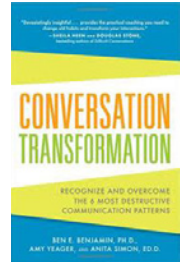# Question Traps

Excerpted and adapted from *Conversation Transformation: Recognize and Overcome the 6 Most Destructive Communication Patterns* by Ben Benjamin, Amy Yeager, and Anita Simon

The only thing more dramatic than Ricardo Garza's rise to success and influence was the speed with which it all seemed to be falling apart. Ricardo had been the pride of the HG Biotech sales division, a superstar with an entrepreneurial spirit, keen intuition, and a wealth of creative ideas. Given his outstanding performance as an account executive in Latin America, he'd been the natural choice to lead the company's push to develop a major new market in Europe. He was quickly promoted to sales director and charged with assembling a team to manage this initiative.

At first, there was every indication that Ricardo would excel in his new role. His reputation and charisma helped him attract an impressive group of talented, independent-minded managers—entrepreneurial mavericks much like himself. These executives respected Ricardo's accomplishments, and also liked him as a person. Some considered him a friend. Together, they should have made an unstoppable team. None of them would have imagined that after just six weeks, more than half the group would be threatening to quit, placing the whole initiative (not to mention Ricardo's career) in jeopardy.

What went wrong? To Ricardo, it seemed clear that the managers he'd hired were unwilling to accept direction from him. It's not that he was looking for blind followers; on the contrary, he'd made it clear to the team that he valued everyone's input and wanted open dialogue. However, he did need some cooperation in order to get things done, and all these people did was argue with him. The managers themselves saw the situation quite differently. While they still liked Ricardo personally, they experienced him as a dominating and controlling leader. In theory he might want collaboration, but in practice he just pushed through his own agenda.

Knowing that something needed to change, and change quickly, Ricardo called in Claude Marchessault, a leadership coach who'd worked with other executives in the company. When Claude sat in on one of the team's meetings, he saw exactly how they were getting derailed.

For the first fifteen minutes, Ricardo was the only one who spoke. Prior to the meeting, he had drawn up a diagram showing several different market segments, together with strategic business alliances the team was developing in those areas. Now he circled a spot on the diagram, saying, "This is where our main focus needs to be, yes?" After a momentary pause, he went on, "Here's what's happening with these customers…" Ricardo proceeded to give a detailed analysis, stopping periodically to ask, "Isn't that right?" Primarily he addressed the group as a whole, but every so often he'd turn to one individual and ask, "Don't you think?" or "Wouldn't you agree?" Receiving no response, he'd say, "Okay, then" and continue talking.

Only when Ricardo had finished and sat down did the other team members speak up. All of their comments pointed out problems with what their leader had said: "That's what we thought a week ago, but it's not quite accurate." "Sure, you've identified one important point of focus, but there are several oth-

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ers you haven't considered." "What you're saying applies to our traditional alliances, but some of our new partnerships don't fit that mold."

As Claude observed these interactions, it was easy to see why the managers saw Ricardo as domineering, as well as why he saw them as rejecting his leadership. It was also easy to see which dysfunctional communication pattern lay at the root of their problems.

Leading Questions— A Question and Answer All Rolled Into One

The managers contributed to the communication breakdown by *yes-butting*—giving a token agreement ("That's what we thought" or "Sure") followed by a different, competing idea. (We discuss yes-buts at length in Chapter 3 of *Conversation Transformation*.) But what was it that triggered this arguing? What was their leader doing?

What Ricardo Garza intended to do was facilitate an open dialogue. Often a good way to do that is to ask questions, and he did ask quite a few. The problem was the types of questions he asked: "Yes?" "Isn't that right?" "Don't you agree?" All of these questions encourage competition, rather than collaboration, because all of them are *leading*.

Most people find leading questions extremely frustrating. When someone uses this type of communication, they're doing two different things at once: giving their own opinion and asking you for a response. The opinion tells you that the "right" or expected response is to agree with their opinion. Suppose your aunt says,

"Aren't these fruitcakes delicious?" Her opinion is "These fruitcakes are delicious," and the expected response is yes. Or maybe your manager says, "It won't be a problem for you to work overtime today, will it?" Clearly the expected response is no.

