

For Permanent & Positive Change

# The Exchange

**FEATURED TOPIC: ASKING THE TOUGH QUESTIONS**

## Getting Answers to Tough Questions

People are not comfortable answering the tough questions in life. Their constraint most likely falls into three categories.

First, they do not want to tell you. This may be due to their reluctance to share bad news, or at least share it with you. Regardless of the reason they do not want to answer, you may get a shrug, an excuse, or silence.

Second, they do not know the answer to give you. This may occur because they do not feel qualified or informed. Perhaps they are intimidated by your position or power. It could be because they don't want to give the wrong answer – a hangover from days in the classroom when the teacher called upon them when they were not prepared. Your answer may be a shrug or a mumbled, "I don't know."

The third reason a person does not answer your tough question may be attributed to the complexity of the question. They simply don't understand what you want. Questions that have long introductions or multiple questions can confuse the most willing respondent.

At TLC, we teach people a dynamic tool to get the answers to the tough questions. We call this a Triple Probe. Here are the steps to follow:

1. Create your first question beginning with a "how" or "what."
2. Identify the key words in your question as the verbs, adjectives, or nouns.
3. Replace those key words with synonyms, and you have created a similar question that will get you the answer you need.
4. Ask your first question. If no response is received, ask the second similar question. Repeat the process until

three questions have been asked. If the person does not respond by the third question, it is unlikely that they choose to answer.

Here is an example of a Triple Probe:

How do you feel about the change in the program?  
 What are your reactions to the new initiative?  
 What do you think about the revised plan?

The test to determine if the three questions are indeed a Triple Probe is to see if the same answer applies to each one. If the answer in the example just given was, "I think it is going to cost too much money," that answer would fit any of the three questions.

The delivery for asking a Triple Probe is important also. Sincerely ask the first question. Allow five to eight seconds for a response. You can add a comment before you ask the next question, such as, "I'm interested in your input."

Triple Probes work because if the person does not want to tell you, by the time you ask the third question they will most likely tell you something just to make you go away. If the person did not know the answer, by basically asking the same question with different words, you have given them time to think and come up with an answer. If the person did not understand the first question, the re-wording will certainly aid in their comprehension.

Triple Probes are aggressive, yet with the correct delivery and timing, they will seem most appropriate. The best part is that you will get information that you need. If a question is not worth getting an answer, what is the value in asking in the first place? When a tough question needs an answer, use a Triple Probe and connect! ❖

## What Our Clients Are Saying

"I've utilized all of the tactics I learned from the sessions. It is awesome to see how effective asking instead of telling could be. I've actually learned a lot about my daughter by simply shutting my mouth and listening to her. THANKS!"

Nicole Johnson, Treasury Department, Atlanta, GA

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### Looking Forward

Our next issue will focus on Confirm Understanding.

### Looking Back

You might also be interested in our October 2006 edition: [Creating the Perfect Team](#) or read other [previous issues of The Exchange](#).

*"I began to like this man. He answered your questions briefly and to the point, and never tried to be funny. I felt I could be confidential with him."*

Kenneth Grahame



## For Permanent & Positive Change

### Open a Can of Worms

Asking tough questions can “open a can of worms”. This is a common expression used as a warning. It is usually in reference to a calm situation that has the potential to become more volatile.

But what do worms and an opened can of them have to do with asking difficult questions? We’ll hope to avoid opening up a can of worms and succinctly tell you now.

The earliest origin dates back to the 1890’s. Worms are common lures when fishing. If you are on a dock or near an embankment opening a container (can) of worms would be normal. If you are inside a vehicle or a living room, opening a can of worms full of dirt, rocks, and the worms themselves, could be messy!

This saying “opening a can of worms” came to describe any situation where the slightest question or incident could elicit an unwelcomed reaction.

To avoid opening a can of worms, think before speaking. If the worm’s lid stays shut, that means your mouth is too! ❖

### Ten-Minute Genius

Have you ever been in a situation where you left without getting the information you needed, only to recognize your error ten minutes later? Sometimes this is referred to as a V-8 moment because we hit our head with our palm at our lack of timing. Many times, the window of opportunity has closed and we will not get our question answered.

If this has happened to you, you’re not alone. Most of us are geniuses ten minutes later. Ah, the vision of hindsight! To buy yourself some extra time, try these on for size:

- » Ask permission to come back with questions that may come to your mind. Most people will agree without thinking about it and this keeps the door open to future conversations.
- » Ask, “What questions should I be asking you right now?” This may catch them off guard, yet you may get an honest response, especially if you have asked with a friendly expression on your face.
- » Use a filler phrase to keep the person talking so that you have time to think. For instance, “That’s interesting. Tell me more.”
- » Quickly survey your mind to determine if you have the Who, What, When, Where, Why answers. If not, that is the question to ask.

