

# How do you get a quality answer? Now, that's a good question

Leaders will get far more useful responses if they learn the art of asking 'clean' questions.

**Heather Cairns-Lee, James Lawley and Paul Tosey** explain how to do it



Asking good questions is a vital part of being a business leader. But how can you be sure the answers someone gives accurately reflect their real thoughts? The solution we recommend is to use the principles of clean language interviewing (CLI) – an approach to asking questions aimed at eliciting authentic answers about a person's thoughts and experiences. In business, CLI is a useful tool for improving the quality of information in both formal and less structured situations.

CLI involves three principles. First, minimizing the use of the questioner's own terms and assumptions. Second, using the exact language of the person being questioned to enquire about their thoughts and experiences. And third, asking questions that give the person maximum freedom to express their answers.

You may think, "I already do that". And you might be right, but only to a degree. Even people highly experienced at asking questions rarely appreciate how much of their own views and assumptions can *unintentionally* "leak" into a question. As leaders have significant authority, this is compounded by the "acquiescence effect", whereby people respond with what they believe the questioner wants to hear.

We are all prone to asking leading questions. Biases in questions arise from three things: the questioner's own terms, their assumptions, and their value judgments. For example, suppose an employee says to their manager, "We need to take some actions to maintain quality standards", and in response, the manager asks, "What does your department need to change in order to improve?"

This question (1) introduces the manager's own terms by using the word "change" rather than enquiring about the "actions" the employee is thinking of; (2) assumes that "we" refers to the employee's department; and (3) implies a value judgment, that the department "needs to improve", which could lead to a defensive response.

What distinguishes CLI from other methods is that it removes potential biases from questions. This increases the chances that the person being questioned will contribute their own take on the matter – which could provide important knowledge and unexpressed subjective views. While

CLI's origins lie in psychotherapy, its principles and methods are widely applicable in other contexts – including business, coaching, conflict resolution, and market research. By adopting CLI techniques, people at all levels can gain better access to information they need to do their jobs to the highest standards.

## CLEANING UP YOUR QUESTIONS

Central to CLI is the use of "clean questions", which are as free as possible from the questioner's terms, assumptions and value judgments. Such questions aim at directing the interviewee's attention without ascribing meaning or suggesting answers. Creating such questions calls for following a few guidelines:

**First, use the other person's words.** Paraphrasing in follow-up questions – rewording an idea in the belief that it will make it clearer or give it more impact – is actually more likely to distort meaning and reduce understanding. Changing words changes meaning. Staying close to the exact words, including metaphors, used by someone in a conversation – respectfully and without robotic "parrotting" – preserves that person's meaning.

**Second, remove assumptions that indicate the kind of answer a questioner might be looking for.** For example, asking "How should we eliminate this problem?" presupposes that elimination is necessary. That is likely to limit the scope of a respondent's answer; when asked by someone in authority it may prove especially hard for the respondent to disagree (the "acquiescence effect"). A cleaner question would be, "And what kind of problem is that?" Using CLI does require practice to notice and reduce the assumptions that so often slip into the ways that people ask questions.

**Third, avoid conveying the questioner's opinion.** This can happen simply through expressing surprise, for example, "What's that, you're not going to meet your target!?"

## FURTHER APPLICATIONS OF CLI

The basic level use of CLI described above can be applied to almost any conversation or situation where a high quality of information is required, simply by incorporating clean questions wherever they are helpful or relevant.

CLI can be particularly useful in situations of conflict, helping a questioner

## HOW TO ASK 'CLASSICALLY CLEAN' QUESTIONS

TO FIND OUT ABOUT ...	ASK
ATTRIBUTES	And what kind of X is that X? And is there anything else about X?
LOCATIONS	And where/whereabouts is X?
RELATIONSHIPS	And when X, what happens to Y? And is X the same or different as Y?
SEQUENCES	And then what happens/what happens next? And what happens just before X?
SOURCES	And where does/could X come from?
SELF-REFLECTION	And how do you know?

CLI is easy to apply because it provides a small number of "classically clean" questions – questions that anyone can use to inquire into another person's experience. In all cases, 'X' stands for the exact word(s) used by the interviewee or person being questioned.

Of course, these are not the only clean questions you can ask. However, getting used to asking these questions will sensitize you to your own assumptions. You may also be surprised at the range of answers you receive.

Using CLI can also be a useful way of signaling that you're paying careful attention. Repeating the other's words back to them accurately shows that you are trying to understand things from their perspective rather than converting what they are saying into your way of thinking.

These questions are especially useful in following up on a person's statements to elicit further information, replacing commonly used "probe" questions. For example, try asking, "And is there anything else about X?" There usually is, and this question signals interest on the part of the questioner to find out more.

In print, these questions might appear stark. Delivered with a tone of curiosity, and more slowly than in normal speech, they offer an invitation for the person being questioned to search within themselves for their own answer.

One feature to note is that all the questions start with "And ..." This is important because it suggests that what follows will continue on from what the person being questioned has just said. Questions starting without "And..." can often be interpreted as "yes, but", implying some form of disagreement, challenge or dismissal of the interviewee's previous statement.

Also worth noting is that clean questions are not the same as open-ended questions. The idea that closed questions are bad and open questions are good has become ingrained. But from the perspective of CLI, open-ended questions are just as likely as any other kind to be "leading" through introducing the questioner's own terms, assumptions and value-judgments. The example given earlier ("What does your department need to change in order to improve?") is an open question, yet it includes all three of the biases that make it a leading one.

Source: Authors

better understand the perspectives of those involved – particularly important if they are one of the parties involved or want to maintain neutrality.

On a broader canvas, CLI principles can be applied in market research or other investigatory projects (from design and planning to the gathering of data, to analysis and reporting) to produce findings about which people can feel more confident.

CLI can be particularly useful in situations of conflict, helping a questioner better understand the perspectives of those involved – particularly important if they are one of the parties involved or want to avoid having to justify their position.

CLI is also an important tool in managing diversity. Its use in assessments, for example, can help make procedures far less susceptible to unintended forms of bias. It can enable the emergence of different perspectives, including from people with different backgrounds to the questioner. That could be people with different social or educational backgrounds, with different kinds of expertise, or from another culture or country.

## KEY TIPS FOR BUSINESS LEADERS

With the possibilities they offer for learning and enhanced self-awareness, CLI techniques are highly relevant for business leaders.

CLI is particularly useful for avoiding self-deception or confirmation bias through seeking evidence, even if subconsciously, that supports existing or preferred beliefs or theories. Instead, executives can open dialogues in which the person being addressed is enabled to speak on their own terms. When this happens, the person can search for their own ideas rather than reacting to the assumptions of their questioner.

In addition, an awareness of CLI makes it possible for people with more power to put themselves in the shoes of those less powerful. People who become fluent in asking clean language questions often gain a greater understanding of the influence that their words have on others. This can help them to avoid bias and communicate with others with genuine curiosity. ■

Further details about this method of asking questions can be found in *Clean Language Interviewing: Principles and applications for researchers and practitioners*, published by Emerald in July 2022.

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