In addition to the problems they create on the receiving end, leading questions also cause trouble for the people who use them. Typically this type of communication happens unconsciously. In our training and coaching, we hear a lot of people use leading questions, and in almost every case, they have no idea they're doing it. Often they sincerely want an honest response, and they're dismayed to realize that people feel pressured to agree with them. This type of pressure tends to provoke one of two opposing reactions: defiance or compliance. The managers in our opening story became defiant, asserting their divergent viewpoints with yes-buts. A compliant response—agreeing inauthentically, because that's what seems to be expected—can be even more problematic.

> Leading questions have two components embedded within them:
>
> • An opinion
>
> • A question
>
> The opinion makes it clear what the "right" response to the question is.

The compliance elicited by leading questions may be particularly damaging for individuals in leadership positions, who are already at risk of not getting truthful information. As the authors of *Primal Leadership* explain, high-level leaders are often subject to *CEO disease*: "the information vacuum around a leader created when people withhold important (and usually unpleasant) information."[1] Business leaders can be intimidating, simply because of their position and power (including their power over the jobs of their em-

ployees). It's no wonder people are afraid to disappoint or upset them. This same effect can happen in any situation where one person has more power or authority than the other— for example, with a doctor and patient, parent and child, or teacher and student.

Leading questions exacerbate this problem. Imagine that a CEO asks his manufacturing team, "You're all set to meet this customer's deadline, right?" Who wants to be the one to say, "No, we're running three weeks behind"? If nobody has the nerve to give the "wrong" answer, there may be serious negative consequences for the team, the customer, the leader, and the organization as a whole.

The combination of leading questions and compliance masks conflicts, rather than resolving them. In the short term, the communication may seem highly efficient—people reach decisions quickly, without any debates or disagreements. The problem is that if those decisions aren't based on reality, they're not sustainable over the long term. They may also generate resentment, leading to a lack of follow-through or even outright sabotage of supposedly agreed-upon ideas. Leaders who mistake forced agreement for true consensus may get a nasty shock when the plans they pushed through start falling to pieces.

One final drawback with compelling agreement through leading questions is that it discourages innovation and imagination. When you block the free flow of ideas, it's difficult for new, creative solutions to emerge.

Although leading questions are generally counterproductive, in some situations they serve an im-

1. Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 93. The term *CEO disease* originally appeared in an article in *Business Week*: John A. Byrne, William C. Symonds, and Julia Flynn Siler, "CEO Disease," *Business Week,* April 1, 1991: 52–59.

portant purpose. One clear example is legal cross-examination. Think of the courtroom dialogue in *Perry Mason*, *Law and Order*, and other legal dramas. Hostile witnesses frequently face aggressive barrages of questions, like "Isn't it true that Mrs. Johnson filed for a restraining order against you? Isn't it true that you wanted her dead? You went to her house that night, didn't you?" In this situation, leading questions suit the lawyer's purpose perfectly. The implied "right" answer is exactly what they want the jury to hear.

Don't All Questions Lead?

The short answer is yes. To some extent, all questions lead by pointing in a certain direction. You can think of a question as a funnel, channeling information into a conversation. Different types of questions create different types of funnels. (See the sidebar "Four Types of Questions.")

The largest possible funnel is a broad question. If you ask your co-worker, "What are your thoughts about the upcoming merger?" you're defining the topic of discussion (the merger) but you aren't putting any limits on what they might say about that topic. Even the somewhat narrower question "What do you think is the greatest challenge we face with the merger?" is still broad, since there are any number of opinions the person could give in reply.