Usually, the worst question is the one you do not ask. Get tough. Be a genius now and ask that tough question. ❖

### Get Right, or Get Left

Vincent Ivan Phipps

How many of these clichés have you heard?

- » The squeaky wheel gets the oil.
- » Ask and you shall receive.
- » Be careful what you ask for, you just might get it.

Of course there are several others. Considering this month’s theme is asking tough questions, here is one I’d like added to the list: Ask Right, or Get Left! Never heard of it? Good, because I just made it up! Some believe that people get what they deserve. I believe that we also get what we ask for. Therefore, it is in our best interest to know how to ask.

When asking questions, there are some key guidelines to remember:

**1. Ask what you want.** If you want to know how someone will do a task you feel is impossible, instead of asking, “Can you really do that?” and getting a, “Yes,” ask, “How will this be accomplished?”

**2. Ask it easy.** Questions that are too long are harder to answer. For example, “Do you feel this method, even if it was not the original plan, will be the best for us all, considering we have never done this before, and if we do it now, we can’t begin until first quarter, but that’s only if sales are up?”

Ask that question this way, “How successful do you feel this method will be?”

**3. Ask without the nots.** Questions with the word “not” in it are confusing to answer. Try answering this question if you are very thirsty, “Would you not like something to drink?” If you say, “yes”, will you get something? If you say, “no”, will you get something? If you ask without the “not,” it is much easier to answer. Ask instead, “Would you like something to drink?”

I have often heard there is no such thing as a bad question. I disagree. There are several bad questions. Regardless of whether you feel all questions are good or if only a few are good, we can all agree that the way we ask our questions can be improved.

Some questions are harder than others. By asking tougher questions with the right techniques, it can make it easier to deliver and improve your receptivity of the answer. Asking hard questions that are poorly worded can cause you to get left behind. So remember, ask right, or get left! ❖

#### Helpful Hints

- ✓ Ask only one question at a time.
- ✓ Speak slower to show seriousness or concern.
- ✓ Pause before asking to mentally choose the right words.

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*“I keep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew); Their names are What and Why and When And How and Where and Why.”*

Rudyard Kipling

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## For Permanent & Positive Change

### Ask The Experts

Dear TLC,

I am in a position where I have to do a lot of negotiations. Sometimes I have to ask some pretty tough questions. When asking about prices, due dates, and other serious points, I tend to ramble. I am not nervous but I get excited! I get even more excited when I'm getting close to making a deal! I don't want my joy of asking too many questions to be seen as unsure or afraid. Please advise.

-Ramblin Man

Dear Ramblin,

Regardless of skill or knowledge, people will associate a fast talker as excited and a slow talker as controlled. Before your meetings, have a list of what questions you want answered. During that conversation, unanswered questions are to be used with the following approach:

1. Before asking, pause (2-3 seconds of silence).
2. Ask the question once, then stop talking.
3. Avoid restating, or asking a different question.
4. Listen for their full answer.
5. After they've stopped talking, pause again before confirming they answered you.

### Happy Birthday!

Happy Birthday to TLC clients celebrating in November:

- » George Trotti
- » Margaret Carton
- » Debbie Franke
- » Tommy Beckler
- » Brian Korkus
- » Wilson Harvey
- » Marian Adamson
- » Eric Norden
- » Paul Veraart
- » Jeff Hathcock
- » Sheila Nelson
- » Robert L. Henry
- » Tom Sutter
- » Randy Crowder

### Featured Service - Media Training

Asking and Answering the Tough Questions

Most organizations are either striving to get the attention or publicity of the media, or are frantically protecting themselves from it. The media, on the other hand, is striving to find the truth or to raise their ratings. Often, these two entities clash.

TLC has worked with government agencies, private corporations, and politicians to present their best image and message to the media. This is accomplished through a seminar or through individual coaching. TLC senior coaches have extensive experience in addressing the media through television, radio, and printed media.

The content of the training is comprised of five primary areas:

- » Staying on the Target Message
- » Handling Questions and Answers
- » Utilizing Body Language
- » Controlling the Voice
- » Projecting Confidence

All of these areas are needed for a message to be delivered convincingly and sincerely.

