

Leadership Development

Scaling Questions

A tactic to discuss outcomes and solicit actionable feedback

Scaling questions allow us to rate priorities, goals, satisfaction, problems, skill set, coping strategies, successes, motivation for change, safety, confidence, and hope on a numerical scale from one to ten. They are quick, simple, and easy to ask, making them especially useful for busy managers and leaders struggling with increasing workloads. Scaling questions simplify emotional, complex, and overwhelming situations. They are also available to anyone: peers can use them with each other, and managers and employees can *both* initiate a scaling conversation as a way to touch base and get feedback.

It takes just four steps to create a powerful scaling question that can then guide a conversation.

Step One: Define the scale.

- Ten = the best outcome, the hoped-for development, the best of all possible results

- One = the opposite of whatever you define as a ten. The bottom of the scale is one and doesn't need elaboration. (Zero is not part of the scale).

Either partner can establish the scale.

Step Two: Place the issue/situation on the scale.

Now that the bookends are clear, one person frames a question about a specific aspect of the situation in terms of the scale. The other person, the rater, assigns a value between one and ten.

The formula looks like this: If ten is [best possible outcome for thing] and one is the opposite, where are you/where am I in doing [the thing]?

Step Three: Learn more about the rating.

- Stay positive: why did the rater give that score? Why is the number as high as it is, even if it's a one?
- Show appreciation for the information. Be non-judgmental: don't question or argue the rating itself, but try to understand why the rating makes sense to the rater.
- Ask again, "What else made it that high?" Ask again, until the rater has exhausted their explanation.

Step Four: What do you need to see to have the ratings slide up a bit?

- Where to next? What small step would result in a slightly higher rung on the rating ladder?

Optional Step Five: Where would your close friend/partner/co-worker place [thing] on the scale?

This step can either take the scaling question to a third person, or it can enable the rater to speculate about how someone they know would evaluate the thing in question. (This can be a great tool to get over-critical

raters out of their heads or to encourage a rater to think about the project from someone else's point of view.)

I love scaling questions because they accomplish so much with relatively little effort. They

1. Clarify the issue.
2. Are simple to use.
3. Put a “fence” around a situation, making it more manageable and less overwhelming.
4. Translate feelings about a situation into numbers.
5. Encourage outside perspective to the situation.
6. Create incremental plans and next steps.
7. Result in next steps that others can see
8. Yield useful feedback in many cases.
9. Build confidence.
10. Focus on solutions instead of problems.

Scaling questions in action

Sample conversation:

Manager: “If ten is my directions are obvious and understandable and one is the opposite, where would you place my directions on most days?”

Employee: “I would put you at a five.”

M: “Great! Why did you put me as high as a 5? What made my directions rate that high?”

E: “Well, you tell me what I need to do when you give me the assignment. You tell me where to find additional information.”

M: “Thanks. Now what might I do to improve just a little?”

E: “Well, if we could talk in your office, I wouldn't be distracted by everything else going on. And if you could write out the top three things.”

M: Thanks so much. So if we spent a few minutes together in my office going over the jobs and I handed you a list, I would likely move

up a bit?"

E: "Yes, that would help."

Examples of scaling questions:

- "If ten is you are super-confident asking your boss for a raise and one is the opposite, where are you?"
- "If ten is I'm ready to be a director and one is the opposite, where am I?"
- "If ten is the project will for sure be done on time and one is the opposite, where are you?"