

Questions and deception: How to ask better questions and elicit the truth

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To make some of life's most important decisions, it often helps to ask sensitive questions—those touching on potentially sensitive issues such as finances or personal history. For instance, when deciding to take a promotion, it would help to ask peers what the job entails (or pays), and when deciding whether to move to a certain neighborhood, it would be helpful to know what people living in that neighborhood pay in rent. But

most people avoid asking questions that seem rude or intrusive, for fear of offending others.

Research by Einav Hart, assistant professor of management at George Mason University School of Business, shows just how far this reluctance goes. Her 2020 paper in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (co-authored with Maurice Schweitzer of Wharton and Eric VanEpps of University of Utah) found that even when offered a [financial reward](#) for asking sensitive questions (e.g., "Have you ever committed a crime?"), most people would not do it.

The participants who did ask sensitive questions anticipated they would come off as rude and leave a bad impression, but their fears turned out to be overblown. The sensitivity or non-sensitivity of the questions made no difference to how the question-asker came across. Hart concludes, "People often overestimate the costs of asking, and are too reluctant to ask sensitive questions."

But the fact that people are not always put off by sensitive questions does not guarantee that they will answer truthfully. In fact, one of the reasons sensitive questions tend not to bother us may be that we can often withhold information or lie—which is particularly helpful when the information sought has a higher likelihood of being compromising.

Further research by Hart shows that the likelihood and truthfulness of answers can correspond to how the questions are phrased. Her 2022 paper in *Current Opinion in Psychology* (co-authored with VanEpps) integrates research on deception, conversations and impression management for insights into how this works. Hart argues that questions not only help askers gather information, but also signal information about the asker themselves: Their knowledge, assumptions, and preferences. These signals affect what answers we receive, and if we receive an answer at all.

For example, leading questions, or questions that seem to imply what the "right" answer is, are often too suggestive to inspire complete honesty. If you were to ask an employee or co-worker, "You finished the work, right?" the implication that the work really should have been completed by now exerts subtle pressure that may cause them to tell you what you want to hear, rather than the truth.

Other types of loaded questions can implicitly reduce the range of acceptable responses (e.g., "How happy are you with your salary and benefits at this company?"), or impose oversimplistic yes/no framing on a complex subject ("Are you experiencing pain today?").

Hart advises, "Ask more neutral, open-ended questions that do not signal your own assumptions. You want to 'normalize' potentially stigmatized topics, and signal that all answers are acceptable. This helps people feel more comfortable disclosing potentially sensitive information. The phrasing can be something like 'What kind of pain, if any, are you experiencing today?' In addition, you could try lumping sensitive topics in with less delicate topics."

When dealing with an expert, such as an auto mechanic or plumber, many avoid asking questions, fearing that revealing lack of knowledge will invite the expert to take advantage. For instance, they might charge a higher rate to consumers they perceive to be unsophisticated. Hart recommends doing a little research into [common problems](#) before soliciting expert information—just enough to ask better-informed questions.

Asking specific questions such as "How long will it be until I have to change this car's tires?" (compared to "The tires are durable, right?") signals competence and increases the chance you'll be taken seriously—and that you'll receive truthful responses.

In contrast to the exaggerated fears we may have about asking sensitive questions, Hart's take on the research is that when asked the right way, they can actually strengthen bonds between people. For example, during the tentative early stages of a relationship, sensitive questions can be a way to probe deeper into subjects that have come up naturally in conversation, thereby building rapport and trust.

"While sensitive questions may feel intrusive, they can also signal that you care about the person you're talking to," Hart says. "Asking the right question in the right way enables people to increase the likelihood of truthful responses as well as improve relationships."

More information: Eric M. VanEpps et al, Questions and deception: How to ask better questions and elicit the truth, *Current Opinion in Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101383](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101383)

Einav Hart et al, The (better than expected) consequences of asking sensitive questions, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.10.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.10.014)

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