

## John Sturrock Podcast

(transcript)

### Better Conversations, Better Outcomes

#### Asking Questions (part 2)

In this session, I am going to explore further the topic of asking questions which we began in the last podcast.

Really effective questions are so important. Alongside listening (which we'll come to next in this series) and pausing – you may remember the power of the pause from an earlier podcast – for me, questioning is one of the essential skills. And, like any practical technique we need to practice it. Continually.

Think of the world class sports women and sports men you admire. Or the top musicians. They are constantly practising. It's the same for those of us who want to be really good at asking questions.

Last time I mentioned the value of open questions. Rudyard Kipling's six trusted friends: what, where, when, why, how and who. And how they can be used to get under the surface, to really understand where someone else is coming from.

Let's develop this idea. What kind of questions will help you to find out what is really going on? When I started out as a mediator, I used to take a sheet of paper with me with a very rough mind map of the range of possible questions I might need to ask in the early stages of a conversation, after I'd built up a bit of rapport with the person I was talking to. It was more the formulation of the question rather than its content, as the content would depend on the subject matter and the answers I elicited.

My mind map would include questions like the following (bear in mind these are just examples; you have to modify and shape them each time):

*What are your goals today? What do you want out of this? What would you like to achieve? What do you really need to achieve? What would it mean to you if....? What really worries you? What are your main concerns? ...about the day, about the process, about what has happened, about the future? What do you hope for after this is over? What is really important to you? What would make a real difference to you? What would you do if this was at an end? What else do I need to know in order to help you? What do you need to tell me? What is this really all about? (That last one, asked in the right way and at the right time, can be really helpful).*

Note the use of the words "today" "really", "real", "main", to try to focus in on the underlying issues – and looking to the future as well as the present. And note also the distinction between wants and likes and needs. Each is likely to bring a different response.

And these are just a few of the "what" questions. Each could be followed by a "why" question. Some people are wary of the "why" question as it might seem too invasive. For me, it is all about your tone, the timing, the rapport you have built up with the person you are speaking to, your genuine interest in the person and genuine curiosity about the situation.

*“Why might that be a concern for you?”* can be a gently probing question without seeming in any way like an interrogation. *“Why is that important?” “Why are you worried about...?” “Why do you feel that way?” “Why is this so difficult for you?”*

This is about exploring what “lies under the stairs” in the words of the author Charles Handy, that little recess where things are tucked away.

And more “How” questions will also fit in too. *“How could we reduce that worry?” “How would you feel if...” “How could you take that forward?” “How could I make this process work well for you?”* or even just *“How can I help today?”*

And so on with “who”, “where” and “when” as appropriate. My mind map is not a rigid framework, only an aid memoire.

These questions are tools to be used carefully and sensitively, always allowing yourself a momentary pause as you formulate each question. Often the question will follow naturally from the preceding answer, allowing you to go a little deeper each time, exploring the real meaning. Indeed, the words in the answer may inform the next question.

*“When you say x, what do you mean by that?” “What might those words have meant to others?” “Why is achieving z a top priority for you?” “How would telling him that help you move forward?”* Think about an onion and peeling away each layer with each of your questions.

Don’t go too far too fast. You don’t just rush through all of these questions. It should be a conversation not an investigation. And of course, it is essential to listen to the answers. That’s where the gold dust lies. That is why the pause is so critical. There’s no point having carefully crafted questions if you are so busy formulating them that you don’t hear what is being said in response. You don’t know what is going to be said. Avoid making assumptions.

Listen, digest and then formulate. As I said a moment ago, the answers will often help you frame the next question. The brain is a fantastic mechanism and, if you give it a few extra micro-seconds, it will do its job really well. Take your time. Go with the flow.