

Stop Asking Questions

Tags: [#conversation](#) [#human-relations](#)

Creator: andrew-warner

Dialogue

Title: The Way to Get People Talking

We believe that we should ask questions. The focus should always be only on the other person, right? You invite us to get others comfortable with transparency.

Charlie Rose's interview technique - a single word.

- Because.
- How so?

Stop asking questions -- don't sound needy.

Instead of "How did you get your first job?"

Try: "Tell me how you got your first job."

People want interviews (and leaders) to show up and own the conversation.

Don't script -- but show up with a plan.

Avoid asking "most" or "best" questions. Example of a most question:

| Who was the most helpful person in your life?

The Double-Barrel approach -- allowing people an easy way out.

What have you changed your mind on?

Reserve

Dramatic lowball question.

Quotes

Highlight [page 20]: As Elena told us about her family, I asked a few more questions, and she kept opening up. She unburdened herself. The big secret she kept hidden didn't need to be a secret. It felt good to be accepted and to see she wasn't alone. Then, as she wound down, she said something that hurt me. She leaned back in the sofa, crossed her legs, and said, "Andrew's always pumping us for personal information." I looked at her and saw resentment in her eyes. I couldn't understand it. I

knew she felt relief from talking. At times she cut me off and cut others off, just so she could keep telling us about her family. Why the hostility? As I drove home that night, I thought about it. I realized that as my conversation skills improved, some people felt relief and closeness by talking to me. But I also realized that some people said the same thing Elena did. They felt I was pumping them for information, even though I was tapping into what they were dying to talk about. Mulling it over, I realized my mistake. I never shared anything revealing about myself. My conversation techniques worked so well that people opened up. Often more than they ever had before. Yes, they felt relief and acceptance, but they also felt vulnerable. And, more painfully, they felt alone in their vulnerability. So I started talking more about myself. At first, I tried keeping things balanced. I talked as much about myself as my conversation partners talked about themselves. Quickly, I discovered that most people don't want to listen. They prefer to talk. So I learned to include a revealing sentence or two about myself every once in a while, then go back to giving others a chance to talk. That worked.

Highlight [page 24]: And you know what? Sometimes the people you're talking with won't open up on the first conversation. It might take them years. Others won't open up at all. You need to be fine with that." Today I am fine with that, but only because I saw how often that's true. If you want guests to be open with you, you need to be willing to share first, and do it without an expectation for immediate reciprocation. Give it time. The depth of conversations you'll have will be worth it.

Highlight [page 49]: So how do we get people to tell us stories? I used to try asking, "Could you tell me a story?" Smart people often dismissed that request. Stories sound like what you'd tell two-year-olds, not how you talk to a smart audience. Those that didn't dismiss the need for stories often froze because coming up with a story is too much pressure. I learned to rephrase my request. Instead of "Could you tell me a story about that?" I used phrases like the following: "Tell me about a time when you did that." "Do you have an example of that?" "Tell me about the day you signed the agreement to sell your company." "Take me to the moment you quit. What did you say?" Notice that I don't ask, "Tell me about the most important time . . ." Asking people "the most" questions distracts them from the conversation, as you'll see in a future section. The important thing is to ask about "one." A story isn't about "every time." It's about a single incident. If your guest can't think of an example, a good technique is to give them one of your own. It allows you to model what you want them to do. That's what I did with Allie Magyar, founder of the events platform HUBB.

Highlight [page 51]: Stop "Most" Questions: Avoid Interviewers' Worst Questions Many sites that offer interview advice to new podcasters include lists of questions to ask guests. These lists are often packed with what I call "most" questions: What book had the most influence on you? What's the worst thing that happened to you? Who was the most helpful person in your life? I see what the writers are going for. They know that interviewers have a limited time with guests, and they want to maximize that time by focusing on the biggest, best, and most significant aspects of guests' lives. The problem with that approach is that it freezes people because it forces them to do too

much mental work for too little payoff. Take that last question, "Who was the most influential person in your life?" An interviewee who hears it has to make a mental list of people who influenced her. Then she has to hunt for the person who was most influential. Then, after she comes up with an answer, she might wonder if she might insult someone she didn't pick. Would mom feel bad, for example, if she picked dad? Meanwhile, as an interviewer, you probably don't need the person at the top of their list. You're just trying to understand one of their influences. So why not simply ask, "Could you tell me about someone who had a big influence on your life?" Chances are good that that approach will lead to the most influential person anyway. But without the pressure to name the single most important person in her life, your guest will feel freer to talk to you about it.

