

How to ask a good question?

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Introduction

This document is meant for members of councils and committees who want to ask questions to their discussion partner (director or team leader). In this document we give attention to: when to ask what kind of question and what is a good way of asking questions.

Why do you ask questions?

In participation asking questions to your discussion partner is a powerful tool to:

- collect information
- to ask for an opinion
- manage content

On the basis of the answers to questions, as a member of the council or committee, you are better able to write an advice or take a decision.

When do you ask questions?

During the whole participation cycle (from agenda setting meeting to B-meeting and evaluation meeting) questions play an important role. In the document "meeting structure IPC-SDPC-DPC" <https://portal.fontys.nl/fbreed/medezeggenschap/participation/CAA/default.aspx> you find questions you could ask in each phase of the cycle.

- *In a situation of separated A- and B-meeting¹*

Asking questions will become an even more powerful tool when you ask your discussion partner questions in writing between the A- and B-meeting. It will give the discussion partner room to research for the answers before the B-meeting. Moreover, answers are written down and can be archived. In addition to the written answers, in the B-meeting questions for clarification can be asked, so that a decision can be made in the evaluation meeting. That will make the decision making process more efficient.

- *In a situation of directly connected A- and B-meeting*

In the A-meeting you can formulate good questions that you ask your discussion partner in the B-meeting. The discussion partner will be able to answer part of the questions, but might have to research some other questions. To make the process more efficient, you can ask your discussion partner to answer in writing before the next meeting, so that in the next meeting a decision can be made or a standpoint can be determined.

¹ A-meeting: meeting in which only the members of a council participate; B-meeting: the meeting in which the discussion partner participates

Demands on a good question:

You want to make sure that by your way of asking questions, you receive the information you need to do a good job (determine a standpoint on the basis of which you can give a good advice or make a good decision). You can only determine a standpoint or take a decision, you can only give a good advice when you have as much neutral information at your disposal as possible, information that is not coloured by a certain vision or opinion. Try to prevent upsetting your discussion partner by your way of asking questions. Important for every question: think about what you want to achieve with your question, what do you want to know. That will also determine the way you ask the question. So:

- make your question as specific as possible (by which you invite your discussion partner to answer as specific as possible)

- ask neutral, non-suggestive questions, without hinting at your own opinion (by which you indicate to be open-minded and not having a set opinion yet)

- don't ask why-questions (by which you don't call the discussion partner to accountability)

- ask open questions, starting with who, what, when, where, how (by which you invite your conversation partner to give more information than just "yes" or "no")

- do not ask several questions within one question (chances are, not all questions are answered)

Examples of "bad" questions

- When could we get the minutes, do you think? (Vague question, which will be responded to with a vague answer)
- Don't you agree that the personnel policy turns out pretty badly? (You already give your own opinion and suggest a specific answer)
- Why did the management not choose for option B? (You already give your own opinion and you call the discussion partner to accountability)
- Is the management going to do something to solve the problems with the schedule? (the conversation partner can suffice by answering "yes" or "no")
- Isn't it better to postpone the meeting, since Pete can't make it, or shall we invite Margret, since she knows about it as well? (You ask several questions and it is not clear which question needs to be answered)
- I guess you are pretty busy. Shall I send the meeting documents for you? (You give your interpretation to the situation of someone else and you already know what the other person needs)

Alternatives

- We need the minutes by Friday. Is it possible to receive them ultimately Thursday noon? (You are very concrete about what you want)
- The personnel policy has been evaluated. What are the conclusions of the management? (You ask for an opinion from the management, without giving your own opinion yet)
- Which considerations have played a part in the decision of the management to choose between option A or B? (You ask for an explanation of a choice and withhold your opinion about this choice)
- What is the management going to do in the short and long term to fix the problem with the schedule and prevent future problems? (You ask for concrete information, actions)

- To make sure the meeting runs smoothly, it is necessary to have either Pete or Margret present. Pete is unable to come. I propose to invite Margret for this meeting. Does everybody agree? (There is one concrete question that needs an answer)
- I have the impression that you are very busy. Is that correct? (only after confirmation, you can ask what the other person needs from you or how you can help the other person)