

Module: Key Skills – Open questions and how to use them

Module in Communication Skills for Supervisors

What do we mean by open questions?

In many everyday conversations we are asking questions to seek information that we need. These types of questions tend to be closed questions that will provide a factual or yes/ no response. Some closed questions are also used as ways to give advice.

Examples of closed questions

What time is it?

How long will this take?

What do I need to do next?

Have you thought about? (advice-giving)

Did you try ...? (advice-giving)

Closed questions very much have their place and are essential at times when we need a specific answer or we need to get a specific message across.

Open questions are designed to prompt the thinking of the other person. Although we might gather information this way, the purpose of the question is to support the other person.

Open questions can generate new thinking and allow someone to come to their own conclusions about something. Open questions give space for the person being asked to think. For the person asking the question, they are a prompt to then listen fully to the response.

Open questions tend to begin with what, how, where and when. Although 'why' can also be used as an open question, it can provoke a defensive response so tends to be best avoided¹.

Examples of open questions

How have things been since we last met?

How could you go about that?

What options do you have here?

And what else?

'If' is also a great way to begin an open question when challenging limiting beliefs and assumptions. Nancy Kline in her book *Time to Think* defines 'incisive questions' as questions which can '*remove limiting assumptions, freeing the mind to think afresh*'².

Key Skills – Open Questions

- *If you knew you could complete this year, what would be different?*
- *If time was not a barrier, what would you do next?*
- *If you could ask for help, what would that give you?*
- *If you knew you could pass the exam with ease, how would you go about your revision?*

The benefits of open questions

Rapport building: Asking an open question and then really listening to the response is a great way to build rapport. When initially getting to know a trainee, it can be extremely valuable to ask questions such as:

- *What's most important to you here?*
- *What do you want to achieve in this placement?*
- *How could you make the most of this year?*

Problem-solving: They also support someone to come up with their own solutions to problems or challenges. Although advice can be useful and is essential at times, when someone is grappling with something they are often dealing with complexities that only they can solve:

- *What have you tried before? What worked about that?*
- *What could you do here?*
- *What options do you have?*
- *How will you know this has worked?*
- *What's the simplest thing you could do?*

Challenging assumptions: As highlighted above, questions beginning with 'if' are a great way to challenge assumptions and overcome perceived obstacles. Even if the obstacles are real, the question can really prompt a new perspective, which can open up new possibilities for the trainee.

- *If you were a consultant, what might you do in this situation?*
- *If you know that your colleagues do respect you, what difference would that make to you?*
- *If you know that people want to learn from you, how would you begin the teaching session?*

Increasing motivation, confidence, commitment and other traits: Again the 'if' question is a great tool here combined with other types of open questions:

- *If you were just 5% more motivated / confident / committed, what would be different for you?*
- *What's it like for you when you are confident / motivated / committed?*
- *How does it feel when you are confident / motivated / committed?*
- *What small step might you take if you felt like that today?*
- *How will you know something has improved?*

Trainer Exercise 1

Turn the following closed questions into open questions: (Please note there are no correct answers to get here. Use this as an opportunity to think of different types of questions.)

1. *Have you thought about using your time more efficiently?*
2. *Could you talk to your consultant?*
3. *Could cycling into work be a better way to increase your fitness?*
4. *What about writing a plan of action for the next 3 months to help with your motivation?*
5. *Have you tried speaking out when you feel you're being undermined?*

Trainee scenarios with example open questions

Please note there is never a perfect or right question to ask. Some questions may work well with the trainee, others may not. Here are some examples of the types of questions that might be helpful in each scenario. You may well think of others.

1. **The first meeting with a trainee who took time out of training and is nervous about being back.**
 - *What did you enjoy about your last placement? What worked well?*
 - *What's important to you about being back?*
 - *What do you hope to achieve now you're back?*
 - *What would represent one small step forward in that?*
 - *How can I best support you?*
2. **A trainee who lacks motivation and is falling behind with their e-portfolio.**
 - *When you think about the e-portfolio, what comes to mind?*
 - *What stops you?*
 - *When you are motivated, what's different?*
 - *Who are you when you're at your best?*
 - *What options do you have here?*
 - *What small step could you take to make a difference to this?*

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3. **A trainee with a poor ARCP outcome who is struggling to engage with support.**
 - *What's important to you about completing your training / being a doctor?*
 - *What have you been finding challenging lately?*
 - *What does this ARCP outcome mean to you?*
 - *If you know it is possible to turn this around, what difference would that make to you?*
 - *What options do you have here?*
 - *How can I best support you with this?*
 - *What first step could you take?*

4. **A trainee who is being disruptive in their team**
 - *How do you see this situation?*
 - *What do you make of the comments from your team members / colleagues / consultant?*
 - *What part might you be playing here?*
 - *What can you control here?*
 - *If things were working well with your team, what would be different?*
 - *If you were willing to take one small step to improve things, what could that be?*
 - *When could you take that step?*

Trainer Exercise 2: Trainee scenarios

Below are three trainee scenarios. Come up with 3 - 4 open questions you could offer to support the trainee to find a way forward.

Scenario 1	It's your first meeting with a trainee who has transferred from another deanery.
Scenario 2	A trainee is approaching an exam. It's their third and final attempt. They are not sleeping well and are worried about what will happen if they fail again. Their motivation and confidence are low.
Scenario 3	A trainee is struggling to build good relationships with colleagues. They feel undermined and isolated and want to be able to connect better with people.

Trainer tips and exercises to take away

1. Try using open questions with at least one trainee this week. Notice what happens.
2. If you have a trainee that you are finding challenging at the moment, come up with some open questions that might work well with them.

Bonus option is to ask them!

Bonus exercise

Practise asking open questions every day for a week and notice what happens.

Other worksheets to look at in the module

- Scaling 1 to 10
- Key Skills - Listening

Further reading

1. Sir John Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance*, Nicolas Brealey Publishing, (25th anniversary edition 2017.) (First published 2002)
2. Nancy Kline, *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*, (Updated Sept 2002) (First published by Cassell Illustrated 1999), p54