A narrow question such as, "Do you think the merger is a good idea?" or "When will the merger be announced publicly?" provides a much smaller funnel. The possible answers are now strictly limited—in these cases, to either yes or no, or to an isolated piece of data. With a leading question, the funnel is even smaller. When you ask, "Aren't you nervous about the merger?" or

"Don't you think it's a good move for the company?" you leave room for only one acceptable answer: agreeing with you. (The alternative is to disagree and risk a confrontation.) With some leading questions and all righteous questions (like "Can you believe they let this happen?!"), you're not asking for an answer at all. Essentially, the funnel is completely blocked.

The ability to use questions to set the direction of a conversation is an essential leadership skill. For instance, if you're trying to encourage people to think creatively and generate new ideas, you'll want to use plenty of broad questions. If you're trying to pin down specific pieces

of data, you'll want to use narrow questions. And most of the time, if you want to get an honest, straightforward answer, you'll want to avoid asking questions that are leading or righteous.

Transformation Skill: Taking the Push Out of Your Questions

All of us ask questions, and all of us sometimes fail to get accurate information. Often the most important information we can receive is something we don't want to hear: a disagreement with our ideas, challenge to our perspective, or objection to our plans. If you find that you frequently don't get that

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Four Types of Questions

The questions that people ask fall into four general categories. Only the first two (broad and narrow) serve the real purpose of a question: asking for new information. The other two (leading and righteous) take the form of a question, but have entirely different effects on a conversation.

1. Broad questions: Open-ended questions that invite others' thoughts, conclusions, opinions, or proposals.

What's the best way to reduce our debt? How do you think we should respond to this applicant? How should we spend our next vacation? Why do you think those problems keep happening? Where could we find the money to fund this program?

2. Narrow questions: Direct, specific questions asking for yes/no, either/or, or short factual answers.

Do you think this is a good idea? Is it shorter to go by route I-95 or the turnpike? Which of these two products is cheaper to produce? How many people will be in the class? Who was the seventh President of the United States?

3. Leading questions: Opinions in question form, implicitly seeking agreement rather than new information—or, in some cases, seeking no answer at all.

Isn't this a great plan? It's really hot today, isn't it? Do you really think that? Don't you think he's the best candidate? Wouldn't you rather have breakfast before we go out?

4. Righteous questions: Attacks in question form, expressing blame, indignation, or outrage.

Do you think I like working day and night? Do you ever think of anyone but yourself? Does he have any idea how stupid he sounds? What's the matter with you? What were you thinking?!

type of information, the strategies we're about to describe may be important for you to learn.

Transformation Step 1: Self-awareness. To stop yourself from asking leading questions, you first need to have an awareness of them. Read through the "Spotting Leading Questions" sidebar and see if you recognize any expressions that you tend to use frequently (like "Don't you think?" or "Wouldn't you say?" or "Right?"). If you're not sure, we recommend that you ask someone who's close to you, and whom you trust to tell you the truth—someone who isn't reluctant to give you difficult feedback (as a subordinate employee might be).

For instance, you might ask a coworker, "When I ask for your reactions to my ideas, do you feel like I'm open to hearing your opinions, or do you feel pressure to agree with me?" Or you might ask your spouse, "When we're making plans and I ask what you want to do, do I come across as really wanting to hear your answer? Does it ever feel like I just want you to do what I want to do?" Be sure to avoid asking leading questions such as "You tell me the truth, don't you?" or "I don't pressure you, do I?"

If you learn that you do come across as leading, ask what you do to give that impression. What words do you typically use? Also, you can invite the person to speak up in the future when they hear you use a leading question. You'll probably find that it's easier for somebody else to notice how you're communicating than for you to notice it yourself. (Just be careful not to get defensive or hostile, punishing the person for doing what you asked.)

Children tend to have great radar for this type of communication. If you have a child old enough to understand the concept of leading questions, try making them an offer: every time they catch you using one, you'll give them a quarter or some other reward. Kids usually jump at the chance to point out their parents' mistakes. As a side benefit, they wind up with useful knowledge about effective communication. Some of the people we've coached have been amazed at how much they've learned in this way (not to mention how many rewards they've had to hand over!).

No matter whom you enlist to help build your awareness, you'll gradually get better at noticing your own leading questions. Eventually you'll reach the point where you can stop yourself before you use one and try a new approach.

