



UPEN Mentoring Programme

Guidance Note 3:

Asking Questions

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August 2026

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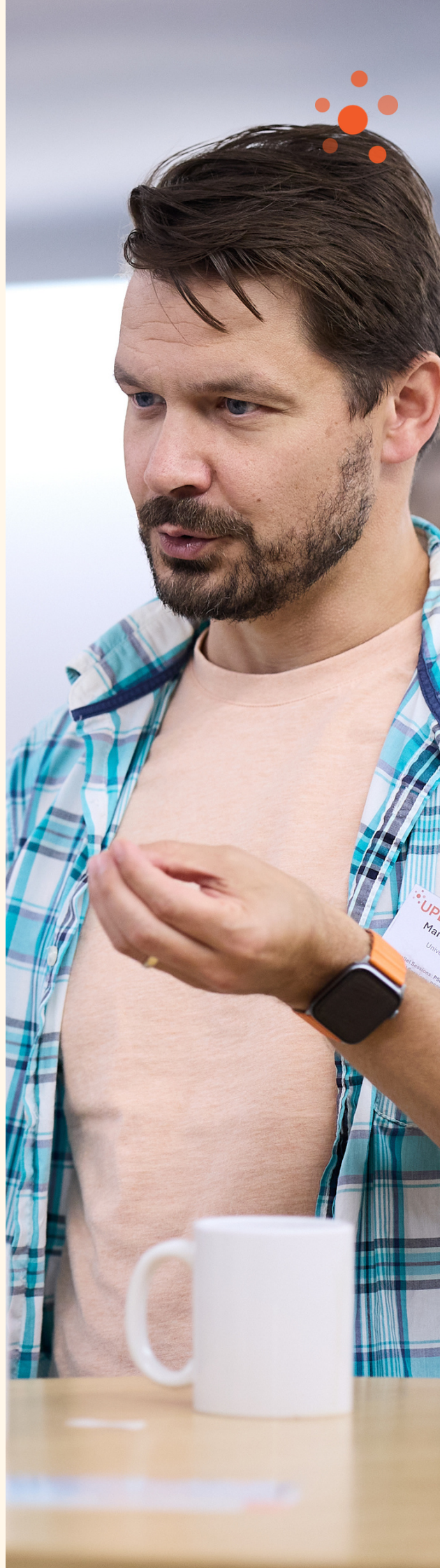
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Overview

Asking questions is something we do all the time in many different contexts. Questioning is a useful and powerful tool that should be deployed carefully in the mentoring process. When used well, questions can support and prompt in a positive manner, building trust and developing the mentees' personal skills. If used inappropriately, questions can emphasise the power imbalance between mentor and mentee/s, narrow down discussion, and lead to the mentor dominating sessions.

There are many different types of questions and mentors should consider the reasons behind the questions posed by mentees and reflect on the reasons mentors may ask questions. Meaning behind the question can be as important as the question itself.

As mentors we would like to ask questions that **help mentees develop**, identify strengths and weaknesses, as well as invite the mentee to challenge perceptions. Within the policy engagement community, the **art of questioning is a key skill** which, when deployed effectively, can enhance the relationship and help to **build a shared understanding** of the field.

Types of questions

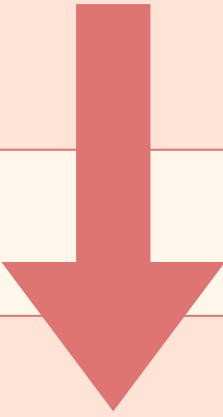
Being aware of the different types of questions we ask as mentors can help to build trust in the mentoring relationship and avoid slipping into hierarchical power dynamics. Taking a moment to reflect on the nature of the question you are asking can be a valuable tool in creating a shared environment. This may be particularly appropriate in UPEN group sessions.

“Having the self-awareness and flexibility to [...] seek the right question modes can enhance engagement, teamwork and collective creativity – all of which are related to higher productivity and team performance.”

David Clutterbuck, 2016



The five modes of questions devised by David Clutterbuck (2016) illustrates the different types of questions we use in a variety of settings.

The Fives Modes of Questioning ¹	Power dynamic	Examples
1. Questioning to demonstrate superiority or undermine	Hierarchical or ego driven	You really thought that would work, did you? Seems obvious that wouldn't work, why did you do it that way?
2. Questioning to elicit specific information		Can you tell me what exactly you did to complete the project? Who was involved and what was the timeframe?
3. Questioning for self-curiosity		I'm fascinated with how you solved that problem; can you take me through it step by step?
4. Questioning for other-curiosity		What other angles or approaches can you think of to deal with the task?
5. Seeking the right question.	Collaborative or reflective	What question would be really helpful for you right now?

In the mentoring relationship, mentors should seek to avoid asking questions that demonstrate superiority or dominance and consider questions that prompt reflection and build a shared relationship.

This means carefully considering the type of questioning you are asking and shifting towards more collaborative or reflective styles, and away from directive or hierarchical approaches. This way the mentee can be empowered to seek solutions themselves or together with their mentor.

¹ David Clutterbuck (2016) [Five modes of questioning](#)



Open questions

As mentors, you should try as far as possible to favour open questions rather than closed ones. Open questions encourage mentees to expand on a topic or a feeling and to explore it in greater depth.

Some examples of useful open questions for your mentoring relationship are:

- Tell me about your experience of...
- How do you feel about...
- What were your reasons for...
- What are your next steps?
- Describe your relationships at work?
- How did you get to where you are?
- What key challenges do you face in your role?
- What are your career goals over the next three years?

