

5 Reasons why people don't ask questions in training



By Marc Ratcliffe

Most participants' brains seem to stop functioning when you invite them to ask questions. It's like at the mere mention of the phrase "are there any questions" a chain-reaction of nuclear proportions engulfs the participants' brains and they all become suddenly quiet as the fallout spreads through their bodies and renders them incapable of even making eye contact!

Possible causes:

1. **Fear** – fear of what their peers may think of them, fear of what the trainer may say to them and fear of asking a foolish question (or appearing to be the only confused person in the room). As trainers we need to allay fears by creating a safe and supportive environment where contributions are not only encouraged, but rewarded. Remember, they are not just stakeholders, they are shareholders in the process and as such they should have some say in what they are going to learn and input on what they would like to know.
2. **Feeling rushed** – feeling that their question isn't really all that important after all, especially if there is a break immediately following the "question time". However, if the trainer is transparent about the time allocated for questions and continues to model good question asking practice, then they are more likely to get a higher frequency of questions. Moreover, if the trainer has strategies in place for recording questions that may require additional time for research, consideration or follow-up, they have a greater chance of receiving a

better quality of question. One common strategy to support this, is for the trainer to have a "car park" or "action plan" on the board. This provides a visual focus point for questions and keeps the trainer honest by ensuring they deliver upon the answers.

3. **Not wanting to interrupt** – many training sessions follow the "master and apprentice" pattern of development. This is where the trainer is the subject matter expert and they do most of the talking and the participant's role is to wait for the pearls of wisdom to flow. Invariably, there are few obvious points for the participants to ask a question and they may lack the confidence to disrupt the status quo. Therefore, their silent questions go unanswered and their engagement with the content diminishes. Perhaps one of the simplest strategies to overcome this, is for the trainer to affirm that it is okay to interrupt.

4. **The trainer knows best** – if something is important the trainer will mention it. The trainer has probably delivered the same session 100 times and can sometimes miss the nuances of learning it the first time. Be upfront with the participants and remind them that if they use the collective knowledge and experience of the group, rather than simply that of the trainer, they will have more to draw from.

5. **Not being asked by the trainer if they have any questions** – studies show that trainers do not ask participants if they have any questions more than half the time. And if they do, it is done as an afterthought, rather than as an integrated part of the learning or as a function of their checking for understanding activities. If you are worried that people won't ask questions when prompted, you can always ask yourself a question. e.g. "A lot of people ask me this..." Another solution may be to have anonymous questions. Give everyone an index card. Ask participants to write down their questions during the day. At the end of the day ask participants to turn the card over and pass it to someone else. Next, ask the participants to continue passing the cards around the room until you ask them to stop (after about 15 seconds). Make sure everyone has a card. Now select a participant at random and ask them to read the question on the card. Suggest that the participant may pretend to read the card - but actually ask his or her own question.