TLC senior coaches also have extensive experience working with those who report the news. Body language, vocal inflection and confidence are necessary for the presenter and for the reporter. Discerning the target message is important, and sometimes it can be even more important to read between the lines, or, rather, to discover what is missing between the lines. This is where asking the tough questions and being persistent and pugnacious come into play.

An October 9, 2006 article by Ann McFeathers of Ms. Magazine and entitled, "Helen Thomas-Asking the Tough Questions," quoted Thomas as saying, "We don't go into journalism to be popular. It is our job to seek the truth and put constant pressure on our leaders until we get answers."

Are you the one asking the tough questions, or are you the one fielding the tough questions? Asking TLC for the help you need is not so tough. Just give us a call today at 1-888-BECAUSE (because you always communicate)! ❖

#### Remember To

- ✓ Nod your head slowly while listening.
- ✓ Ask "what" and "how" in your questions to get more information.
- ✓ Restate the other person's answer to confirm mutual understanding.

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*"Ignorance never settles a question."*

Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield

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*"It is not every question that deserves an answer."*

Publilius Syrus

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## For Permanent & Positive Change

### Chief Executive's Opinion

Beverly Inman-Ebel, M.A., CCC-SLP

Like you, I was taught to tell the truth. Recently, I was told to lie and I dreaded the tough question that lay ahead.

I was at the DeGaul Airport in Paris and had missed the fifty-minute connection from one airline to another. That came as no surprise since I had missed the same time crunch connection on my way to Portugal just a few days before. When I asked for an earlier flight to make the connection, the airline, I had booked, would only comply if I agreed to pay an additional \$751.00, which I refused.

So, there I was at the local Customer Service counter speaking with a very helpful agent, from another airline, who empathized with my situation. For ninety minutes he was unsuccessful at reaching my booked airline and other airlines had waiting lists for flights back home. By now it was 1:00 p.m. and the traffic going west across the big pond was diminishing. Finally, the resourceful agent found me a flight on another airline with the caution, "If they ask about your luggage, you must tell them all you have is your carry-on. If they find out you have luggage in the system, they will not let you on the plane."

My carry-on consisted of a small computer case, minus the computer, brimming with gifts of ceramic tile from Portugal. As I ran to catch the shuttle to the new gate, and stood in line for an hour to get my boarding pass, I dreaded the tough question that was waiting for me.

Sure enough, as I was being questioned about why I was mid-stream in my travels without a boarding pass, I was asked, "What about your luggage? What luggage do you have?" Now, admittedly, I felt like Bill Clinton as I purposefully only answered the last of the two questions and took full advantage of the

present verb tense "do" versus the past tense "did" such as, "What luggage did you have when you started your journey?" I pointed to the micro case and said with forced confidence, "This is my luggage that I have." I was quietly praying that the French speaking woman did not catch the subtle meaning.

She commented how small it was. I truthfully reported that, as an international speaker, I travel light and had washed out underwear and shirts in my hotel bathroom. That part was the truth because my luggage was delivered to me just the night before as I got ready to leave Portugal. I was fortunate that she did not ask me to open the suitcase. After a few questions about unusual visas to unfriendly nations that were in my passport, I was given the boarding pass.

I didn't like lying. More than that, I didn't like the idea of being stuck in Paris. The terrorist alert was at the orange level that particular day. I thought the lost luggage had to do with safety. Since I knew I was not posing a threat to any airline, I felt justified in my lie of omission.

The next day, safely at home, I realized that the issue was that the airline that brought me home was financially responsible for finding my luggage. The airline that caused the problem was not held responsible. American Airlines gave me courteous customer service and reunited me with my luggage three days later. While it cost them some effort to locate the luggage, I will choose to fly American in the future.

When you get tough questions, I am not recommending that you lie, even lying by omission. I am admitting that some questions, and their answers, are difficult. Do the very best you can, for then you can live your dreams! ❖

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*"It is a good point of cunning for a man to shape the answer he would have in his own words and propositions, for it makes the other party stick the less."*

Francis Bacon

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*"Men are never so likely to settle a question rightly as when they discuss it freely."*

Thomas Babington,  
Lord Macaulay

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TLC establishes long-term relationships with our clients. If we have helped you or if you believe our approach to change would work for someone you know, please communicate with us by e-mail [tlc@talklisten.com](mailto:tlc@talklisten.com) or phone 1-888-232-2873. We work with individuals and groups on the following subject areas: attitude, listening, body language, voice, leadership, compliments and corrections, behavioral style, teamwork, effective meetings, public speaking, accent reduction and much more!

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