These general questions can be shaped towards the policy engagement field as you develop the relationship with your mentee/s.





The Five Cs

Another way to think about open questions is to group them around 5 Cs². This is a particularly helpful model for dealing with a single task or complex issue which may have multiple options associated with it.

1. Challenges	An issue or problem the mentee is currently facing.	Where are you now? Where would you like to be? What is your most pressing challenge?
2. Choices	The options available for addressing the challenge.	What are your options? What are the pros and cons of each option?
3. Consequences	The consequences of choosing one option over another, or of not doing anything.	Describe the impact of each option? Positive and negative. Explore how attractive each option feels.
4. Creative solutions	Other potential solutions that the mentor and mentee might discuss as options.	Step back and reflect. Consider best practice and elements of all options. Has the mentee been in a similar situation?
5. Conclusions	A decision about what to do next and a commitment to act.	Explore options. Is help required? What would success look like? Are there gaps in knowledge? etc. Rate your desire to pursue this option, and rate the possibility of success on a scale of 1-10

² The 5 Cs model was designed by Mike Pegg (see *The Art of Mentoring* 2006 and *The Mentor's Book* 2003) and also see [Exploring career mentoring and coaching](#), The Open University and [Being a mentor: a guide for researchers](#) by the University of Edinburgh.



Asking effective questions

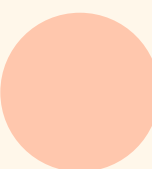
These tips can help you ask more effective questions:

- Be mindful of the power dynamic between mentor and mentee
- Continually using closed questions will restrict the discussion, resulting in the mentee saying less and the mentor asking more
- Open questions, that start with 'How?' 'Where?' 'What?' 'Who?', build trust
- Prompt reflection from your mentee: 'How do you feel about this option?' 'What support may you need?'
- Use a range of question types to get your mentee to reflect, elaborate, justify, and explore their thinking

Being able to formulate and ask the right questions is a key skill for an effective mentor. An appropriately phrased question could unlock new ideas, challenge limiting assumptions, and bring about new insights. Good questions in mentoring are simple and generally require open ended responses (in contrast to closed questions which require yes or no responses).³

If you are particularly interested in questioning techniques for mentoring, coaching and in other situations, take a look at the Socratic method in the Resources section.

Offering constructive feedback



As a mentor, you may be involved in providing feedback to your mentee if:

- Your mentee asks you directly for feedback on their work or professional activities
- During mentoring discussions, you spot an opportunity to offer feedback

In the second case, be careful to first ask the mentee if they would like some feedback. In most instances, the mentee will welcome your feedback, but providing unsolicited feedback during a discussion can break the mentee's concentration or complicate the matter under discussion.

³ Another popular 5 C model can be found in these [5 tips for asking better questions](#) by Xenia Wickett TEDxAISB Youth.



BOOST for feedback

The mnemonic BOOST can help you to ensure your feedback is constructive for your mentee⁴.

Balanced: Focus not only on areas for development, but also on strengths.

Observed: Provide feedback based only upon behaviours that you have observed.

Objective: Avoid judgements and relate your feedback to the observed behaviours, not personality.

Specific: Back up your comments with specific examples of the observed behaviour.

Timely: Give feedback soon after the activity to allow the mentee the opportunity to reflect on the learning.

Effective questioning in policy engagement settings

The UPEN mentoring programme places policy engagement specialists with mentees to guide and support capacity building in the field. It may be that mentees within this context ask many questions of their mentors to help to develop their own skills.

For example, questions such as ‘how did you approach this task?’ or ‘who should I approach to assist me?’ may lean on the experience and expertise of mentors in the policy engagement field.

That said, prompting and nudging mentees towards seeking their own solutions and building confidence to engage with policymakers, support academic researchers and so on can be achieved by effective and thoughtful open questioning.

“Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers.”

Voltaire

⁴ NHS leadership programme Effective mentoring a resource and guide for mentors



References

- David Clutterbuck's 2016 [Five modes of questioning](#)
- Short video from the [Royal Society of Arts on empathy](#)
- Really helpful material from the University of Edinburgh on [asking questions](#)
- NHS leadership programme includes [Effective mentoring: A resource and guide for mentors](#)
- Katie Colombus' *How to Listen: Tools for opening up conversations when it matters most*, The Samaritans, 2021, Octopus
- The Mentoring School has a helpful piece on [the power of imperfection](#)
- [Exploring career mentoring and coaching](#), The Open University.
- For those interested in finding out more about the Socratic method of questioning [see this piece by the TES](#) and [this video from The Right Questions](#)
- [The UCL mentoring handbook](#) has good sections on listening and questioning plus a helpful template for a consensual contract
- [5 tips for asking better questions](#) by Xenia Wickett TEDx [video]

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About UPEN

Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) is a central space for academics, policy actors, and professional services staff who undertake and support academic-policy engagement. We champion academic policy engagement to strengthen evidence-informed policymaking in the UK.

UPEN is hosted by University College London (UCL), with co-chairs located at UCL, University of Huddersfield and University of Leeds.

UPEN Programmes

This report was produced as part of UPEN Programmes. UPEN Programmes is led by UCL in partnership with the Universities of Birmingham, Cambridge, Durham, Huddersfield, Leeds, Nottingham Trent, Southampton, and Teesside, and the Wales Centre for Public Policy at Cardiff University and Insights North East. Additional key collaborators include the Institute for Community Studies, the Institute for Government, and Yorkshire Universities.

UPEN Programmes is funded from 2025-2028 by Research England, ESRC, and UKRI.

