

■ SMALL QUESTIONS. BIG REVEALS.

WHOEVER ASKS, LEADS

How to get real
answers out of people

DESIGN INFINITY

E-BOOK



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Hello, It's Harper

Tuesday, 10:42. The phone rings. Unknown number.

YOU Hello?

VOICE Hi, Harper here. So I've been looking at what we discussed, and I think the second date would work better for us. I just need you to confirm it today so I can pass it on.

YOU Oh... sure.

Sure. You said "sure". You have absolutely no idea who Harper is, what you discussed, what the first date was, let alone the second one. But he sounds so confident that not knowing feels rude.

So you start investigating. Quietly, on the fly, like a detective without a licence. Is it the insurance guy? The gas company? The parent of your kid's classmate? You agree to something you don't understand, promise a "confirmation" without knowing what it contains, and after hanging up you spend a good minute staring at the wall.

Now the same call again. Just with one extra sentence:

VOICE ...I just need you to confirm it today.

YOU Sorry, I didn't catch where you're calling from?

VOICE Oh, sorry. Harper, from Westside Garage. About your tyre change.

Mystery solved. No investigating, no blind nodding. One question, and the conversation went back to where it should have started.

■ You don't have to rescue every conversation

Most of us carry one quiet reflex: when a conversation gets stuck, it's our fault and our job to fix it. Someone speaks vaguely, so we guess what they mean. Someone criticises us, so we defend ourselves. Someone wants something from us, so we explain why it won't work. And we do all of it quickly, because silence is awkward, isn't it?

But it isn't always your job to rescue a badly run conversation. If someone hasn't said who they are, you don't have to guess. If someone makes a claim, you don't have to disprove it. You can simply ask what it's based on. And if someone wants something from you, first find out what it actually is.

You don't always need the perfect answer ready. Sometimes it's enough to ask the right question and let the other person finally explain what they actually want.

■ The rules of the game

This book isn't about winning against people. It won't teach you to humiliate anyone, trip them up or pull out of them something that isn't yours to have. It will teach you three humbler and far more useful things: **getting clarity, protecting your own boundaries and not letting yourself be manipulated.**

You'll find tactical phrasing here, pauses, questions handed back and subtle psychological moves. But you'll always have a completely direct and truthful version at hand as well. There's a big difference between a polite shortcut and a lie, and we'll stay on the right side of it.

And one honest thing right at the start: no question works like a magic spell. People aren't answer vending machines. A good question simply gives you a much better chance that the conversation will move in the right direction.

■ How to use this book

Each of the eight chapters gives you one new skill. In each you'll find several real-life situations, and we'll take every one of them apart the same way:

- **The situation** you'll recognise.
- **The knee-jerk reaction** most of us have before we've had time to think.
- **A smarter reply** you can use straight away.
- **Why it can work**, meaning what's actually going on in the conversation.
- **Watch out for**, because even a good question can come out wrong.
- **Try it today**, a small task to test it out.

At the end there's a bonus: 25 lines that change the direction of a conversation. Feel free to print it or take a photo of it.

CHAPTER 01

01

Who's at the Wheel?

How questions change the dynamics of a conversation

Think of a conversation as a car ride. Whoever asks the questions is holding the wheel. Whoever answers sits next to them and reads out the directions. Both are fine. The trouble starts when you slide into the passenger seat automatically, even when you don't have to.

■ Answering or leading?

All it takes is someone saying something with a faintly accusing undertone, and we know exactly what to do: explain, justify, set the record straight. At school we learned that questions get answered, ideally at once and correctly. But an adult conversation isn't a test.

The person answering gives away information, defends themselves and reacts to someone else's framing. The person asking clarifies that framing. It isn't about who "wins". It's about not having to stand at the blackboard every time someone else picks up the chalk.

■ Not every sentence is a request for an explanation

Someone asks you a question that isn't really a question at all. It's a task wrapped in a question mark. "You still haven't sent it?" doesn't actually mean they want to hear your day hour by hour. And "That's an odd decision" isn't an invitation to defend your thesis.

Many remarks are just probes. People throw a line out and wait to see what happens. If you start explaining straight away, you signal that you owe an explanation. Sometimes you don't.

■ How to sharpen a vague claim

Some of the most powerful questions in English are only a word or two long: *Meaning? In what way? How so? When?* A vague claim is like fog. Almost anything can hide in it. A short clarifying question doesn't blast through the fog. It just shines a light into it.

■ Curiosity, not interrogation

Between "What do you mean?" and "What do you mean?!" lies one exclamation mark. And the difference between a conversation and a row. The same sentence can sound like genuine interest, like irony or like a challenge to a duel. Tone, pace and expression decide. Before you ask, check whether you really care about the answer. If you do, it will be heard.

SITUATION 1.1

The meeting and "you should have done it differently"

THE SITUATION

In a meeting you sum up how you handled a client's complaint. A colleague leans back and announces: "Well, you should have done that differently." Everyone turns to look at you.

× THE KNEE-JERK REACTION

“But I did it like that because...” followed by a five-minute defence. The result? You look unsure, your colleague looks like the expert, and nobody has found out what exactly he would have done.

A SMARTER REPLY

“Differently how?”

“What would you have done?”

WHY IT CAN WORK

Your colleague delivered a verdict with no content. The question invites him to supply the content. Either he comes up with a sensible idea and you learn something, or he realises he has none. Either way, you haven't defended something nobody actually challenged.

