
Brainstorming Reflective Questions

Activity: Participants brainstorm mentor responses to situations they might encounter with their interns, volunteers, apprentices, etc. The situations relate to learning to perform job tasks, gaining personal and social competence, and encouraging career planning.

Purpose: Participants are encouraged to think of reflective questions very quickly that would be appropriate for a variety of purposes. The combination of trying to come up with questions themselves and hearing the questions others pose increase awareness of types of reflective questions and the situations where they could be used. It also gives them more confidence in their ability to use reflective questioning.

Materials: Laptop computer with LCD projector *or* newsprint and markers

The description of each situation is projected on the screen (and read by the facilitator), then the recorder quickly types in the reflective questions as the brainstorming progresses. Situation descriptions must be typed in ahead of time or written on newsprint. Enter one situation per page.

60-second digital timer with face large enough for all participants to see and audible alarm

Amusing, inexpensive gifts, preferably small and soft enough to be tossed to participants

To keep this activity lively, we distributed amusing gifts to recognize

- most creative questions
- best reflective questions
- etc.

There are enough situations to make it possible for everyone to receive a gift, which serves as a mild incentive for everyone to contribute. Tossing the gifts to people helps everyone loosen up and not be shy about suggesting questions.

Handout, “Brainstorming Reflective Questions” (optional)

⌚ Time: 15 to 30 minutes, depending on what is included



Cornell Youth and Work Program
PREPARING YOUTH FOR THE FUTURE

**Mentoring Youth at Work:
Trainer Guide**

CORNELL

Introduction ☺ 5

We use the term “reflective questioning” for a style of teaching that is sometimes called “the Socratic method.” “Reflective” emphasizes that the best questions call for more than simple recall of facts. They draw out from the learner connections among facts, inferences, and applications that the learner may not have previously recognized. Because the learner is an active participant in this process, it is often much more powerful than listening to someone explain everything.

We think most people agree that questioning is an effective way to teach, but it isn’t easy to come up with good questions at just the right time. Therefore, this activity calls for the group to generate a large number of reflective questions very quickly by brainstorming.

The most important rule of brainstorming is that no discussion is allowed (with an occasional exception for clarification). The emphasis is on producing a large number of questions without worrying about repetition, wording, or even whether all of them meet the definition of reflective questions. That definition is included in “Mentoring Youth at Work: Guide to Teaching and Learning.” It states that reflective questions:

- Draw out of the learner things the learner did not know were there.
- Cannot be answered with “yes” or “no.”
- Require thought and putting things together, not just recall.
- Have multiple possible answers.

I will pose a series of situations drawn from interviews with mentors and for each one I’ll ask you to brainstorm reflective questions that would be appropriate. I will type the responses and add them to the screen. The goal is to get you into a mode in which such questions flow readily. Therefore, I will enforce a strict time limit of 60 seconds for each situation. In between each brainstorming minute, we’ll take a short time to look back at the questions to make sure they meet the criteria for reflective questions. But we won’t take time during the 60 seconds to discuss any of the questions.

After the 60 seconds are over, the facilitator may point out suggestions that do not meet the criteria or make other observations. There may be some brief discussion among participants. But the group should quickly move on to another situation to maintain the rapid flow of questions.

Keep track of time. You probably will not be able to get through all the situations.

Situations for Learning to Perform Job Tasks ☹ 10–25

1. Your mentee has made a mistake and you want to turn it into a learning experience.
What would you say?
2. You want your mentee to go ahead more independently with work she already knows how to do.
What questions might you ask?
3. You send your mentee to a meeting to observe how a colleague leads it.
What do you ask him when he returns to help him benefit from the experience?
4. Your mentee has learned one way of doing a task but is resistant to learning other ways.
How would you help her accept other approaches that might be as good or even better under some circumstances?
5. You want your mentee to start on a new project by setting priorities.
What are some questions that would help?

