

The Art of Questioning

Mentoring at its best is subtle, like a coyote walking unnoticed around the edge of camp. Coyotes thrive in every habitat, even cities, but people rarely notice them because they find the gaps in human awareness and exploit them. Mentoring can look like asking a few simple questions to find the edges and gaps in participants' (and your own) awareness.

We ask questions about what youth notice and perceive. When we ask questions about perceptions rather than decisions or choices, the youth know that we care about their experiences and are interested to know more about them, but aren't judging them for their choices. When youth come back from an experience in nature, having an adult ask even a few questions about what the youth noticed immediately deepens the learning opportunities and frames the experience as valuable.

The 3 levels of questioning help us as mentors to find the edges of our mentee's awareness. Using the three levels of questioning involves some personal commitments: finding your own authentic curiosity, letting go of being right, and learning to ask authentic questions. Practice asking questions rather than giving answers. Find curiosity about the little things that you might otherwise overlook. Let go of the need to show that you know something, and be willing to ask the most basic questions to open up wonder for a topic.

Start with Level 1 questions. These are confidence builders that participants can answer easily. An example is asking a participant the color of the flower they saw.

Level 2 questions are right on the edge of the participant's awareness, and participants have to stretch to answer them. An example is asking a participant to find their flower in a medicinal plants field guide, and using questioning to help them remember the growth habit, habitat, and other less obvious characteristics of the flower. Use these sparingly.

Level 3 questions are mindblowers and cannot readily be answered, and should be used once in a while. An example is, after finding that the participant's flower is Arnica and learning about the medicine we can get from Arnica, pointing out that getting medicine for the human body from a plant is a little miracle of biology, and asking what other small natural miracles have gone unnoticed in our lives.

Not all questioning sessions need all three levels of questioning. In fact, most do not. Ask questions appropriate to the intensity of the event, the development of the participant, the time container available, and the level of trust you've developed with the participant and other people present. A simple "what did you notice," or "how big was the bird," is better than a barrage of confusing questions! Most of all, find your own authentic curiosity!