

"DON'T YOU THINK THAT...?"¹

Open-ended probes are intended to help others continue talking so you can discover their point of view and get useful information for problem solving. Examples:

"Tell me how this came about."

"How did you decide which method to use?"

"What are your expectations at this point?"

Sometimes, though, we slip into questions that are not open-ended, with which we don't really seek information but rather offer an opinion – a statement. We are often unaware of doing this. These might be called *pseudo questions*. Pseudo questions can be detrimental to constructive problem solving because the statement is framed as a question in the hope of forcing agreement from the other person. Below are six types of pseudo questions.

1. Co-Optive Questions

This pseudo question attempts to narrow or limit the possible responses of the other person. "Don't you think that...?"; or, "Isn't it true that...?"; "Wouldn't you rather...?"; "Don't you want to...?"; "You wouldn't want that, would you?" The questioner is attempting to get the desired response by building certain restrictions into the question.

2. Punitive Questions

When using a punitive question, the questioner really wants to expose the other individual without appearing to do so directly. For example, someone proposes a solution to a problem where you believe all the causes have not been looked into, and you ask about an area you know has not been considered. The purpose of the question is not to obtain information, but to put the other person on the spot.

3. Hypothetical Questions

In asking hypothetical questions, people again resort to a pseudo question. "If you were in charge of the meeting, wouldn't you handle it differently?" In asking this question, you do not actually want to know how the person would handle the meeting; you actually want to criticize the meeting. Hypothetical questions typically begin with "If," "What if," or "How about?"

¹ Excerpted from an article of the same name by J.W. Pfeiffer and J.E. Jones in *The 1974 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators*.

4. Imperative Questions

Another type of pseudo question is the one that actually makes a demand. A question such as "Have you done anything about...?" or "When are you going to...?" is not asking for information; rather it implies a command: "Do what you said you were going to do, and do it soon."

5. Screened Questions

Screened questions are a very common variety of pseudo question in which you ask what the other person wants to do, hoping it will be what you want. If the other person takes you at your word you may be trapped into either going along with something you don't want, or ignoring their input – which will make them wonder why you bothered to ask in the first place. Or, they may feel frustrated from the pressure to "guess" what you really want them to say.

6. Set-Up Questions

Set-up questions maneuver the other person into a vulnerable position, ready for the ax to fall. One example is, "Is it fair to say that you...?" Or, "Would you agree that...?" The questioner is leading the witness in much the same way a skillful lawyer sets up a line of response in court. A very similar question is the "got'cha." It might run something like this: "Weren't you the one who...?"; "Didn't you say that...?"; or "Didn't I see you...?"