

How To Ask Positive Questions

Facilitator's Guide

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Introduction

The video, **How To Ask Positive Questions**, starring John O’Hurley (best known as J. Peterman on the *Seinfeld* series) is designed to acknowledge the beneficial impact of positive questions on communication and teamwork.

In his to-the-point and distinctive manner, O’Hurley helps deliver these important learning points:

- Questions should be phrased in a positive way to help nurture and develop ideas.
- Your inflection and attitude affect how your question is perceived – and given a helpful response.
- Questions should be “open” (as in “open-ended”), inviting further discussion and clarification, rather than “closed” questions (as in “closed-ended”) that shut down idea generation.
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Employees who can effectively utilize positive questions will deal better with all of their colleagues throughout the entire organization. They will be able to help their teammates generate and refine ideas to increase the team’s overall productivity. They will develop more significant relationships with their colleagues, which can have a positive impact on morale, service, and results. **How To Ask Positive Questions** can help your team members or employees reap the benefits of questioning.

This guide provides two training plans for facilitators: One that considers using positive questions in a workshop on effective communication and another that considers using positive questions to enhance teamwork. This second training plan is recommended for use by an intact team.

A Word To Facilitators

This guide is designed either for 1) facilitators who are training professionals, or 2) team leaders who are conducting team meetings. Experienced training professionals will be familiar with the methods and techniques of group instruction. Team leaders bring first-hand experience of working in teams and familiarity with the dynamics of the group they head.

In either circumstance, when you use the video **How To Ask Positive Questions**, you are also a role model for the participants in the skill of questioning. In whatever venue you show the video, pay particular attention to your use of questions. Make sure you:

- Use questions wherever possible to generate discussion. For example, instead of answering a participant's question with a lengthy explanation, turn the question back to the group.
- Use open questions. For example, instead of asking, "Do you know who invented the cotton gin?" ask, "What can you tell me about the invention of the cotton gin?"
- When you "Are there **SAMPLE** than,
- Try to refrain from making judgments about the questions that participants ask during the meeting or training session. This includes refraining from common statements like, "Good question!" and from such interactions as, "Are there any questions? No? Good..."
- In responding to questions, paraphrase before responding to be sure you, and the entire class, heard the question correctly.
- During the session, when participants make comments that could be turned into questions, encourage them to do so. If they use questions that are veiled put-downs or commands, gently challenge them to refine those questions.
- Remind them that while questioning is something that we all do every day, we can all further refine our questioning technique. At first using positive questions can feel unnatural or awkward. Encourage participants to persevere even if initially their questions don't go over well in meetings or don't come out sounding just right.

Concepts Presented In The Video

This how-to video presents a rapid-fire series of tips for creating and using positive questions. Key concepts from the video are briefly described below.

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From The Video: *“Asking questions is a skill, a communication skill, like speaking clearly, listening well, communicating non-verbally. And like those skills, it improves with training and practice.”*

Key Concepts: We know that speaking clearly, having proper listening skills, and being knowledgeable about the importance of non-verbal cues play a vital part in clear communication between people in organizations. Surprisingly, the impact of questions, and how to properly ask them, remains an unacknowledged part of the training curriculum. Like other communication skills, it can be learned, and, once learned, improved.

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From The Video: *“Much of the research on questions concludes that a good number of questions aren’t really questions but commands disguised as questions, or put-downs in the form of a question.”*

Key Concepts: Just
inflection at the end

“What were you thinking?” or “Is that it?” are often judgments rather than questions. These types of questions create negativity and defensiveness.

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From The Video: *“Your goal is to strengthen your teammate’s goal, not weaken it. You want to make sure you don’t sabotage it unknowingly.”*

Key Concepts: Teams are evaluated on the quality of their ideas. Asking the wrong questions can have a negative impact by shutting down a potentially valuable idea before it has had a chance to become fully developed.

From The Video: *“After you’ve asked your question positively, make sure you listen to the response positively.”*

Key Concepts: Don’t disappear on your teammate after asking a question. He needs you to pay attention and respond with follow-up questions to clarify his thinking and to validate the idea. All basic communication principles – including active listening, maintaining eye contact, refraining from distractions – are applicable when questioning.

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From The Video: *“Your questions should help refine and clarify the issues that Jim’s proposal has brought up. So when you put forth your questions, make sure this is part of what you are trying to do by phrasing them in a supportive, positive way.”*

Key Concepts: Negative questions (like, “Why don’t you just fire him?” or “Isn’t that going to take too long?”) create “drag.” They weigh people down. Ideas take flight when you phrase your questions in a way that increases confidence and morale (For example, “What have you considered doing with this employee?” or “How much time do you think is needed for this task?”).

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From The Video: *“An own way, to elaborate isn’t this what is supp*

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Key Concepts: Lots of questions cut off conversation by requiring simple one-word answers. They discourage a person from talking more about their ideas, needs, or goals. Open questions encourage people to engage in conversation and to explore their possibilities together. They get at the subtleties and complexities of the situation.

