

## **Q**uestioning techniques

Communication is one of the most important competences for any facilities manager. Engaging effectively with key stakeholders – who may be customers, suppliers, staff or senior management – requires a solid understanding of their needs and wants, their priorities and their concerns. Active listening requires mastery of a number of techniques, including the use of questions.

Understanding how to apply different questioning techniques in different circumstances can greatly increase the effectiveness of communication, particularly in one-on-one situations like interviews, customer meetings or performance reviews.

Among the most effective questioning techniques is the use of open and closed questions. A closed question usually receives a single-word response or very short, factual answer and is useful in fact finding (How many cleaners were on site today?) or to help decision making (Do we agree to accept this tender?).

Open questions elicit longer answers and usually begin with what, why or how. An open question asks the respondent about their knowledge, opinion or feelings and will help to gather detail (What else happened on the day of the accident?) or to explore ideas (How can we cut costs without reducing service?).

“Funnelling” is a very useful technique in interview situations. By starting with a closed question (Are you happy with our service?) and then introducing more open questions (In what way could we improve? Why is that a problem for you?), the conversation can be directed towards more valuable information that can be verified with closed questioning (Would a change of delivery times be more convenient?). This is the same process used by the police when interviewing subjects and can reveal information that would not have been discovered in a less structured conversation.

Probing questions (Why do you need umbrellas?) can form a useful part of this process and are another useful strategy for finding out more detail (How long has the roof been leaking?) and for exploring the thoughts and feelings that lie behind a situation. Asking why something is so (Why do you want to resign?) may provide a better understanding of the other party’s position, which will help when it comes to adjusting actions accordingly.

The use of clarification (Do you mean that your chair has actually broken?) and summarising (This is what I am going to do. Is that correct?) questions is particularly helpful for those who work in front line service roles such as an FM help desk.

Questions are a powerful way of learning, building relationships, avoiding misunderstandings and dealing with difficult situations. However, a good questioning technique also requires good listening skills to ensure that the other party has enough time to answer and that their answers are properly understood before action is taken.

*The Sunday Times* has published a range of useful books on a variety of communications skills, which include practical advice on questioning techniques. These include “Successful Interviewing” by Rob Yeung, ISBN 0749451645, and “Improve Your Communication Skills” by Alan Barker, ISBN 0749448229.