

## John Sturrock Podcast

(transcript)

### Better Conversations, Better Outcomes

#### Session 9: Some Deep Questions and Really Listening

After a short pause in these podcasts for the launch of my book *A Mediator's Musings*, this is a return to the theme of asking questions, for the last time, as we also make the transition into the importance of listening.

This is podcast 9 in this series.

We can never over-emphasise the importance of understanding. Often that is more important to people than getting their own way. *"Just as important as the outcome is that we now **understand** where you are coming from..."* as a lead negotiator said to his counterpart on day three of a really tough negotiation.

I would like to mention some really powerful questions which can help us to gain understanding, really get under the surface and help people to address difficult matters. In my work, I have been greatly influenced by Ken Cloke, one of the finest writers, thinkers and leaders in the field of conflict resolution. In his wonderful book, ***Mediating Dangerously***, he illustrates some of the questions which can make a big difference.

Questions like these, which I find at page 121 of the book:

- *What is the crossroads at which you are standing at this moment in your life or in this conflict?*
- *What is preventing you from moving forward?*
- *What have you done or not done that has contributed to or sustained the conflict?*
- *What price are you paying for this conflict?*
- *How long do you intend to continue paying it?*
- *What is the one thing for which you would like to be acknowledged?*
- *What is the one thing which you would like to acknowledge in the other person?*

Building on these, in a mediation some time ago, I prepared a series of questions for siblings to consider prior to our mediation in an acrimonious dispute about the distribution of their parents' assets.

Here is what I asked them to consider and try to answer:

- *What is this really about?*
- *How much of this is about money?*
- *What is really motivating you?*
- *What do you need to have acknowledged about you and your role in the family?*
- *What have you done to contribute to this situation?*
- *What would you do differently if you could start again?*

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- *What do you need to say to your brother/sister which will really help?*
- *What do you need to say you are sorry about?*
- *What would our parents say to you if they were standing in the corner watching you?*
- *What would they expect of you in this situation?*
- *What one thing can you do which will change things radically for the better?*
- *What can you give which will help to change the present situation?*
- *If you were watching yourself from a detached perspective in this mediation, what would you hope to see and hear?*
- *If you leave this situation without a resolution, what is the one thing you might regret not saying?*
- *What price do you put on family reconciliation/resolution?*
- *If you leave this with a resolution, how will that feel? What will you do?*
- *What change might that bring to you - and to your siblings?*
- *If this is the last time you are to see your brother/sister, what would you like to say?*
- *What impression would you like to leave?*

These questions can be easily adapted to partnership, boardroom and other business or personal settings.

Of course, if you are going to ask questions like these, you need to listen to what is being said in response. Or not said. If you listen, what do you hear? What do you see? What signals do you pick up? What might have been said? What was on the tip of the tongue? We talk about listening in the margins. What do you take from that momentary glance away? Or the drop in the voice? If you had said nothing, and allowed silence to prevail, what would have happened? Who or what would have filled the space? If you had kept quiet, what might you have learned?

If we don't assume we know what is going to be said, if we avoid butting in, or prejudging, if we just pause before preparing our response, our rebuttal, our position on the matter, it is amazing what we might hear – and learn.

In the search for meaning, therefore, listening is critical. In fact, listening has often been described as the key skill as we seek understanding - and to show that we really value other people.

But often we don't really listen, do we; this came from a friend many years ago:

*“As we have become (wo)men who do too much, we find our listening skills on the wane. We cut people off in the middle of sentences. We assume we know what the other person is going to say, and we act on that assumption. We even become enamoured with the sound of our own voice.*

*We must remember that communication is more than a monologue. Good communication is a balance of speaking and sharing, listening carefully, and absorbing before we speak again”.*

I recall the mediator Jane Gunn once writing that:

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*“to be listened to is to be valued; acknowledged; recognised as an individual – to be truly listened to is to receive a precious gift, to be made to feel special”*

*“when we are listening, we are offering the other person the gift of understanding and acceptance (Note: not necessarily agreement), of being taken seriously”*

*“at the end of the day, making others feel special is one of the keys to building relationships. In life and business...”*

For all sorts of reasons, listening works! And it takes practice. When we practice listening in simple exercises in our training courses, people often say to us: “We now realise that we have never really listened”.