WATCH OUT FOR

Said with a smirk and folded arms, it sounds like a challenge to a duel. Ask calmly, with genuine interest, as if you expect a good idea. You might well get one.

□ TRY IT TODAY

When you hear a verdict with no content today (“that’s weird”, “that’s not quite it”), ask “In what way?” and just listen.

SITUATION 1.2

Sunday lunch without you

THE SITUATION

Your mum calls: “Well, we had lunch on our own again. Never mind, we’re used to it.”

× THE KNEE-JERK REACTION

An avalanche of explanations. Work, the kids, being tired, the car in the garage. The more reasons, the more it sounds like excuses, and the worse you both feel.

A SMARTER REPLY

“Did you miss us?”

“Would you like us to agree on a regular date?”

WHY IT CAN WORK

Behind a reproach there is often a very simple wish: I want to see you. Explaining deals with the reproach. A question deals with the wish. Once the other person can say it out loud, the reproach loses its point.

WATCH OUT FOR

“Did you miss us?” with a sarcastic drawl is pouring oil on the fire. Do you mean it? Then say it like you mean it. And if you don’t want a regular date, don’t offer one.

□ TRY IT TODAY

Think of the last reproach you heard from someone close to you. What wish might have been hiding behind it? Write it down in one sentence.

SITUATION 1.3

“How much were you hoping to get?”

THE SITUATION

You’re selling a bike through an online ad. A buyer looks it over and asks: “So how much were you hoping to get for it?” Even though the price is in the ad.

× THE KNEE-JERK REACTION

“Well... it’s in the ad, but I could go down a bit, maybe by twenty?”

You’ve just negotiated yourself a discount before the other person has even opened their mouth.

A SMARTER REPLY

“The price is in the ad. What did you have in mind?”

“How much were you hoping for” often works as a probe to see if you’ll waver. Answering with a question hands the decision back to the person who has to make it. Now it’s up to them to name an offer.

WATCH OUT FOR

Handing the question back is fair when your position is already on the table. If you never stated a price and kept bouncing every question back, it would look like dodging. Ping-pong for its own sake bores everyone.

□ TRY IT TODAY

Notice a moment today when you started negotiating with yourself before the other person had offered anything.

SITUATION 1.4

“You’re being weird today”

THE SITUATION

An evening in the kitchen. Your partner watches you for a moment and then says: “You’re being weird today.”

✗ THE KNEE-JERK REACTION

“I’m not weird!” Or the opposite version: frantically searching for what you did wrong and apologising for something you can’t even name.

A SMARTER REPLY

“Weird how?”

“What did you notice?”

WHY IT CAN WORK

“Weird” can mean anything from “you’re quiet” to “you’ve had your hair done”. A clarifying question turns a fuzzy label into a concrete observation, and observations can be talked about. A label can only be guessed at.

WATCH OUT FOR

It's all about tone. "Weird how?" said with curiosity invites a conversation. Said sharply, it sounds like "don't you dare say that again". Try both versions out loud and you'll hear the difference yourself.

□ TRY IT TODAY

Say one question in three tones today: curious, tired and sarcastic. Then choose the one you actually want to use.

KEY IDEA

A question gives you room to think and stops you automatically taking responsibility for the whole conversation.

CHAPTER 02

02

Sorry, I Didn't Catch That...

Quietly getting the information you're missing

Remember Harper from the introduction? We meet plenty of Harpers. Not all of them phone. Some write e-mails full of acronyms, others refer to meetings we don't remember, and still others ask for our details without saying why.

They have one thing in common: you're missing information and you're embarrassed to ask for it. So you guess. But guessing is the most expensive way to get information, because when you guess wrong, you're the one who pays.

■ Politeness isn't subservience

Being polite means speaking with respect. Being subservient means pretending you understand just so the other person won't feel uncomfortable. The first is a virtue, the second a bad habit. A person who calls you without saying who they are has broken the rules of conversation, not you. You don't need to cover for it or find clever ways around it.

■ Didn't catch it. Really?

“Sorry, I didn’t catch...” is a little bit of diplomatic grease. The other person doesn’t have to admit a mistake and you don’t have to apologise at length. But it’s fair to say one thing out loud: if you didn’t miss anything, because they never said it, this is a polite shortcut, not a fact. Most people take it that way and it harms no one. If it doesn’t sit right with you, you always have a completely truthful version at hand. You’ll see it in the very first situation.

SITUATION 2.1

Harper calls again

THE SITUATION

The caller gives only a surname and talks as if you’d had coffee together yesterday: “Hello, Novak here. So how’s that order looking?”

✗ THE KNEE-JERK REACTION

You stall and wait for a clue: “Well, I’m still... working on it.” You risk promising something to a completely different person than you think.

A SMARTER REPLY

“Sorry, I didn’t catch which company you’re calling from?”

Completely truthful version: “I caught your name, but I don’t know which company you’re with.”

WHY IT CAN WORK

Both versions bring the conversation back to the missing information without forcing you to apologise. The first offers the other person a graceful exit (“I must have said it too fast”). The second is direct and just as polite. In both cases most people simply fill in who they are.

WATCH OUT FOR

Don’t say “I didn’t catch that” three times in one call. By then it sounds like mockery. And don’t play hard of hearing when something serious is at stake, such as a contract. There, say it straight: “Before we go on, I need to know who I’m speaking to and what this is about.”