Write an Effective Survey Question

To conduct a needs analysis or evaluate a training program,
a trainer must formulate good questions. **BY ROSS TARTELL, PH.D.**

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We live in a world that is hungry for information. Businesses want to know the perspectives of their customers, employees, and suppliers. Line managers know that good data can be the difference between success and extinction.

Trainers have a similar challenge. To conduct a needs analysis or evaluate a training program, a trainer must ask good questions. Ask the wrong questions and the training might teach the wrong skills or solve the wrong problem. Good questions give you the information necessary for success.

Writing questions is only one part of creating a data collection approach. Effective survey design requires clear directions, thoughtful sequencing of questions, effective visual display on the page, and appropriate rating scales. But you only "get what you ask for." Strong questions are the foundation of any survey, and that's our focus here.

TIPS TO KEEP IN MIND

You first need to know why you are collecting data. If you know what you want, you will get good, actionable information. Although there are many types of questions when it comes to data collection, the most common is a statement followed by a rating scale—for example, from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Here are a few fundamental principles that will help you to write the "stem," which is the statement the survey respondent is asked to rate:

1. Be sure the statement applies to the respondents and that it's likely they will have the information —otherwise, they will make up a response or skip the question. For example, the statement, "Senior management was involved in creating this training," would be a poor survey item. It's better to provide more specificity: "My manager has discussed how this training applies to my job."

2. Make sure the questions you create provide information that's necessary and not just "nice to know," despite well-meaning stakeholders who might want to add irrelevant items.

3. Keep it simple. Use simple sentence structure and language that will be easily understood. Respondents can't give an accurate answer if they don't understand the question.

a. *Create short questions that contain one idea.* Don't use "double-barreled" questions; eliminate the use of the words, "or" and "and." For example, "My manager gives me accurate performance feedback and ensures my compensation is fair," contains two different concepts. Instead, ask each question separately. "My manager gives me accurate performance feedback." "My manager ensures that I am fairly compensated."

b. *Be brief and concise.* Here's a complex question: "What is the frequency of interaction between the training staff, the internal client groups, the learning management system (LMS), and external client groups?" A better question might be: "What is the frequency of communication with other key internal stakeholders?"

c. *Minimize jargon and acronyms.* Respondents can't give an accurate answer if they don't understand the words.

d. *Avoid the use of double negatives.* "I am not unfamiliar with how to write a developmental plan" becomes much easier to understand when rewritten as "I am familiar with how to write a developmental plan."

4. Pay attention to social desirability. Most people want to give a "socially acceptable" answer. Avoid leading questions that contain emotionally loaded words (e.g., "broken," "horrible," "expensive") or words that are derogatory. For example, contrast "The members of my work group belittle and make fun of each other" with "The members of my work group show respect by listening to each other's ideas."

Famous quality guru W. Edwards Deming once said, "In God we trust; all others must bring data." Asking well-constructed questions will provide the data you need to ensure training success. **t**