribution from your mentor is specifically not worded as advice, it could be easier for you to come to your own conclusions and understandings.

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## 04 What is liberating for you?

The wording of your questions can ignite different streams of thoughts. Consider the difference between, “How *do* I manage stakeholders effectively?” vs “How *can* I manage stakeholders effectively?” In the former, we are asking the mind to obey and may limit our thinking around actions. In the latter, the mind has more opportunity to play with the question and it may open the possibilities to framing our way forward.

## 05 What is true for you?

Reality is both the good and bad. If you try to bring only your best self to mentoring conversations, it could be a missed opportunity to receive genuine support. Ask sincere questions rather than questions you think you should be asking. If you bring your true self to the relationship, your authenticity is likely to be reciprocated leading to real and richer conversations.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Khyati is the Founder of Yzer Solutions Pte Ltd, a talent development consultancy. She has 20 years of teaching, training and consulting experience, specialising in Interpersonal Communication and Positivity-Led Performance. Khyati is a certified Time to Think Facilitator and Coach, introducing individuals and organisations to the Thinking Environment®. Khyati runs a Thoughtful Meetings program for organisations seeking to establish mutually enriching mentoring relationships.*

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## 06 Are you listening?

To ask great questions and then not listen generously to the responses could be the unravelling of a meaningful opportunity. In the Thinking Environment®, we have discovered that transformative listening is nearly a work of art. It comes from genuine interest in where your mentor will go next in their thinking. It is held by a promise of non-interruption. The quiet presence of your attention, respect, and ease, could generate fresh, important, and creative thinking from your mentor. Cultivate a subtle, yet powerful expertise in listening to your mentor.

## CONCLUSION

Questions are so embedded in human communication that it is easy to underestimate their value in generating productive thinking. They are an effective tool for strengthening connections between people, solving problems, and opening new possibilities in our lives.

In a mutually enriching mentoring relationship, a mentor offers a rigorous framework in which the mentee can think well for themselves. In turn, the mentee takes ownership of the outcomes of the mentoring conversations by posing questions that indicate clear, independent thinking.

In the words of Henry David Thoreau, “It takes two to speak truth – one to speak, and another to hear.”

What do you think?