

Essential Skills for Engaging Conflict:

Six Conversations in Support of Effective Collaboration

Module 5: Exploring Issues to Understand Interests

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In the previous module, we introduced the work of Roger Fisher and William Ury. Their paradigm-shifting book, *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*, provides an elegant structure for understanding what needs to be done to fully unpack and resolve an issue.

- When we come together to make decisions around difficult “*issues*,” we typically bring our “*positions*” to the conversation.
- Our positions typically include our perspective on the issue(s) along with our preferred solution(s).
- As stated in previous lessons, when positions are perceived as compatible, there is no problem. However, when our positions threaten each other, we open ourselves to the “dark side” of conflict. This is where self-awareness and choice become critical.
- The choice is between defending our positions or suspending judgment and seeking to understand the “*interests*” driving the positions advocated by each of us. In this context, where a person’s positions express “what” they want, their underlying interests express “why” this is important to them.
- A wise and effective decision is not found in a compromise between our positions, but rather in a solution that meets as many of our shared and independent Interests as possible.

An essential skill for getting at these deeper interests is the ability to ask good questions. All too often, our questions at this point are focused on identifying the flaw in the other person’s thinking, or looking to find a quick and easy solution to the problem. Once again, it is not possible to generate effective solutions to a problem that we do not fully understand. Full understanding is achieved when we can articulate our shared and individual interests

In this module you and your team will:

- Understand the correlation between the questions asked and the conversation experienced.
- Learn strategies of “Intentional Inquiry,” where questions are asked in service of a conversation of shared learning.
- Differentiate different types of questions for different purposes.
- Practice generating powerful questions.



The Correlation Between the Questions Asked and the Conversation Experienced

The exploration phase in the process of collaborative decision making is crucial, yet often overlooked or given only cursory attention. In the early stages of the conversation, we typically have only a preliminary understanding of the issue(s) based on our initial sharing of information. The questions we choose to ask will be critical to our ultimate outcome. Too often, our questions shift the conversational focus to a specific solution or plan of action. “Now that we know what the problem is, what should we do?” becomes the focus of our attention.

There is a fundamental decision to be made at this point in our conversation. Will we generate questions in service of divergent thinking or convergent thinking? Will they expand our shared understanding of the issue(s), or will we begin to look for a quick and readily accessible solution? It has been said that the conversation we have is determined by the questions we ask. What we ask, the spirit in which we ask it, and how we ask will invite certain responses and discourage others.

In general, questions focused on divergent thinking are intended to increase our shared thinking on and understanding of an issue. They are designed to take the conversation into a deeper understanding of the complexity of a subject. They are ques-

tions that push the conversation beyond the known into the unknown. Questions intended to support divergent thinking focus on increasing our awareness of alternatives, encourage open discussion, are designed to gather diverse points of view, and facilitate unpacking the logic of a problem.

The Public Conversations Project, a dialogue facilitation group, share the following thoughts on questions in their workshop entitled, “The Power of Dialogue: Constructive Conversations on Divisive Issues”:

“The questions we ask have real effects” (Michael White). “Our questions are fateful” (David Cooperider). The very act of asking questions influences people. Acts of asking and answering alter experience and generate possibilities for further experiences. Questions are statements of the questioner’s beliefs, interests, commitments and they are acts that have effects on listeners, even before they are overtly responded to. Questions develop and are responded to in specific contexts that have power to shape meanings, invite or discourage curiosity and openness, restrict or expand possibilities for action.

“What we focus on expands; attention gives life” (David Cooperider).



They share the following distinctions for correlating types of questions with types of conversations. For example, a question may seek to:

Elicit facts, or	Generate experience
Elicit positional speaking, or	Elicit personal experience
Challenge the other, or	Explore the other's perception
Determine the other's knowledge, or	Invite the other's collaboration and beliefs
Elicit a problem focus, or	Elicit a focus on skills and strengths and desired outcomes.
Elicit history, or	Elicit imagination (e.g. future dreams and hopes)

They go on to advocate for asking questions in support of shared learning that are designed to:

- Create openings where there are closings, surface something that feels fresh and new;
- Express curiosity about someone's experiences and perspectives, passions and strengths;
- Promote reflection and new thinking;
- Promote collaborative, side-by-side relationships.

For some, this may increase our discomfort and frustration. Many of us are problems solvers, and our goal is to make a decision and agree to a plan of action as quickly as possible. We are very busy, time is a limited resource, and we have lots to do. Too

often, questions are oriented to convergent thinking. The focus becomes evaluating alternatives, summarizing key points, sorting ideas into categories, and arriving as quickly as possible at a general conclusion or decision.

This fundamentally compromises our ability to achieve one of the key values of collaboration— leveraging our individual thinking into shared thinking, so as to generate new and innovative thinking. More often than not, challenges we are facing are not simple or complicated, but complex. They will not be solved with technical solutions but require the adaptive work of shared learning.

As a group engage in the following activity to increase your understanding of what makes a “good question:”

Individually:

- Think of a question that you have used in your work, once or regularly, that you believe is a useful and “good question.” Or
- Think of a question that you have been asked that caused you to engage in significant reflection and possible change.

As a group: Take turns sharing.

