Questioning Skills

**Tips for Answering Questions**
Although some people get a perverse pleasure from putting others on the spot, and some try to look good in front of the boss, most people ask questions from a genuine interest. Questions do not mean you did not explain the topic well enough, but that their interest is deeper than the average audience.

Always allow time at the end of the presentation for questions. After inviting questions, do not rush ahead if no one asks a question. Pause for about 6 seconds to allow the audience to gather their thoughts. When a question is asked, repeat the question to ensure that everyone heard it (and that you heard it correctly). When answering, direct your remarks to the entire audience. That way, you keep everyone focused, not just the questioner. To reinforce your presentation, try to relate the question back to the main points.

Make sure you listen to the question being asked. If you do not understand it, ask them to clarify. Pause to think about the question as the answer you give may be correct, but ignore the main issue. If you do not know the answer, be honest, do not waffle. Tell them you will get back to them...and make sure you do!

Answers that last 10 to 40 seconds work best. If they are too short, they seem abrupt; while longer answers appear too elaborate. Also, be sure to keep on track. Do not let off-the-wall questions sidetrack you into areas that are not relevant to the presentation.

If someone takes issue with something you said, try to find a way to agree with part of their argument. For example, "Yes, I understand your position..." or "I'm glad you raised that point, but..." The idea is to praise their point and agree with them. Audiences sometimes tend to think of "us verses you." You do not want to risk alienating them.

**Tips for Asking Questions**
Use words that convey your message. When talking, be sure the words you choose are clear and straightforward. Fancy phrases and long or strange words might be impressive, but they do not necessarily lead to clear communication.

Repeat if necessary, but stop talking once you've made your point. Many questioners repeat themselves unnecessarily, long after their speakers have caught on.

**Traits of Strategic Questions**
A strategic question:
1. Creates motion -- Gears to "How can we move?"
2. Creates options -- Instead of "Why don't you ..?", asks "Where would you ...?"
3. Digs deeper -- "What needs to be changed?" "What is the meaning of this?"
4. Avoids "why."
5. Avoids "yes" and "no" questions -- These leave the presenter in a passive or uncreative state.
6. Empowers -- "What would you like to do?"
7. Asks the unaskable questions.

Examples of Powerful Questions to Ask
1. How important is this?
2. Where do you feel stuck?
3. What is the intent of what you're saying?
4. What can we do for you?
5. What do you think the problem is?
6. What's your role in this issue?
7. What have you tried so far? What worked? What didn't?
8. Have you experienced anything like this before? (If so, what did you do?)
9. What can you do for yourself?
10. What do you hope for?
11. What's preventing you from ..."
12. What would you be willing to give up for that?
13. If you could change one thing, what would it be?
14. Imagine a point in the future where your issue is resolved. How did you get there?
15. What would you like us to ask?
16. What have you learned?

Asking questions more "open-endedly."
In order to coordinate our life and work with the lives and work of other people, we all need to know more of what other people are feeling and thinking, wanting, and planning. But our usual "yes/no" questions actually tend to shut people up rather than opening them up. You can encourage your conversation partners to share more of their thoughts and feelings by asking "open-ended" rather than "yes/no" questions. Open-ended questions allow for a wide range of responses. For example, asking "How did you like that food/movie/speech/doctor, etc.?" will evoke a more detailed response than "Did you like it?" (which could be answered with a simple "yes" or "no").

When you are under time pressure, it is tempting to push people to make "yes-no" decisions. But pressing forward without addressing people's concerns has played a key role in many on-the-job accidents and catastrophes (such as the Challenger Space Shuttle explosion).

Some examples of open-ended questions that could be helpful in solving problems in a way that meets more of everyone's needs, getting to know and understand the people around you better, and simply creating richer and more satisfying conversations.
EXAMPLES OF OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS:

"How comfortable are you with Plan B?"

"How could I modify this proposal to meet more of your requirements?"

"What kind of information do you need in order to go forward?"

"What do you think about ... moving the office to Boston?"
(rather than "Is it OK with you if we...?"

"How are you feeling about all of this?"

"How ready are you to ...?"
(rather than "Are you ready to ...?")

**Asking questions more creatively.**

What sort of questions are truly worth asking? When we ask questions we are using a powerful language tool to focus conversational attention and guide our interaction with others. But many of the questions we have learned to ask are totally fruitless and self-defeating (such as, boss to employee when a mistake is made, "Why????!! Why have you done this to us????!!!"). In general it will be more fruitful to ask "how" questions about the future rather than "why" questions about the past, but there are many more creative possibilities. Of the billions of questions we might ask, not all are equally fruitful or illuminating; not all are equally helpful in solving problems together.

Question-asking in everyday life. As we wrestle with each new challenge in life, we ask ourselves and others a continuous stream of questions. Question-asking is one of the main ways that we try to get a grip on whatever is going on, but we are usually not very conscious of the quality of questions we ask.

"Why are you always such a jerk?"
or...
"How could we work together to solve this problem?"

As noted above, not all questions are of equal value. Many are a waste of effort but a few can be amazingly helpful. Learning to ask conscious, fruitful questions of others, of oneself, and about one's situation or task at hand, is an important part of the training of many professionals. Specifically, engineers must ask deeply penetrating questions (saving lives may be dependent on the answer) in order to apply a body of knowledge to solve problems in a way that respects the unique elements of each new situation, person, piece of land, broken leg, canyon to be bridged, and so on.