

## Types of Questions

Since facilitation is essentially a questioning function, it's not an exaggeration to say that a facilitator is only as good as the questions they ask! Asking a weak question may send a group in the wrong direction. Failing to ask the right probing questions may result in the group not exploring issues deeply enough. For this reason advanced facilitators must be extremely skilled at asking the right question at the right time.

Before launching into any line of questioning, always asks yourself:

- *What do I want to ask?*
- *Why do I want to ask this?*
- *How might people respond?*

Regardless of the question type (open or closed) or the setting, here are some question development guidelines to consider:

- Always customize the questions to fit the context.
- Ask questions that people are capable of answering.
- Use language that's clear and unambiguous.
- Create safety before asking difficult questions.
- Stay open and avoid questions that lead people to specific conclusions.
- Ask follow-on questions that fit with the flow of the conversation.

Questions fall into a number of categories depending on what they're intended to do. In addition to the examples offered here, you will find dozens of examples of questions scattered throughout this book. Here are a few of the main categories of questions in common use:

Questions that set the context	<i>What's our goal at this meeting?</i> <i>What are your expected outcomes?</i>
Questions that invite development	<i>Can you say more?</i> <i>What else is connected to this?</i>
Questions that probe	<i>How did this start?</i> <i>Who's involved?</i> <i>What's the history of this?</i>
Questions that clarify	<i>Are you saying . . . ?</i> <i>Am I understanding that . . . ?</i>

Questions that diverge	<i>What would be the opposite of that? What would the competition do?</i>
Questions that reframe	<i>Can you say that in another way?</i>
Questions that link	<i>What else fits here? What comes to mind that is similar? When did this happen before?</i>
Questions that invite challenge	<i>Who sees it a different way? What would our competitors say?</i>
Questions that test	<i>What are the pros and cons of this? What are the main blocks and barriers?</i>
Questions that summarize	<i>What are the key ideas we can all live with? What can we say to bring closure?</i>
Questions that build buy-in	<i>What's in it for you? What do you stand to gain?</i>
Questions that overcome resistance	<i>What concerns you about this topic? What conditions or assurances will overcome those concerns?</i>

This large and complex topic deserves far more attention than can be provided given the scope of this book. For a resource devoted entirely to questioning take a look at *Questions That Work* by Dorothy Strachen (2001, ST Press) for a comprehensive overview of this essential art. There is also an excellent overview of questioning in *The Secrets of Facilitation* by Michael Wilkinson (2004, Jossey-Bass).