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From The Video: *“The main idea is to let Jim’s idea breathe a bit, to gain some life before asking questions that might endanger it. Remember, your job is to keep your teammate’s idea alive as long as it remains viable.”*

Key Concepts: Timing is everything when it comes to communicating via questions. When a question is asked too soon, it can squelch an idea before it has come to fruition. It is best to wait until:

- The presentation is over
- A discussion of the agreed-upon points has occurred
- A designated question and answer period has begun

Materials And Logistics


For the two training plans that follow, you will need:

- ◇ A room large enough to accommodate all the participants seated at a table, with space to move around and re-group for the exercises.
- ◇ VCR and monitor.
- ◇ Flipchart, markers, tape.
- ◇ Copies of the worksheets for each participant. Original worksheets that you can duplicate are provided in this guide. For Training Plan A, the worksheets begin on page 18. For Training Plan B, the worksheets begin on page 19.
- ◇ Cue cards for the exercises.

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Before You Start

Regardless of whether you use one of the two training plans in this guide, or a training plan of your own design, before the session is scheduled to begin it's a good idea to:

- ◇ Familiarize yourself with this guide, the video, and the exercises you will be using.
- ◇ Customize the materials in this guide by altering them or by adding additional activities or content for your specific group or objectives. Prepare your own personal examples or anecdotes to support the points you will be making. Think about how the concepts in the video can apply to the projects your group is involved in, as well as any work obstacles the participants are facing.
- ◇ Anticipate any comments, questions, or complaints that the participants might have after seeing the video so you can be prepared to respond to them.
- ◇ Reserve the room you will be using.
- ◇ Gather the materials listed below.
- ◇ Set up the room so that everyone can see the video. 
- ◇ Cue up the video and adjust the sound so you can hear it at the back of the room.
- ◇ Set up the flipchart and write the agenda on it (you need only write the descriptions, not the times).
- ◇ Welcome participants as they arrive.
- ◇ Although you will already have watched the video, be sure to sit with your group and watch it again. It would send the wrong message for you to leave the room or to focus on something else while they are watching it.

Training Plan A – Questioning For Effective Communication

2½-hour program

Overview

This program *expands* upon the video by using a three-part exercise to focus first on the power of using questions to communicate and then on how to make the questions you ask more effective. Participants are asked to react to certain statements and then to convert those statements into questions to assess how their reactions might change. After watching the video, the questions participants create are analyzed, refined, and used as the basis of discussion.

Objectives

Following this session, participants will be able to:

- Describe the benefits of using questions to communicate.
- Change statements into questions that are positive, are open, and are real questions.
- Consider the impact of the way questions are asked.
- Use feedback to improve questioning skills.
- Explore the different types of responses people give when being told something as opposed to when being asked a question.

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Agenda

Time	Description
5 minutes	Introduction: The Benefits Of Questioning
30 minutes	Questioning For Effective Communication, Part One
20 minutes	Watch & Debrief Video
15 minutes	Questioning For Effective Communication, Part Two
10 minutes	Inflection
15 minutes	Phrasing
10 minutes	Timing
30 minutes	Questioning For Effective Communication, Part Three
15 minutes	Wrap-Up

NOTE: This agenda does not include participant introductions. If this is not an intact work group where everyone knows each other, it would be best to start with a round-robin introduction, should group size permit, where everyone:

- States his/her name.
- Tells why s/he came to this session.
- Asks an introductory question (e.g. Where do you live? Where did you grow up? How long have you worked here? Do you have any pets?) of the person seated beside him/her who will introduce him or herself next.
- Answers the question posed by the person who preceded him/her (the first person will need to respond to the question created by the last person).

Introduction: The Benefits Of Questioning

5 minutes

- Explain that this session is titled *Questioning For Effective Communication*.
- Ask participants why they think questions are an effective part of communication. Look for responses such as:
 - They help people learn about each other.
 - They allow people to clarify their thoughts.
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- Explain that **SAMPLE** do it all the time. The questions we ask, we can reap the benefits they've just described – and more.

Questioning For Effective Communication, Part One

30 minutes

- Explain that to fully establish the power of questions, we need to compare how people respond to questions vs. how they respond to statements. The first part of this activity focuses on how people respond to statements.
- Ask participants to find partners.
- Have all partners turn to the worksheet titled, *Questioning For Effective Communication, Part One (A-1)* and provide the following instructions:
 - Each person should read two of the four statements on this page aloud to the other person. Read them word-for-word as they are written.
 - After reading each statement, ask your partner the two questions beneath the statement:

- o What is your reaction (feeling) when your partner reads this statement to you?
 - o What might you do or say in response?
- Everyone should jot down some notes on their discussions of these two questions in the space provided on the worksheet.
- Allow partners about 10 minutes to complete the activity.
- Debrief the activity using the following questions:
 - What were some of your reactions (feelings) in response to the statements read to you?
 - Why do you think you reacted that way?
 - What were some of the things you would do or say in response to these statements?
 - ❖ Write down some of the participants' responses on the flip chart.
- Explain that different types of responses will surface when you turn common statements into questions.