Highlight [page 54]: If I have a question that I'm not sure my guest would feel comfortable with, I might turn it into a Double-Barreled Question so I could intentionally give my interviewee a way to wiggle out of what they don't want to answer. If I'm wondering whether someone got a divorce, instead of asking, "Did you get a divorce?" and making a business conversation feel uncomfortably personal, I might ask, "Do you feel comfortable saying if you divorced your husband?" Break that down, and you'll see I'm actually asking two questions: 1) Are you divorced? And 2) do you feel comfortable talking about it? People who don't feel comfortable answering the tough question will focus on answering the easy one. Here are a few actual examples from several different interviews: Example One: Is it inappropriate for me to ask you if you're a millionaire now because of this business? Answer: I didn't become a millionaire from the business. Example Two: Is it inappropriate to ask if [your partner] gets half of this business? Answer: He doesn't own half my business. Example Three: Is it inappropriate for me to ask you who you're dating these days? Answer: I'm dating my business ideas and my fifty-six thousand books. This is such a transformational phrase that I use it outside of interviews often. When I'm out with my wife and she hears a Double-Barreled Question come out of my mouth, she smiles. She knows there's a good chance the stranger we just met will share a personal experience they hardly ever share. And with that, the stranger will instantly become a close friend. To be sure, it doesn't always get people to open up. And that's fine. The Double-Barrel approach gives them an easy way to stay away from topics that are too invasive for them.

Highlight [page 56]: Here's how that went down when an interviewee didn't want to get personal. Toward the end of my conversation with Mikkel Svane, the founder of customer service software Zendesk, we talked about the challenges of his early days in business. Then I tried to get more personal. Me: Is it inappropriate for me to ask you if you're still with your wife? Svane: Yes. So I didn't press. He said it wasn't appropriate. Instead, I shared something personal from my life about the difficulty of working hard in the early days when others my age were having fun. Then I quickly shifted the conversation to a book he mentioned he liked. When I watch the video of that conversation years later, I can see discomfort in his face when I tried to talk about his family. When I shifted to my story, he smiled a bit, and when I switched to the book

discussion, his face lit up. It all happened in under sixty seconds because I didn't linger on a topic he told me to avoid. That's what this technique is about. We want to give people a way to get personal if they're comfortable doing it but also give them a graceful way to move past it if they aren't.

Highlight [page 64]: My interview coach read our transcript and showed me that the peak-end rule was at play. That's the cognitive bias people have for remembering the most intense (peak) and the last (end) parts of an experience. Before this realization, I saved my toughest question for last. I thought my interviewee trusted me enough by then to know my intentions were good and would feel comfortable with me so I could give my audience something dramatic at the end. After that upset call, I played back interviewees' reactions in my head and realized they might have been hurt too, but they didn't know me well enough to tell me. I decided to stop saving my gutsiest, most difficult question for the end. Instead, I allowed that question to be easy. It helped ease us out of the interview and left my guest happy. Years later, I heard Oprah Winfrey recognized the vulnerability guests have and went a step further. In an interview at Stanford University, she said each of her guests ask her the same question when her interview is done: "Was that okay?" Barack Obama and George Bush both asked it. Beyoncé taught her how to twerk on the show and then asked it. I realized even the most adored performers feel vulnerable at the end of a performance. Asking a tough question in the end was like punching their confidence before saying goodbye. I stopped, but Oprah helped me see it wasn't enough. I started anticipating their need for validation. When an interview ended, I thanked them, told them they did well, and mentioned one specific thing they did well. Guests used to routinely ask me to give them another chance to record their interviews. "I think I could have done better. How about we record again next week?" they'd ask. Ending on a question they could knock out of the park and telling them what they did well after the interview helped reduce those requests drastically.

Highlight [page 65]: The Talking Release: Remember This above All. Before I leave this section, I want to leave you with one important message: if you fail with every tip I gave you so far, you'll do well if you simply let your guest talk. I realized the importance of that years ago at a quiet dinner with my brother Michael. I got a call from one of the employees at the greeting card company he and I founded. "Andrew, I can't stop crying," she said. I was surprised, not that she was crying or what she was crying about. I knew about the tough breakup she was going through. What took me by surprise is that she wanted to talk to me, not Michael. Ever since we were kids, people brought their business questions to me and their personal issues to Michael. Even when adults were down and he was barely a teenager, they talked to Michael. But maybe our employee had noticed all the work I'd done to improve my relationship skills. "My ex is being intentionally cruel," she sobbed. "He keeps flaunting his new relationships. He wants me to be jealous." "Don't let him do this to you," I said, trying to show that I empathized. Then I gave her some advice. She stopped responding. I sensed that I'd lost her. I could tell this wasn't what she needed, but I didn't know why. She thanked me and we hung up. Then Michael's phone rang. She'd called him. I guess

she didn't realize we were at dinner together, and she looked to him for help. I sat silently, listening, trying to understand what magic he had. I wanted to understand what I should have said. Here's his magic. He asked, "What happened?" Then he didn't say much more than "Mhmm" for a long time. He followed that by asking, "Why did you say that?" and went back to listening. When they hung up, I asked my brother, "How's she doing now?" He told me she was feeling better. She knew not to let her ex get under her skin. She knew to ignore it. Still, it bothered her. After unloading on Michael, she felt better. That's the magic of listening. People prefer to be heard than to be helped.

References