

Keys to Proper Questioning

The way you ask a question is as important as its content. To gain the maximum information about your counterpart's needs and motivations, you have to structure your questions carefully. Following are several key points that will help you gain accurate information.

1. Have a goal and a questioning plan. When you are negotiating, it is important to have a goal in mind and a questioning plan that will help you achieve that goal. If you have ever been in a deposition, you know that attorneys are masters at having both a goal and a questioning plan. A lawyer will walk into the room with a legal pad full of questions that are sequenced in a specific order to ensure that the witnesses' responses help solidify the lawyer's case.

What type of information will help you make a good decision? How will you go about getting that information? Will you be direct? Will you disguise your questions? Asking direct or closed-ended questions is most helpful when you are trying to confirm a deal point or gain a concession. Open-ended or indirect questions are useful for gaining as much information as possible. For example, when working with a buyer, a direct question like "Do you have the go-ahead to purchase this product in the current budget cycle?" would provide you with a straight "yes" or "no" answer that would help you with your sales forecast. An indirect question like "Who else needs to be involved in making this type of purchase decision?" would reveal who the real decision makers in the company are.

A questioning plan will put you in the action mode and your counterpart in the reaction mode. With your counterpart reacting, you are in control of the negotiation and in a better position to accomplish your

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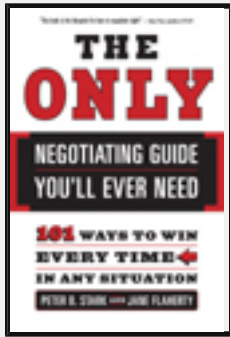
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2. **Know your counterpart.** The more you can find out about your counterpart, the better you can target your questions. For example, some people have a strong need to build a relationship and do not like to address task-related issues before relationship issues have been addressed. Most often, a relationship-oriented person opens every conversation by asking how you and your kids are, and maybe discussing the weather or the score in last night's baseball game. The task-oriented person wants to get right down to business. If you are a task-oriented person and your counterpart is relationship-oriented, you may give the impression of rudeness if you dive right into the negotiation without addressing the amenities. On the other hand, if you are a relationship-oriented person and your counterpart is task-oriented, your efforts to initiate a little "small talk" may be seen as wasting precious time. Respecting your counterpart's style creates a win-win atmosphere.

What motivates your counterpart? What are her needs and values? How does she approach social interactions? What is her attitude toward time? A greater knowledge of these issues will enable you to make your questions more targeted and specific.

3. **Move from the broad to the narrow.** In the question sequence, it is helpful to start with broad questions. Then, as you gain answers to those, you can refine and hone your questions to eventually yield specific information. For example, "Did you keep maintenance records on your car?" "Yes." "What did you record?" "When I changed the oil and replaced the tires." "How often did you change your oil?" "Every three thousand miles." "What kind of oil did you use?" and so on.

4. **Use proper timing.** We've all occasionally asked the wrong question at the wrong time. It is important to be sensitive to your counterpart's needs and feelings. If your counterpart finds your question offensive, two things happen: (1) You do not gain the information you would have with a properly timed question; and (2) your counterpart may become reluctant to negotiate

with you in the future. Asking your husband how his diet is going while he is eating dessert is an example of bad timing.

5. **Build on previous responses.** This point is similar to the third point. As you gain more information, you can make your questions more specific. Negotiators who use this technique are always listening for information they can dive into for more clarification. The more information they have, the better decisions they can make. In the made-for-television Columbo movies, Peter Falk's character is a master of this technique. "Just one more question," he says. "If you weren't at the murder scene, how did you know the weapon was a knife?"

6. **Ask permission to ask a question.** Asking permission is the polite thing to do. It is also effective because most people will not refuse you if you ask permission. Finally, it starts the swing toward agreement. Once your counterpart has granted you permission, he is more likely to give you a complete answer. Lieutenant Columbo is a master of this technique, too. He constantly returns to the suspect and asks politely, "Can I ask just one more question?"

7. **After you ask a question, stop talking and listen.** Novice negotiators are uncomfortable with silence. Silence is a void, and they feel an overwhelming need to fill it. In fact, some negotiators will even try to answer the question for their counterpart if there is no response. When you ask a question, enjoy the golden silence and give your counterpart ample time to formulate a response.

8. **Take notes.** If you are going to ask questions, we encourage you to take notes. You do not need to take everything down word for word, but capture enough detail to enable you to recreate the negotiation later, recalling the main points your counterpart made. Taking notes demonstrates that you care about your counterpart's thoughts and are thorough in your investigations, and allows you to recall information as

the negotiation proceeds.

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