- Briefly describe the context in which you asked the question.
- What was the question and how did you ask it?
- What happened when you asked the question? What impact did it have? What kind of thinking did it generate?
- What do you believe made it a good question?

As a group: From this conversation, summarize some characteristics of a “good question.”

Intentional Inquiry: Asking Questions in Service of a Conversation of Shared Learning

In Module 3, we introduced the notion of “conversational stance” described by Stone, Patton, and Heen in their book, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. You will remember that they differentiate between what they refer to as a “telling stance” and a “learning stance.” The stance we take has a significant impact on the quality of the conversation. Our stance will fundamentally determine the line of inquiry we pursue, and the types of questions we ask.

In her book entitled, *Change Your Questions Change Your Life*, Marilee Adams introduces a strategy she calls QuestionThinking. She refers to it as a “system of tools using questions for vastly better results in almost anything you do.” This reinforces the correlation we just introduced between the questions asked and the quality of our conversation. Questions make up a significant part of both our internal and external dialogue and, therefore, have significant impact on the way(s) in which we engage our world and each other. Adams states that, “questions drive results. They virtually program how we behave and what kinds of outcomes are available.”

Adams distinguishes between two paths of engagement, which she refers to as the “Learner Path” and the “Judger Path.” Each path is characterized by different types of questions. For example, when choosing the “Judger Path,” you are inclined to ask questions like:

- What’s wrong with them?
- What’s wrong with me?
- Why are they so stupid?
- How do I fix this?

Judger questions are often couched in automatic reactions, are blame focused, and see things in a win/lose context. This takes us back to the “Universal Human Paradigm” introduced in Module 1 that says:

- There is a way that things “should” be.
- When they are that way, things are right.
- And when they are not that way, there is something wrong with me, with them, or with it.

In contrast, when choosing the “Learner Path,” you are more likely to ask questions like:

- What happened?
- What’s useful?
- What do I want?
- What can I learn?
- What is the other person thinking, feeling, needing, wanting?

As in the distinction between a Telling Stance and Learning Stance, the options of Judgers Path and Learners Path are a choice. Who am I committed to being in this conversation? What choice will have me most at integrity with my intentions? Learner questions are born out of thoughtful choices, a commitment to mutual purpose and benefit. They are questions driven by the curiosity of the Learner’s Stance.

We introduce the term, Intentional Inquiry, as a method of asking questions with purpose in mind. By this, we do not mean questions meant to ma-

nipulate the conversation or to coerce a specific outcome. Rather, the inquiring person intends to inspire reflection and new thinking. The term “intentional” used here is significant. Questions in this context become tools by which we “unpack an issue,” “dive more deeply into an issue,” and “create a deeper shared pool of meaning.” Building on the tool metaphor, we know that different tools do different types of work. For example, if you are building a house, you would not use a framing hammer (large, heavy, and leaves a waffle pattern in the wood) when doing the fine finish nailing on cabinets. In the same way, different questions do different types of work in a conversation. The list below provides samples of this.

A. BROADENING QUESTIONS

- are encouraging and not threatening.
- invite further discussion.
- are useful for beginning a session or opening discussion.
- give the respondent latitude in what information s/he chooses to share.

Examples:

- “Tell me more about that....”
- “What else happened?”
- “What happened next?”

B. CLARIFYING QUESTIONS

- help gain understanding of a term or concept.
- move from the general to the specific.

Examples:

- “What do you mean by ‘always, every, never’?”
- “What does ‘unreasonable’ mean to you?”
- “What don’t you understand?”
- “Who, specifically, doesn’t care?”

C. EXPLAINING QUESTIONS

- help gain understanding of the respondent’s reasoning.
- encourage reflection by the respondent and understanding by the questioner.
- HINT: Ask these instead of asking “Why?”

Examples:

- “How did you expect this to turnout?”
- “What leads you to that conclusion?”

D. EXPLORING QUESTIONS

- help gain understanding of the other person’s interests, assumptions, fears, expectations and priorities.
- help shift the respondent’s thinking to what s/he is trying to accomplish.

Examples:

- “What concerns you about...?”
- “What do you most want me to understand about ____ that you don’t think I understand?”
- “What is the best/worst that can come from this?”





E. CHALLENGING QUESTIONS

- challenge a person's line of reasoning.
- create a shift or change in a person's position or point of view.
- "gently" challenge incongruities in a person's behavior, position, interests, etc.

Examples:

"What do you suppose would happen if the press reported that?"
"You say you're interested in my suggestions, but I notice you turn away when I start to talk. What's going on?"

F. BRAINSTORMING QUESTIONS

- generate alternatives or options.
- develop new ideas.

Examples:

"What is one thing you could do to accomplish that?"
"How else might that be done?"

G. CONSEQUENTIAL QUESTIONS

- reality test a possible situation.
- explore the outcome of a choice or behavior.
- examine the consequences of a decision.

Examples:

"How does that suggestion meet your criteria for fairness?"
"What would that be like for you?"
"What would happen if you did?"

When asking questions it is helpful to keep the following in mind:

- How thoughtful are you when asking questions?
- Why are you asking the question you have chosen?
- Why have you chosen now to ask that specific question?
- What do you want that question to do?

Activity: The Dilemma Exercise



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