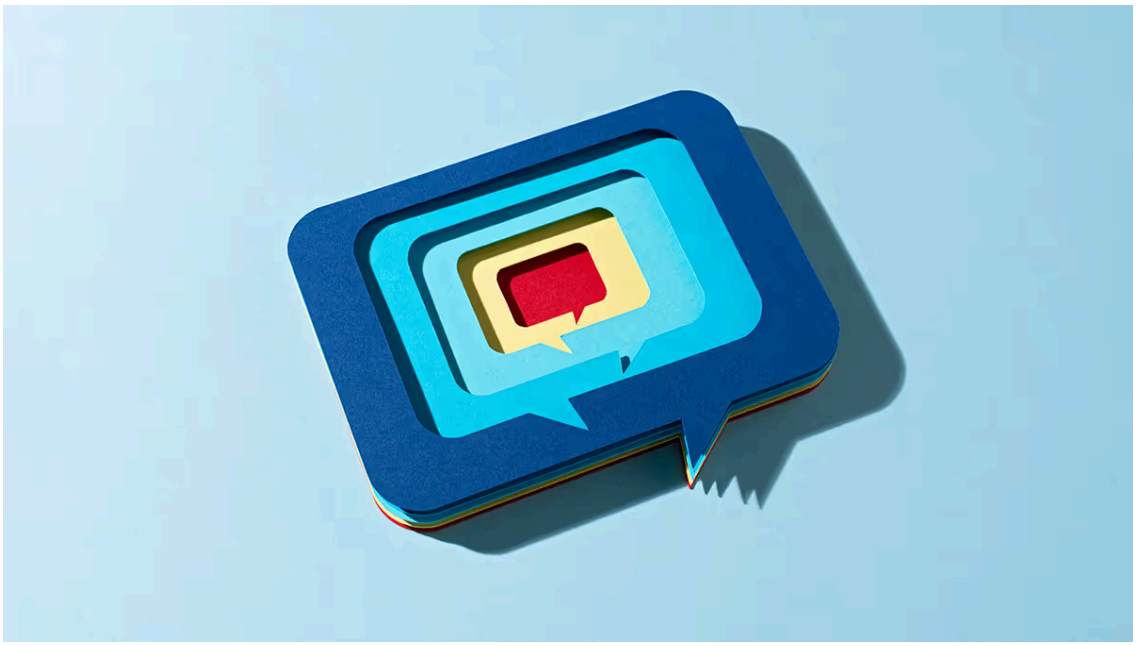
Interpersonal Skills

How to Phrase Your Questions When You Need Honest Answers

by Jeremy A. Yip and Maurice Schweitzer

June 6, 2025



MirageC/Getty Images

Summary. Oftentimes at work we encounter situations that require us to uncover the truth. For example, your manager may not want to tell you that you don't have a chance at a promotion this year because they fear they'd upset you or trigger a conflict.... **more**

Oftentimes at work, we encounter situations that require us to uncover the truth. Your manager may not want to tell you that you don't have a chance at a promotion this year because they fear they'd upset you or trigger a conflict. Or your team member may tell a self-serving lie to avoid getting blamed for a delay on a

project. In a serious instance of employee misconduct or when things go terribly awry on a project, you may need to gather truthful information and compile evidence to make a decision or find a way forward. Simply asking, “How did you miss that critical piece of information?” or “Why didn’t I get promoted?” aren’t enough.

Consider the story of Marshall, who is a composite of a few different real-life scenarios we have seen play out through our work and research.

Marshall is a business analyst at a strategy consulting firm and has been eyeing an opportunity to join a high-visibility digital transformation project led by Chloe, an engagement manager. Marshall knows that landing the opportunity would set him on the fast track for a promotion. He emailed Chloe about the opportunity after hearing about it from one of his peers. But he hasn’t heard back from her yet, and other peers are already getting staffed on the project. He’s not sure what’s causing the hold up since his background and experience match well with the client’s industry.

What Marshall doesn’t know is that Chloe has lingering concerns about his performance on a pharmaceutical project he worked on with another engagement manager last quarter. The manager had told Chloe that Marshall lacked assertiveness when questioned by the client, and Chloe is concerned that Marshall would struggle in a client-facing role.

Marshall knows that he needs to figure out what the problem is so that he can make necessary adjustments before the project is completely staffed. Specifically, Marshall must determine how to approach Chloe and pose questions that would elicit honest information about Chloe's impressions of him. What should he do?

How to Uncover the Truth

Based on scenarios like this and our research on the effect of question phrasing on deception, here is evidence-based advice on how you can get people to tell the truth.

1. Do your homework before starting a conversation.

Homework is particularly important before you begin a conversation, especially for those that have the potential to become confrontational. You are more likely to succeed in extracting the truth when you are well prepared.

In a research study that we conducted on how experts detect insurance fraud, we interviewed special investigators at a large auto insurance company and learned that one of the key reasons for success was the careful, detailed work that investigators undertook to prepare for interviews with those who had committed the fraud. These special investigators canvased neighborhoods, spoke with witnesses, conducted database searches, and gathered evidence. When they spoke with claimants, the investigators had all their facts right.

So, for example, let's say you want to find out from your manager why you weren't promoted. You need to develop a strong fact base. You should record a timeline of your work achievements and privately discuss with trusted peers whether and how your contributions have been valued by others. Get a sense of how long

it has taken your peers to get promoted, what skills they had and how your skills match theirs, and what the current state of the business unit is. Being well prepared with facts makes you more persuasive and helps steer the conversation towards the truth.

