

John Sturrock Podcast

(transcript)

Better Conversations, Better Outcomes

Session 6: Asking Questions as part of Preparation (part 3)

Today, I'd like to turn some of what we've been discussing in the last two podcasts into practical use. Over the years, I've refined a set of open questions for use in preparing for meetings, often in difficult situations, and for people who are going into negotiation or mediation.

I have also used variations of these when starting with a new employee or contemplating a new business relationship. Human due diligence we call it. These questions help me and others to see more clearly what really matters.

Indeed, these questions (all of the "what" variety and therefore just a start) contain many of the elements which any rich conversation with another person might cover.

I am going to go through each of them with a bit of explanation for some of them, though the only way really to grasp their utility is to sit down with the list of questions and go through them yourselves, perhaps with a difficult meeting in mind. Indeed, why not do that now while you listen? Think of a difficult situation you have now – or have had recently – and try to answer these questions.

We start with:

- *What do you really need to achieve today?*

So, this is asking: What is this really about? What is your objective? Think big picture.

Then:

- *If you achieved this, what would that mean for you?*

With this question, we are trying to explore: Why do you need to achieve this? What would the outcome lead to? Why would that matter? What lies underneath?

Then, two questions focusing on actions and words. Prompting us to think more deeply and to pause before we speak or act.

- *What do you need to **do** to achieve this?*
- *What do you need to **say** to the other person to help to achieve this?*

Then, six related questions – whose order could be changed depending on the situation:

- *What are your main concerns at this stage?*
- *What do you think are the other person's main concerns at this stage?*
- *Where might misunderstandings have arisen in the past?*
- *What do you think that the other person really needs out of this?*
- *What do you need to hear from the other person which would help you achieve your objective?*
- *What do you think the other person needs to hear from you which will help to move you on to a realistic outcome for all concerned?*

This collection of questions compels us to think not just about ourselves and our own needs but those of the other person or persons – getting into their shoes as well as you can – perhaps forcing us to challenge our own assumptions and perceptions.

Moving on:

- *What are the areas of common ground between you and the other person?*

This question feels really important (so often we focus on the differences when we have much more in common than we realise) and indeed this might be a question to answer at an earlier stage in this process – remember you can change the order! This is not some sort of fixed prescription.

And then a final group of questions which is more forward looking – an attempt to bring objectivity and realism to our decisions and choices – more on this in later podcasts I am sure:

- *What are the realistic options for sorting this out?*
- *If you are going to work together in the future, what needs to be done?*
- *If you are not going to work together in the future, what needs to be done?*
- *If you can't find a mutually acceptable solution, what will happen?*
- *What will be the consequences for you if this is not resolved?*
- *What do you think will be the consequences for the other person?*

There is much there to work on.

And I suggest ending with a bit of self-reflection:

- *What have you learned about yourself – and the present situation - in answering these questions?*

There is such a lot in all of this. If you just take five minutes to prepare it could make a difference but of course the more you do, the more it will pay off. I do commend practising with this material. It will make a difference I am sure.