

The Skill of Asking Effective Questions

One of the most important skills to acquire for long-term success in working with Rescue Mission clients is the skill of asking effective questions. Few people come with this skill. This skill is born out of beliefs and tested by those who have a continual desire to learn.

Here are questions to ask yourself to check your readiness to gain this skill:

- Do I listen to the client to get the whole story before making my conclusions?
- Do I resist judgment until I have probed below the surface?
- Do I have a real desire to understand the other person's view?
- Do I understand that differing perspectives and perceptions affect decision-making?
- Do I have a huge desire for clarification of facts and feelings before reacting?

If you can say yes to each of these questions, you are ready to develop this skill. Your "yes" answers mean that there is purpose in your questioning and you have a goal that is client-centered. You are more interested in getting to the truth than you are in coming to a conclusion. You understand that people think their way to change.

Effective questions help you to connect with the client in a more meaningful way. When I am asking how they see the situation, they begin to get the opinion that I think their ideas matter. There are many ways to show respect to people, but a superior way is to respect their ability to think. Most people yearn to be listened to. This is a way for clients to experience you as relational.

We sometimes ask questions in order to get clarity for ourselves. We seek to more fully understand the client's presenting problem. A larger purpose of questions is to help the other person clarify his or her own thinking. Immediate cooperation is often the result of a command or instruction but long-term effects are the result of the person coming to his or her own correct conclusion, led by responding to effective questions. Effective questions allow you to direct the path of information toward a useful conclusion. We help people take responsibility for their actions and more easily solve problems if we ask questions.

Of course, we use questions sometimes to get cooperation and to defuse volatile situations. Used with wrong motives, we can manipulate or shame people into a temporary change of behavior.

This skill also has much usefulness with interaction among staff. Asking effective questions results in more solution-oriented problem solving and a reduction of mistakes.

Summarizing, behind effective questioning is:

- ability to listen
- willingness to suspend judgment
- intent on understanding

- clarification of fact and feeling
- freedom to evaluate personal perceptions
- desire to improve opportunity for clear perspective



Beware of the hazards that keep you from asking effective questions because of poor listening habits. Here are reasons why some have trouble with listening. If you truly want to help the client, these issues must be discarded:

- ❖ Desire to keep control of the conversation
- ❖ Dedicated to preconceived opinion
- ❖ In a hurry
- ❖ Desire to demonstrate own intelligence and skill
- ❖ Afraid of emotion

The payoff for getting good at asking effective questions is huge. Not only do you connect with your clients in a more meaningful way, you better and more fully understand your clients' problems. This allows you to help people take responsibility for their actions and solve problems more easily.

The skill of asking effective questions is also very useful in defusing volatile situations and getting cooperation. This skill helps you when working with clients who are argumentative or into avoidance.

This skill will also help you work with your fellow staff more effectively, doing more solution-oriented problem-solving and reducing mistakes. It is a useful way to plant your own ideas and even persuade people. Asking always gets you further than telling.

Developing the Skill

An effective question is thought-provoking, open-ended, and not leading. An open-ended question is one that cannot be answered by one word or a yes or no. Closed questions can be used to start a conversation or summarize progress since the last encounter, but it is still useful to follow that confirmation with open questions. Closed questions are also good to use to finish a time by seeking commitment.

The best questions start with "what."

What are you doing?
What shall we do next?
What happened?
What is stopping you from succeeding?
What is the most important thing to do now?
What are you trying to achieve?
What is the real problem?
What is the solution?

“Why” questions often tempt the client to lie or cover up. Here is where we have to understand the role of guilt versus shame.

“Who” questions often tempt the client to manipulate or get into the blame game.

Any skill is developed through practice. This skill is worth the practice. Try it. You’ll like it!