2. Lay the foundation for honest communication.

Start the conversation by laying the groundwork to build honesty and trust. Detective Joseph Rovnan, a crisis negotiator in Philadelphia, routinely asks his counterparts the following question: “Do you want me to be honest with you?” Invariably, people say “yes,” and he builds a foundation for honest communication from there.

Establishing this norm early on is one of the most important steps you can take in eliciting honesty from others. Of course, there are always some details that the other party would rather not disclose—such as a leader not being in a position to divulge sensitive company information. And that’s okay. They may set boundaries by explaining what is confidential, what they would need to consult with another party on, or what they do not have the authority to disclose. But in that, they’re being honest in what they can and cannot tell you. In such instances, you should acknowledge boundaries and still reinforce the norm for honesty and credibility.

3. Build rapport.

Rapport is the mutual expression of positivity and interest that breeds familiarity and liking, which can help establish trust between individuals.

- Open the conversation with a lighter tone and start by seeking common interests.

- Ask your counterpart to clarify and explain things to show that you're attentive and are invested in the conversation.
- Be respectful. When they speak, acknowledge your counterpart's point of view, and don't interrupt them as that can make them feel inferior.
- Express empathy as it helps validate other people's feelings and builds trust in return.

4. Frame your questions thoughtfully.

After telegraphing a commitment to honesty and building rapport, the next important step, according to our research, is to ask a direct question. We define a direct question as a straightforward inquiry that seeks a specific response without much room for interpretation or avoidance. But the trick lies in asking the right kind of direct question, which influences the information you receive. Most of us typically ask questions that fall into one of three categories: general questions, direct questions that presume a problem, or direct questions that presume normalcy.

In our research, we found that *direct questions that presume a problem* are far more likely to elicit an honest response than general questions or direct questions that presume that there is no problem. Furthermore, we found that individuals who ask direct questions that presume a problem are more likely to be perceived as knowledgeable and assertive.

Let's consider another example. Say you're a hiring manager and you're meeting with a job candidate. You want to extend an offer, but you want to uncover whether the job candidate has a viable, competing job offer that they might accept. If you ask a general question ("Where are you in your job search process?") or one that

presumes the candidate has no other options ("Are you looking forward to this job opportunity at our company?") you may not get the response you need. But if you presume a problem ("Is there anything holding you back from our job opportunity, such as a competing offer?"). The job candidate becomes more likely to disclose that they have another job offer without feeling cornered.

5. Make deception hard(er).

Deception—the act of keeping the truth hidden from someone for one's own advantage—is difficult to detect and there are often short-term benefits that make deception tempting. But it's possible to make it hard for someone to deceive you.

First plan to have the conversation by meeting in person. To lie, people need to control their verbal and emotional expressions, so lying to someone's face is more difficult than lying at a distance, such as on the phone or over email.

Second, try and boost the cognitive load on your counterpart. Lying requires us to think harder to keep track of the truth and the lie, and that increases the cognitive load on the person. Let's go back to the hiring manager example. A common challenge for hiring managers is verifying the qualifications and achievements of a candidate. Some candidates may exaggerate their skills, experience, or certifications to make themselves more appealing. To counteract this, a hiring manager could further boost a candidate's cognitive load by asking about something that happened out of chronological order or asking for minute details. This makes people more likely to make mistakes in their responses, enabling you to discern the truth.

Here's how the advice above plays out with Marshall and Chloe.

Marshall gathered information before approaching Chloe. He looked at his past projects and spoke to former managers and colleagues. He looked at the feedback he received and focused on how it might translate into this new project.

He then asked to meet with Chloe in person, rather than relying on an email exchange or a virtual meeting. He started the conversation by building trust and honesty: “Chloe, I believe in being honest, and I appreciate the same in return.” And Chloe responded, “Marshall, honesty and openness are essential to how I work too, so I’m glad we’re on the same page. If there’s something on your mind, I’m here to discuss and work through it together.”

To build rapport, Marshall avoided making an accusation like, “You never acknowledged my interest in joining the team.” Instead, Marshall was respectful and expressed empathy by saying, “I can see that you have been busy staffing the best project team possible, and I would like to discuss how I can make a contribution.”

Marshall then asked follow-up questions to request specific, detailed information. Instead of asking a generic question like, “How’s the team coming together? Are you still recruiting for it?” Marshall asked a question that presumes a problem: “What concerns do you have about me becoming a member of your project team?”

In return, Chloe responded, “I heard that you are a good team player, but I am not sure whether you are the right fit for the project based on your previous engagement.” Marshall dug deeper by asking, “I believe that I could make a valuable contribution to your team, can you please share what specifically concerns you based on the previous engagement?” Chloe shared that Marshall

appeared to lack assertiveness during the previous client presentation, and that the upcoming client has a reputation for being skeptical and asking tough questions.

Ultimately, Marshall received constructive feedback and gained a clear understanding about why he was not chosen. Armed with this new knowledge, Marshall sought mentoring and training, and, six months later, he worked with Chloe on a new consulting project.

...

While getting someone to tell the truth is a difficult task, fortunately, there are things that you can do to improve your chances of getting an honest answer and to curtail your risk of being deceived. Following these steps will not guarantee that everyone will tell you the truth at all times, but they will make it more likely. Sometimes, the truth can hurt, but truthful information is essential for learning, growth, and professional development.

Jeremy A. Yip is an assistant professor of management at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business. His research expertise focuses on emotion, communication, ethics, imposter syndrome, and negotiation.

Maurice Schweitzer is the Cecilia Yen Koo Professor at the Wharton School and the coauthor of *Friend and Foe: When to Cooperate,*

When to Compete, and How to Succeed at Both (Crown Currency). His research interests include negotiations, emotions, and deception.

Read more on **Interpersonal skills** or related topics **Psychology** and **Behavioral science**