➤ Have pa
Question



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- Each person should re-write the two statements they read aloud previously as questions.
 - You might wish to provide an example here. This might sound like, *“If the original statement was, “If you don’t eat your vegetables, you can’t have dessert,” the question you write might sound like, “What would it take to make you eat your vegetables?”*
 - Then each person will ask the questions aloud of their partner, just as they read aloud the statements earlier.
 - After reading the new questions you have written, ask your partner the same two questions you asked after reading the statements:
 - o What is your reaction when your partner asks you this question?
 - o What might you do or say in response?
 - Ask partners to jot down some notes on their discussion of reactions and responses in the space provided on the worksheet.
- Allow partners about 15 minutes to complete the activity.

- Debrief the activity using the following questions:
 - What were some of your reactions (feelings) in response to the questions you were asked?
 - How were these reactions different than when your partner read you the statements?
 - What might have caused the different types of reactions?
 - What were some of the things you would do or say in response to the questions your partner wrote and asked you?
 - ❖ Write down some of the participants' responses on the flip chart.
 - How do your responses to the questions just asked compare to the responses to the statements read earlier? Look for responses such as:
 - Responses were more positive and less defensive or angry.

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Watch & Debrief video
20 minutes

- Explain that you are now going to watch a 12-minute video, *How To Ask Positive Questions*. After the video, they'll be revisiting the questions they just wrote.
- Debrief the video, with questions like these:
 - What resonated with you in the video? To what did you relate positively?
 - What surprised you?
 - Based on the video, is there anything you want to stop, start, or continue doing?
 - What questions or issues did the video raise for you?
 - What didn't you like about the video?

NOTE: The purpose of this question is to defuse any negative reactions to the video so that the key concepts can be fully embraced. If participants raise any concerns, ask some questions to help them appreciate the rest of the video. For example, if they don't like the abstract set design, ask which of the points John O'Hurley made have value.

Questioning For Effective Communication, Part Two

15 minutes

- Ask participants to find partners (either their previous partners or new ones).
- Have all partners turn to the worksheet titled, *Questioning For Effective Communication, Part Two (A-3)* and provide the following instructions:
 - Working together, each pair should look back at the questions they created earlier on the worksheet titled, *Re-Writing Statements As Questions*, and analyze them using the criteria provided. Are all of your questions...
 - **Really questions?** Or are they commands or put-downs in disguise?
 - **Positive?** Do they strengthen your partner's goal or idea, rather than weaken it? Are they encouraging, rather than dragging down?
 - **Open?** Do they demand more than a yes or no answer? Do they
- Allow part
- ❖ While they are working, rewind the video to the beginning of the Inflection section, which begins at 5:10.


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NOTE: If time is short, you can continue with this training plan even without cueing up and re-watching segments of the video.

- Debrief the activity asking for examples of each of the following types of questions. Aim for 2-3 examples of each type:
 - A negative question they originally wrote.
 - A positive question.
 - A close-ended question they originally wrote.
 - An open one.
 - A question that wasn't really a question.
 - A good question (one that was really a question).
- If you'll be re-playing segments of the video, explain that you'll be watching certain sections of the video again now as you delve deeper into how to ask positive questions. If you are not using the video, explain that you are going to further refine their questions focusing on some areas from the video – inflection, phrasing, and timing.

Inflection

10 minutes

- Re-watch video segment on inflection, beginning at 5:10 and ending at 6:38.
- Explain that inflection is about how you ask your questions; the tone of your voice.
- Talk further about tone of voice using any of the following formats, or a format of your own choosing:
 - If you are adept at modeling different inflections, you can provide some examples.
 - Ask participants to read some of the questions they've written modeling good and bad inflection.
 - Ask participants who previously shared their good questions to discuss the connection between inflection and the attitude behind the question.
- Explain that in the section on inflection, the video also discusses how to listen to the response to your questions, and that you are now going to focus on this with a mini-demonstration.
 - Ask a volunteer to tell you the story of a particularly bad morning
 -  well
 - don't make eye contact with him/her, look at your watch or out the window, cross your arms, and do any other things you wish to show that you are not listening to the response. itively.
 - As participants call out things you should do differently to improve your listening, make those changes until you are indeed listening positively. en
- Ask participants if they have any questions about inflection.

Phrasing

15 minutes

- Explain that you are going to be demonstrating another aspect of questioning – phrasing.

Tell participants that you are going to be thinking of an occupation (for this example, you will be a window washer). Ask participants to call out