Situations for Gaining Personal and Social Competence

1. *Your intern is very independent.
You have given her a project to complete with other interns.
How do you help her work cooperatively as a member of a team?*
2. *You want your mentee to complete a task that requires assistance from other people.
How do you get him to ask for help?*
3. *Your mentee is so timid that she has difficulty talking to others at work.
What questions could you ask her to help her see the need to act with confidence?*
4. *Your mentee does what is required but never seems to do any more.
What questions might encourage greater initiative and motivate him to excel?*
5. *Your mentee is late too often.
How do you help her think about the consequences of lateness?*
6. *How do you get a youth to understand the need for confidentiality?*

Situations for Encouraging Career Planning

1. *How do you guide a youth who seems to have no career direction?*
2. *Your mentee has a very narrow plan for her career.
How would you help her think about a wider array of career options?*
3. *Your mentee plans to join the army after graduation.
Her chief motive seems to be to get out of a bad home situation.
How do you help her understand her motives and consider other alternatives without demeaning the choice to enlist?*
4. *How do you help your mentee relate what he is doing at work to future career goals, even if he is thinking about a career outside your area?*
5. *How do you challenge your youth to think about how to reach their goals, especially how continuing their education after high school might play a part?*
6. *Your youth feels pressure about future plans from his teachers, peers, and parents.
How do you ask him about his personal goals for the future?*
7. *What do you ask your youth to make her understand how what she does now will affect her future?*

As a follow-up to the training, we edited the brainstorming list to eliminate any questions that did not meet the criteria and duplications and to clean up the language, then sent out the list to participants to give them a ready source of good reflective questions. With sufficient help and equipment, it would be possible to do this during the training and pass out a list of questions before participants leave.

Following are responses to these situations by mentors in several of our training groups.

Situations for Learning to Perform Job Tasks

1. *Your mentee has made a mistake and you want to turn it into a learning experience.*

What would you say?

How could you have handled it differently?

Why did you do it that way?

What could you have done to make this better?

Did you realize you made a mistake?

Don't you want to take a second look?

What do you think will happen with this?

How would you resolve the problem?

If you were the customer, would you be satisfied with this?

What's your next step?

What was wrong with what you did?

How would you correct the situation?

Do you think you understand what you did wrong, so that you do it right the next time?

2. *You want your mentee to go ahead more independently with work she already knows how to do.*

What questions might you ask?

What steps would you take to accomplish this job? Then say, "You're ready."

How do you plan to lay out the job?

What do you think you will need for this job?

Thanks for accomplishing that great job. Maybe next time you could figure out how to do it faster.

Do you feel comfortable doing that on your own?

Do you think you can do this on your own?

Are you comfortable with what you have to do?

Do you understand what the end result has to be?

3. *You send your mentee to a meeting to observe how a colleague leads it.*

What do you ask him when he returns to help him benefit from the experience?

What kinds of things did you learn?

How could you use this on the job?

Was the meeting interesting?

What style did she or he (the colleague) use to lead the meeting?

What is most important thing you learned?

4. *Your mentee has learned one way of doing a task but is resistant to learning other ways.
How would you help her accept other approaches that might be as good or even better under some circumstances?*

Can you think of another way (more efficient, safer, easier) to do this task?

Are there times when this approach won't work?

Have you looked around to see how others are doing it?

How can we achieve the same end results in a shorter period of time?

Is this the best you can do with this task?

What do you think the benefit is of doing it your way?

Why are you reluctant to do it this other way?

5. *You want your mentee to start on a new project by setting priorities.*

What are some questions that would help?

What is the most immediate need?

What do you need to do to succeed?

What steps will you have to take to succeed?

What is most important? Why?

What is your deadline?

Situations for Gaining Personal and Social Competence

1. *Your intern is very independent.*

You have given her a project to complete with other interns.

How do you help her work cooperatively as a member of a team?

What are your strengths? What would you contribute?

Do you think if we work together we could be productive?

What do you like about one another's ideas?

Can we make this a team project?

What are some benefits of working with other people?

What can you do to help other members of your team be successful?

How can you contribute to the goal?

Try to define your role in the group.

2. *You want your mentee to complete a task that requires assistance from other people.*

How do you get him to ask for help?

Is there a specific person you could ask for help?

Whom do you know in our organization who can help?

What are others doing that will enhance your work?

Whom do you want to work with you on this project?

What departments are responsible for this task?

What do you feel you should do if you get stuck on something?

This is a big task. Are there different perspectives you can bring to it?

