

Two fence projects, same month, same region. The first: a Brampton homeowner replacing a backyard cedar fence, who spent forty minutes on the phone with each of three contractors and asked about everything except the price. The second: a property manager in Mississauga fencing an industrial yard, who asked one question, "what's your rate per foot?", and signed the lowest number that afternoon.

Both fences got built. Only one got built the way its owner expected. The homeowner's crew arrived on time, set the posts deep, and left the yard cleaner than they found it. The property manager's crew showed up a week late with a different crew than the one that quoted, and the finished line ran six inches off the marked boundary, which would have been a problem anywhere and was a particular problem next to a tenant's loading dock. The difference between those outcomes was not luck and it was not price. It was the questions to ask before hiring, and the mistakes made around them.

This article walks through the common mistakes with questions to ask before hiring, what each one costs, and the better question to ask instead. Some of it applies to any fence. Some of it applies differently to residential and commercial projects, and the differences are worth knowing before you pick up the phone.

Mistake One: Asking Nothing at All

The most common mistake is also the quietest: asking nothing, on the theory that the contractor is the professional and the owner should stay out of the way. This is a reasonable instinct and a costly one. "They're the professional" is true right up until the moment a professional makes an assumption about your property that you never corrected, because you never knew an assumption was being made.

Consider what "asking nothing" produces. The contractor assumes a material grade, assumes a post depth, assumes the old fence stays in place, assumes the neighbor has no opinion, and prices the job on those assumptions. The fence gets built to someone else's guesses, and the owner discovers the guesses when the invoice arrives or when the fence fails. Nobody was dishonest. The silence just did the talking.

The quiet version of this mistake is asking questions only of the wrong person: the salesperson who does the quoting rather than the crew that does the work. The salesperson knows the price list. The crew knows the ground. Ask to talk to someone who has [Toronto fence installers](#) actually built fences this season, and listen to how their answers differ.

The fix is not to interrogate anyone. It is to ask the baseline questions that force the conversation to be specific: Who will be on site doing the work? What material and what grade? How deep will the posts go? What happens if you hit rock? What does the price include? None of these are hostile. They are the questions a contractor expects, and a contractor who is bothered by them is telling you something about how the job will go.

Mistake Two: Asking Only About Price

The opposite failure is just as common: asking one question, the price, and treating the answer as the whole decision. This is the mistake that produces the lowest estimate, and the lowest estimate is rarely the cheapest fence.

Price-only owners discover, in sequence, that the low number did not include demolition, or did not include disposal, or assumed a shorter run than the property actually has, or priced a lighter material grade than the one they pictured. None of that is fraud. It is what happens when the only question asked is the one that produces a number, because a number without a scope is a promise about nothing.

The fix is to ask what the number includes before you ask for the number. Flip the order: scope first, price second, then the follow-ups. What is not included? How are changes priced? What does the payment schedule look like? A contractor who answers those without hesitation is worth more than the one who can only say the number fast. Commercial owners should treat this as a hard rule: on a project measured in hundreds of feet, a vague number is not a quote, it is a starting position.

There is a useful middle path between asking nothing and asking only about price: ask for a range with the variables named. "What does this scope run in your experience, and what would move it up or down?" A contractor who answers with a range and the reasons for it is giving you real information. A contractor who answers with a single confident number is giving you a hope.

Mistake Three: Accepting Vague Answers

Some owners ask excellent questions and then accept terrible answers. "We'll take care of all that." "Don't worry about it." "That's standard." These phrases are not answers. They are exits from the conversation, and every time you let one pass, you are paying for a vague promise with a specific price.

Here is how the exchange usually goes. You ask about cleanup, and the contractor says "we always leave the site clean." You nod, satisfied, and three weeks later the yard is full of cedar scraps and fasteners, because "clean" meant something different to them than it did to you. The contractor was not lying. The word was just carrying more weight than it could hold.