Transformation Step 2: Action—Separate Your Opinion from Your Question. The first challenge in rephrasing a leading question is figuring out what you want to communicate. Remember that a leading question combines two separate components: an opinion and a question. You may want to state both of these, or just one or the other.

Sometimes, when the stakes are low and you don't need anyone else's feedback, you might want to give only your opinion: "I think the landscapers did a nice job." "I thought the acting in that play was great." "I think I look better with short hair." At other times, you might want to follow your opinion with a request for the other person's perspective. You can do this using either a broad question ("I think this cherry pie is delicious. What do you think?") or a narrow question ("I think the first offer sounds like the best deal. Do you agree?").

> **Table 5-1.** Sample wording for rephrasing leading questions. The options you choose may vary depending on the context, the person you're talking to, the subject you're talking about, and your own personal preferences.
>
> **Leading question #1: Wouldn't it be great to hold the leadership retreat at my beach house?**
> Opinion: I think it would be great to hold the leadership retreat at my beach house.
> Follow-up question: Do you agree? or What are your thoughts?
> Narrow question: Do you think it's a good idea to hold the leadership retreat at my beach house?
> Broad question: Where do you think we should hold the leadership retreat?
>
> **Leading question #2: Our new website is too complicated, isn't it?**
> Opinion: I think our new website is too complicated.
> Follow-up question: Do you agree or disagree? or What do you think?
> Narrow question: Do you think our new website is too complicated, too simple, or just right?
> Broad question: What do you think about our new website?
>
> **Leading question #3: This medication has been working well for you, hasn't it?**
> Opinion: From looking at your chart, it seems like this medication has been working well for you.
> Follow-up question: Is that right? or Is there anything I'm missing?
> Narrow question: Is this medication working well for you?
> Broad question: How is this medication working for you?

Both of those options are less problematic than asking a leading question (like "Don't you think the first offer sounds best?"). However, if you're looking for an entirely unbiased response, we recommend leaving out your opinion and moving straight to a question. After you've told somebody what you think, they may feel uncomfortable expressing a different opinion. This is particularly true in situations where your opinion holds a lot of weight. If you tell someone who reports to you that you like offer #1, they may be hesitant to tell you they prefer offer #3. You're better off asking, "Which of these offers do you think sounds best?" (narrow question) or "What are your reactions to these offers?" (broad question).

Table 5-1 gives three different examples of leading questions and options for rephrasing them in the form of opinions, narrow questions, and broad questions.

By transforming his leading questions, Ricardo Garza helped to rescue his sales team from the brink of collapse. When coach Claude Marchessault described the communication pattern he'd observed, Ricardo was able to see how his own behavior had fostered conflict, rather than open dialogue. He was eager to try a new strategy. What would work best, he concluded, was to first state his opinion and then ask a broad question like, "What's your thinking on this?" or "Does anyone have a different opinion?" or "Do you have anything else to add?"

At Ricardo's invitation, Claude also did some coaching with the group as a whole. The managers realized that they'd been reacting more to the way their leader was talking than to the content of what he was saying. In fact, even in their yes-butting, they rarely disagreed with what he said; they were just bringing in new information that he didn't have. After Ricardo made a commitment to asking broad, rather than leading questions, the managers commit-ted to stating their ideas without the "buts" that made them sound like objections or criticism.

This relatively simple change, from leading questions and yes-buts to broad questions and straightforward answers, made a tremendous difference for the group. Freed from the frustration caused by their dysfunctional communication, they were able to focus their energy on what they did best: market analysis and sales strategizing. They began to live up to their potential as a group, developing into a high-performance team that capitalized fully on the knowledge and skills of all its members.

For more information on managing leading questions in yourself and others, including a comprehensive series of exercises, see *Conversation Transformation: Recognize and Overcome the 6 Most Destructive Communication Patterns,* by Ben Benjamin, Amy Yeager, and Anita Simon. You can also find additional resources at www.conversationtransformation.com. ■