How would you ask (that person) for help?

Do you feel comfortable with the other members of your group?

What areas do you think you'll need help with?

Do you think that asking other members of the team for help would make them feel good about themselves?

3. *Your mentee is so timid that she has difficulty talking to others at work.*

What questions could you ask her to help her see the need to act with confidence?

Would you like to work with _____ on this project?

Whom would you feel more confident, comfortable with? Why did you choose that person?

Why is it important to communicate?

Are there any particular people in the workplace that you would feel more comfortable or uncomfortable communicating with?

How do you feel about your own performance?

Is there any way I can help you not be so shy?

4. *Your mentee does what is required but never seems to do any more.*

What questions might encourage greater initiative and motivate him to excel?

What other areas do you want to branch out into?

What gets you really excited?

What types of tasks do you enjoy taking on most?

You did so good in this job, what others might you do?

Is there anything else you would like to do or accomplish?

You are doing a very good job. Are there any other goals you would like to fulfill?

What can you do to improve our business?

Can I challenge you with a project?

Did you notice that Mary was finished with her job, and went ahead and did something else?

5. *Your mentee is late too often.*

How do you help her think about the consequences of lateness?

Do you understand the effect of tardiness on your coworkers?

Do you know if you are not here, we just cannot get started?

If you are late for school, what happens?

I'm glad you are here. I was worried about you. Is everything okay?

Is there any reason why you are late?

6. *How do you get a youth to understand the need for confidentiality?*

Do you realize this could affect your ability to do the job?

How do you feel when others don't respect your privacy?

How would you want this situation handled if it pertained to yourself?

Situations for Encouraging Career Planning

1. *How do you guide a youth who seems to have no career direction?*

What do you like to do?

Do you like physical labor?

What hobbies do you enjoy? What are your hobbies?

Do you want to work with people?

Would you rather work indoors or out?

Do you like using your hands?

What are your talents?

What do you do best in school?

Where do you see yourself in 20 years?

What are your goals?

How much money do you want to make?

What type of experiences have you had? Are there ways you could get more?

What careers seem exciting to you?

What people have influenced you?

Where would you like to live?

Whom can you talk to in other careers?

2. *Your mentee has a very narrow plan for her career.*

How would you help her think about a wider array of career options?

Will a career in this area last?

What is the potential for advancement (in the field you are thinking about)? Can you move up to middle manager or higher?

What are some different levels within this field?

What are your interests?

What are some associated fields?

Can you see yourself doing this 10, 20, or 25 years from now?

What do you feel your skills are? Where could they fit?

3. *Your mentee plans to join the army after graduation.*

Her chief motive seems to be to get out of a bad home situation.

How do you help her understand her motives and consider other alternatives without demeaning the choice to enlist?

What will you do after the army?

What do you think will be the consequences of this decision?

What specialty would you pursue in the army?

Do you want to be an officer or enlisted?

What skills will you learn in the army that you can use when you are out?

How will this decision change your family situation?

4. *How do you help your mentee relate what he is doing at work to future career goals, even if he is thinking about a career outside your area?*

What skills are you developing that aren't specific to this job?

What skills have you learned that can take you further?

What values are you learning here that you can use in another field?

What are you looking for in a career outside of this area?

5. *How do you challenge your youth to think about how to reach their goals, especially how continuing their education after high school might play a part?*

What are your goals? Make a list.

Who are some people you respect? Could you talk to them about careers and education?

What's the market, the competition in this field?

How do the earnings for these positions differ?

How do you think these two candidates with different levels of education would compete for this position?

How are the decisions you are making now affecting the path you will follow in the future?

6. *Your youth feels pressure about future plans from his teachers, peers, and parents.
How do you ask him about his personal goals for the future?*

Where do you see yourself in 5 years? In 10 years?

What are your interests?

What do *you* want to do, not your mom or dad?

Why do you feel pressure?

Have you talked to your parents (about the pressure you are feeling)?

7. *What do you ask your youth to make her understand how what she does now will affect her future?*

Do you think somebody with major mistakes in their past will be eligible for that goal/job in future?

What positive experiences have you had that prepare you for a career?

Are you laying down a foundation for what you want in the future?