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Master Negotiators are twice as likely to ask question than their less masterful counterparts.

By Drs. Brad McRae and Jim Hennig

Great questions are one of a negotiator's best and most under utilized tools. In fact, research shows that Master Negotiators are twice as likely to use questions than their less masterful counterparts. Questions can be used to educate both parties about their professional and/or personal interest and therefore help them reach optimal rather than sub-optimal solutions.

Asking the right question, at the right time and in the right way can lead to a more successful outcome where as asking the wrong question, at the wrong time and in the wrong way can result in breaking off the negotiation, a stalemate, or even the escalation of a conflict. Asking the right question, in the right way and at the right time is both a science and an art. As Shakespeare said, "Ripeness is all" which means that timing is everything. This newsletter will help you ask better questions based on the Master Negotiators we have studied.

Great Questions Help Build Relationships

One of our greatest needs as human beings is to feel understood. As Jim states:

Good negotiators understand the importance of, and quickly identify, the other party's negotiation needs. Great negotiators understand the importance of, and quickly identify, the other party's personal needs, in addition to their negotiation needs.

And feeling that their negotiation and personal needs are understood results in increased likability, which further builds the relationship. When people like you, they want to work with you. They also are likely to concede more often and become more sensitive to your needs, and be more likely to try to meet them. For example, you can ask, "*How do you feel about ... [name the issue]?*" Then ask as many additional questions as necessary to be sure you understand how they feel and why they feel that way. Then confirm your understanding by stating "*Now, let me make sure what I think I hear you saying is that you feel...*" And just to make sure that your understanding is correct, ask "*Is that accurate?*" If they say yes, then you can move forward and if they say no, you can ask for further clarification. This is in keeping with Bertram Russell's famous dictum, "Most arguments could be reduced to a single paragraph, if the participants did a good enough job of defining their terms."

Many negotiations stall and never reach a successful conclusion because one or both of the parties take personal offense? However as Eleanor Roosevelt said, “No one can offend you without your permission.” All they can do is say things or take actions that might facilitate your taking offense. Only *you* can take personal offense. *Don’t*. You’ll have an infinitely greater chance of reaching an acceptable conclusion.

The best time to resolve differences is *before* they happen, before negative emotions develop, before tempers flare and before feelings are hurt. What is easy to discuss beforehand is very difficult to discuss when you’re in the middle of a heated disagreement.

Great Questions Results in Enhanced Clarification

“Is the offer or proposed solution clear?” Make this a standard question after making an offer. Be sure the other party’s perception of the offer is what you intended the offer to be. The other party’s perception is the other party’s reality. Also remember that silence will usually cause the other party to speak and their speaking gives you more information. Additional questions that lead to further clarification are:

“Do I know everything I should know in this matter?”

“In matters like these, how are the final decision made?” [Eliminating direct reference to the other party.]

“What might be causing any present misunderstanding?”

Alternatively, find out what the other party’s ideal outcome looks like. Share what your ideal outcome looks like and work backward and/or forward to come up with creative solutions that maximize each person’s negotiation and personal interests. This is a great question to understand the real needs and wants of the other party. You can then share your ideal situation in the spirit of partnering.

Other questions you can ask are:

“Could you further explain your offer?” Very often an offer will be modified when you ask to have it explained — and virtually always, it is a change favorable to you.

“If we could put this deal together, where would you want to start?” [Then start listing the desirable answers.]

Ask *What if* questions as they are often excellent ways to lead other party’s thinking. People love to be guided, but hate to be told what to do.

“Is there a way we can get this done?” This is an excellent question when you are stalled or at an impasse.

One of the questions that Master Negotiator Roger Fisher and author of the book, *Getting to Yes*, asks is “*Do you want more than what is fair?*” Ninety percent of the time or more, the other party will answer no. Then the next question is “*What are some of the options that we can use as objective criteria to help us determine what is fair?*” This question will help move the negotiation from being positional to one that helps each party to work together as joint problem solvers. What happens if the other party answers “*Yes, I want more than what’s fair!*” Our natural tendency is to become aggressive and say something negative about the other party such as “*It is your sense of entitlement that has made this negotiation difficult in the first place*” or something much worse such as “*You are the most selfish I have ever met!*” Instead, you want to ask the question, “*What would more than what’s fair look like to you?*” This question will usually surprise and help to disarm the other party. You also may find out that what the other party sees as more than what’s fair is perfectly acceptable, or you can make an agreement that he or she gets more than what’s fair this time in exchange for a current or future concession. You can also say, “*If you were in my shoes, how would you suggest that I get my manager to agree to this?*” If none of these techniques work, you can suggest that since the two of you can’t come to an agreement, should both of your managers take over the negotiation, however, it might be worth pointing out that if your managers take over the negotiation, one of the repercussions is that you could both end up looking bad to your respective managers.

In summary, questions educate without being adversarial. This often leads to both a better substantive outcome, a better relationship outcome, and a better negotiation process. In other words, asking the right question, at the right time and in the right way leads to more optimum negotiation outcomes and this is why Master Negotiators are twice as likely to ask questions than their less masterful counterparts.

Remember not only to say the right thing at the right time in the right place, but far more difficult still, to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the wrong moment. — *Benjamin Franklin*

For additional information on how Master Negotiators negotiate, you can read *How to Say it: Negotiating to Win* by Jim Hennig and *The Seven Strategies of Master Negotiators* by Brad McRae. Additional information is on our websites: www.JimHennig.com and www.BradMcRae.com.

For more information on how you can develop and/or enhance your leadership, negotiating and presentation skills, contact:

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