



John Sturrock Podcast

(transcript)

Better Conversations, Better Outcomes

Session 4: Asking Questions (part 1)

“They answered my questions with questions”. These words from a lovely song by Manfred Mann’s Earthband back in 1976, the last track on their *The Roaring Silence* album, have stayed with me over the years. They answered my questions with questions. That’s a real skill.

Hello again, It’s John Sturrock here, with number 4 in my series of short podcasts about how to deal with difficult situations – or just how to build better relationships and have better conversations. In my work as a mediator and coach, we often talk about better conversations and better outcomes, built on strong relationships and really excellent communication.

At the heart of good communication lies the ability to ask really good questions. These are the questions which get under the surface, working towards the heart of a matter, finding out what is really going on, what it’s really about. Someone once observed: “It’s never about what it’s about” and how true that is.

So often we communicate at a superficial level, assuming that what we hear is really what someone means, that how someone behaves on the surface is who they really are and that what someone says they want is really what they need.

Think about an iceberg. We see only a little of its mass above the surface. What lies beneath? The same is true of human relations and especially if people have differences or disputes.

On the surface we see or hear about positions and demands, often expressed in anger or sorrow. But what do these actually represent? What hopes, fears, values, aspirations, concerns, real needs, underlying interests, motivations, lie beneath the surface?

If we want to have really meaningful conversations, establish enduring relationships or resolve an apparently tough situation, we need to explore beneath that surface. And we need good questions to do so.

I like the suggestion that we should “judge someone by the quality of their questions rather than their answers” – what an excellent benchmark that would be.

I am a great fan of open questions. By open questions, I mean those which enable the other person to give an answer that is more than merely yes or no. So often we pose questions which are really us putting across our point of view, assumptions or preconceived idea of what the answer is or should be. “You’ve not heard from X?” “Could you fix this by doing y?” “Do you think that the solution might be....?”

The easiest answer to these questions is yes or no. They don’t get you very far. These are closed questions. They are fine in some situations but not great for getting under the surface.

Rudyard Kipling spoke of keeping “six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew); Their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who.”

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John.Sturrock@core-solutions.com

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Brilliant. And apparently so simple. If we just used these six words to ask questions in any situation where we need to find out more, explore what is really going on, we'd make real progress.

How are you today? How are you feeling? What are you thinking? Where are you going? What will you do there? How will you get there? Who will you meet there? How do you know them? What will you talk about? What's important to you in that conversation? Why does that matter? What matters to them?

Easy to suggest. But not so easy to do. Try it out in a conversation today: ask only who, what, why, when, where and how questions. It takes self-discipline.