

# Handout C

## The Meta Model of communication

The **basis** for all communication is our **personal communication style**. This is the main tool determining the outcome of our communication with others.

**Becoming aware of how we affect – and are affected by – others, is important.** We then need to have methods to adjust our communication style and make it more effective.

We need a method which can enable us to obtain information in a neutral way, without making the other person defensive.

The **META MODEL** is one such method. It was developed by a group of professionals in the United States of America, based on observations of **how people in a number of different situations (in personal and professional life) communicated effectively**.

**Their findings were:**

- people who communicate effectively ask many more questions than others
- they ask many open-ended questions, asking for a description of the other person's ideas, feelings, etc, and often ask for the reasons behind such ideas
- in brief, people who communicate well seek to UNDERSTAND the other person's intention before they give their own opinion.

**THE META MODEL is developed from this study.**

**It is a language tool designed to:**

- collect information in a neutral way
- improve the possibilities to understand the intention of the communication partner
- help structure unclear communication.

The Meta Model consists of a number of different components showing how to deal better with a variety of communication structures. The simplest and most essential part is the one we have introduced in this course:

**To get DESCRIPTIVE information, ask questions that start with:**

- What ... How ... In what way ...
- Where ... From where ... Who ... From whom ... When ...
- Please give an example ... Please say something more about this ...



**Asking an open question often makes people open up, and talk freely**

Such questions are usually felt by the respondent to be **NEUTRAL**.

**The DESCRIPTIVE Meta Model questions will usually communicate a sincere wish to learn and to listen** (IF supported by nonverbal communication that gives the same message!)

Such questions are an invitation to **open communication**.

To get ANALYTICAL information, ask questions that start with

- Why ...

Such questions are often felt by the respondent to be **challenging**, and he/she may give you **an emotional (often negative) response**.

### Asking leading or direct questions

Questions starting with e.g.

- Do you think .../don't you think ...
- Do you also have problems with ...
- Can you see that this idea is a good one ...
- Wouldn't you say that .../agree that

have only two options for answers: **yes** or **no**.

Such questions are often asked **to confirm the idea(s) of the interviewer** or other person who asks the questions. They do not invite the respondent/communication partner to give his/her own idea.

If you are communicating with a person who is a bit **shy or insecure**, asking direct questions will usually not give you any valuable information. It is likely that the respondent will give you the answer he/she thinks you want to hear.

People you know well, or people who are **confident**, will usually not let a leading question stop them if they have something they want to say.

**When we ask leading questions, it is often because we feel insecure ourselves.** It is also because we do not always THINK about what we say and how we say it – asking leading questions is a habit for most people. To change the habit of asking leading questions, is hard – but possible.

**The Meta Model is a useful method to use when we want to find out what people REALLY think and feel.**



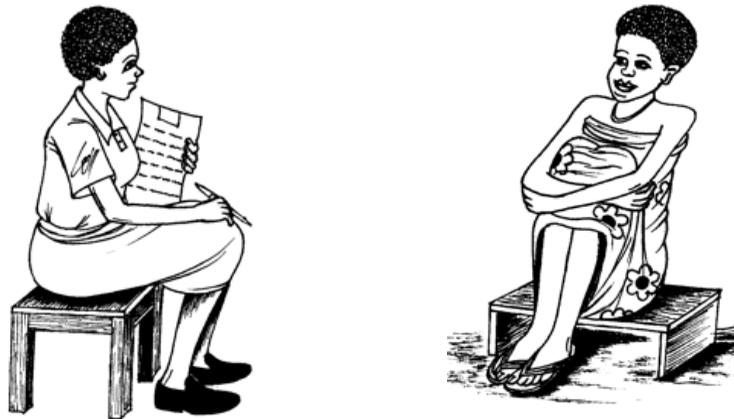
*Field workers often ask why-questions when they feel unsure... Why-questions can make respondents feel attacked, and they may shut up*

Asking questions which give only two alternative answers

- do you think we should go swimming or bicycling?
- are you a Christian or a Muslim?
- would you think we should use role-play or demonstration?

**all limit the respondent to only two choices.** In most cases, there will be many more choices, and asking the question in a different way would open up those other choices.

Confident people will give you their idea of other choices if they think of them, but shy people may not do so.



**Answers to closed questions are quick, but often not reliable. Both persons may be unsure**

**Thus, you should be aware of whom you are talking with, and what that person's characteristics are, before you choose what style of question you will use. If you don't know, the safest is to start with an open question.**

If you fail to do so, **you may not be able to trust that the "information" you receive is true** (i.e. represents the REAL opinion of your respondent).

**Important note:** It is NOT WRONG to ask leading questions – you need to be aware of how you ask questions, whom you ask and when, in order to assess the information. In questionnaires used in survey research, many questions are closed. Closed questions are not "bad" or "wrong" – sometimes they are effective for getting the answer (for example about numbers). It is important to use open questions in all the communication work that concerns the interpersonal interaction – this enables you to get an agreement with a respondent who is happy to sit down and answer the questionnaire with closed questions **and** open ones.