The fix is a habit called the follow-up question. When you hear a vague answer, ask for the specifics once, politely, and see what happens. "Can you walk me through what 'take care of it' covers?" A contractor with real processes answers easily, because they have done it before. A contractor without processes stalls, or repeats the phrase with more confidence, and now you know. When you get a specific answer, ask for it in writing. "That's helpful. Can you add that to the estimate?" separates the organized from the hopeful in one exchange.



Mistake Four: Asking the Right Questions at the Wrong Time

Timing is part of asking. Owners routinely ask warranty questions before the scope is set, price questions before the material is chosen, and crew questions before the contractor has seen the site. The answers they get are guesses, and the guesses harden into expectations that the project then fails to meet.

Ask a contractor about warranty terms before they have seen the ground, and you will get a general statement that covers nothing specific. Ask the same question after the site visit, with the soil, the slope, and the exposure on the table, and you get a real answer about what is covered and why. The question did not change. The timing did.

Match the question to the stage. On the first call, ask about availability, experience with your material, and the shape of the process. On the site visit, ask about the ground, the access, and the plan. When the estimate arrives, ask about inclusions, exclusions, and payment. Before signing, ask about warranty terms, cleanup, and who to call afterward. Each question lands at the moment the contractor can actually answer it, and each answer means more because it is grounded in something real.

The same logic applies to the order of contractors. Do not take the first estimate and sign it, and do not take the third and sign it because you are tired of the process. Give yourself the same set of questions for every contractor, in the same order, so the answers are comparable. That discipline is what makes the timing of questions work.

Mistake Five: Forgetting the Questions That Protect You

The questions most owners skip are the ones that protect them if something goes wrong, which is precisely when questions matter most. These are not comfortable questions, and that is why they are valuable.

Ask about insurance and worker coverage, and verify the details with the contractor and your own insurer rather than taking a word-of-mouth answer as fact. Ask who arranges utility locates before anyone digs, and confirm the requirement with your local utility or municipality. Ask about cleanup and damage: what happens to the lawn, who repairs a broken sprinkler line, and what condition the site is left in. Ask about the warranty in specific terms, what it covers, for how long, and what the claim process is, and get it in writing. Ask how disputes are handled before there is a dispute to handle.

None of these questions are accusations. They are the questions a careful buyer asks about any significant purchase, and a fence is a significant purchase that happens to live outdoors, in the weather, for decades. The owners who skip them are not saving time. They are deferring it, with interest.

Where Residential and Commercial Owners Trip Differently

Residential owners make their worst mistakes on the boundary: assuming the old fence marks the line, skipping the neighbor conversation, and discovering both problems after the concrete is set. The fix is preparation: a survey, a conversation, an agreement in writing. Ask about the line before you ask about the price, and get the neighbor's position before you get the contractor's estimate.

Commercial owners make their worst mistakes on coordination. The questions that sink commercial projects are the ones nobody asked about access hours, tenant needs, utility corridors, and who owns the approvals. A fence around a parking lot touches lighting, signage, drainage, and delivery routes, and the owner who asks about none of those has built a dispute into the schedule. Commercial projects also magnify every mistake: a six-inch error on a boundary is a conversation, while a six-inch error along two hundred feet of industrial yard is a problem with a tenant, a surveyor, and possibly a lawyer.

The scale difference changes the questions, not the principle. Residential owners should ask about the neighbor and the line. Commercial owners should ask about access, approvals, and the maintenance plan. Both should ask the baseline questions, crew, material, depth, inclusions, because both are hiring people to build something that will outlast the phone number on the truck.

The Real Cost of Skipping the Questions to Ask Before Hiring

Look back at the two projects from the start of this article. The homeowner did not avoid problems by being suspicious. She avoided them by asking questions at the right time, accepting only specific answers, and writing down what she was promised. The property manager did not fail because he was cheap. He failed because he asked one question, accepted one number, and let the vagueness do the rest.

The common mistakes with questions to ask before hiring all share one root: treating the conversation as a formality instead of the main event. The fence is built once, in a week or two. The conversation is the part you get to do over as many times as you need. Use it.