This article by Jane Logan of Logan Strategy Inc. was first published in The Canadian Association in September 2004.

The Right Questions for Top Participation

A key facet of a facilitator's job is creating an environment where all participants feel comfortable contributing. The way you ask a question can make a big difference in accomplishing this goal. Dorothy Strachan's book, Questions that Work: A Resource for Facilitators, has many tips for framing questions to put participants at ease.

How to ask:

Consider these nuances, drawn from Questions that Work.

Instead of asking…	Try asking	So that
Do you understand the question or Do you understand the task? or Who doesn't understand this?	Did I make the question clear? Or Is that task clear or should I explain it a little further?	The responsibility for making the question or task clear remains with the facilitator, not with the participant.
What sort of data do you have to back up your opinion?	Tell me more. Has anyone researched this?	You are not putting the respondent in a defensive, weaker position.
You look pretty defensive Gary – what's going on?	To what extent are things moving the way you expected, Gary?	You don't make an assumption about what Gary is feeling; instead you invite him to provide his own perspective.

Strachan advises that when seeking different viewpoints, it's good practice to avoid asking "Who can play Devil's advocate…?" This implies that an opposing view will be perceived to be negative. With people voicing opinions they don't hold, people may lose sight of who believes in what. "What are other ways to solve this problem…" is a better approach.

Setting the stage for maximum participation includes asking honest and relevant questions. A facilitator should never ask a question that she already knows the answer to. Outside of the classroom, it's patronizing to test whether people know specific answers and more helpful to the group if questions provoke discussion. So instead of asking "who knows what SMART objectives are?" ask "Has anyone had any experience with SMART objectives?"

When to ask

To create a safe environment and ask challenging questions that will move the group forward, Strachan suggests making sure the group has advance notice of the question. For example, say "After lunch, I'm going to ask each of you what is the most important challenge before us, so you may want to give this some thought." Questions can also be included in advance question in planning materials, "Please come prepared to share an example of …" Another technique for challenging issues is to ask risky questions in pairs or small groups before asking for input in a plenary session.

Accommodating risk:

Asking someone to explain "*how*" something happened or "*what*" happened may be more effective than asking "*why*". People often feel accused or blamed when asked "why", Strachan says, and may just say the first thing that comes to mind or make things up. "How" and "what" questions are more likely to get accurate and truthful responses in difficult situations than those who ask "why".

Final thoughts:

Strachan's advice on making questions work includes tips on asking questions with sensitivity, creating inviting questions and customizing for context – and leads into seven further chapters of sample questions and advice for facilitators addressing common challenges with groups. This is an excellent resource for anyone who works with groups, including professional facilitators, project leaders, community organizers, trainers, moderators or anyone seeking to build consensus on a board or committee.

Resources:

Dorothy Strachan, Questions That Work: A Resource for Facilitators, ST Press, Ottawa, 2001, available through www.stpress.ca or by calling 1-800-572-1564 . Customers who mention "The Canadian Association" when they order will receive a $3.00 discount - $24.95 per book instead of $27.95. Shipping by mail for a single copy is $4.00.