

John Sturrock Podcast

(transcript)

Better Conversations, Better Outcomes

Asking Questions (part 4)

Why am I asking this question of this person at this time in this way?

I remember when I first came across this formulation back in the late 90s when I was responsible for devising and running the advocacy training programme for the Scottish Bar. We learned this memorable teaching phrase from leaders in the field in the United States and asking questions was of course a key skill for court room advocates.

Why am I asking this question of this person at this time in this way?

Imagine if you could consciously answer this question each time you asked any question. That's not possible of course but the very idea is a good way to start, to prepare, to use in that moment of pause as you formulate that really important question.

Let's break it down: it's really asking us to ponder these subsidiary questions: why, who (or by whom), what, whom (or of whom), when and how?

- *Why – your purpose, your objective in asking the question at all*
- *By whom – why am I asking this question? Am I the right person to do so?*
- *What – this particular question: the subject matter, or topic of your question*
- *Of whom – is this the right person to be asking for a response to this question?*
- *When – at this time: in my conversation, is this the point to raise this? In my flow of questions, have I laid the groundwork? Or do I need an element of surprise? Timing may be really important*
- *How - in this way: the formulation of the question, its form and content, the words we use.*

All powerful stuff. And all learnable, if you bring all of this to your conscious mind and practice. I'd like to focus now on the how: the "in this way" part.

I'm greatly in favour of short questions. One fact or one point per question. Think of those TV interviewers who ask compound questions of politicians, with multiple facts: "Why did you do such and such and who told you to do x and when did you learn about y.." And the answer is? Easily avoided as the politician chooses which part to answer or evades the question all together.

But how impressive is the question: "What were you told?" "When were you told?" Or even better: "What precisely were you told?" "On what day and at what time were you told?" Note that these are still all in the open question form which we discussed in earlier podcasts.

And remember that facts are different from opinions. If you ask questions about opinion or inference, or speculation, there is always scope for differences in views. People can get tetchy quite quickly when they get into this territory. You may need to focus on the underlying facts to really get to the heart of matters.

Beware of “what do you think?” for example. Or even “how far away were you?” or “how near were you?” Everything then depends on the respondent’s perception of distance. Much better is: “What distance in metres were you from the incident?” Objective and checkable. Unless of course you are deliberately trying to create a more subjective picture.

Keep the language simple and clear. Not simplistic but straightforward. Our job is usually to express, not impress. Flowery language is all very well but it may obscure, complicate, or confuse. Break it down into manageable chunks.

Choose your words carefully: every word can be carefully chosen for its task. Think about that: every word carefully chosen for its task. Take that extra moment, that micro-second, and let the brain do its job: selecting the word that might make all the difference.

If you were interviewing one of the key players in decision-making at this time, what might you ask? Here are some suggestions:

- “When precisely were you told about a?”
- “What were you told about the risks?”
- “What steps did you take at that time?”
- “Who advised you?”
- “Who else was involved in decisions?”
- “What specific factors did you take into account?”
- “Why did you take those into account?”
- “What options did you consider?”
- “How did you go about assessing the options?”
- “What criteria did you apply?”
- “Why did you choose these criteria?”
- “Who else did you consult?”
- “When did you do so?”
- “What did they tell you?”

Short, simple language, unambiguous (I hope), clear, focussed, factual (perhaps apart from one or two questions – which ones?), in a structured order, easy to answer, harder to evade. And remember we need to have a purpose in asking the questions, overall, and with each one.

There’s a lot in this isn’t there? I hope it’s useful.