



Questions in Conflict: Why Do You Ask?

Who hasn't flinched when a friend asks "are you doing anything Saturday?" We can't help but wonder "do they want me to help them move? -or are they going to give me free tickets to the big game?" Question often contain underlying agendas, based on the context and the way in which they are asked. In conversation, these can usually be sorted out, but in conflict this ambiguity fans the flames of defensiveness. Why? Because over 90% of meaning in face to face communication comes not from words, but from tone of voice, facial expression and other body language. So while words may form of a question, the non-verbal communication more truly reflects the motive for the question.

A question invites the responder to disclose something about themselves, their situation or their perspective. On hearing a question, we often wonder "why are you asking?" Or we may react to a perceived judgement or assumption contained in the question. Consider the following questions and what the listener might hear:

- **Question:** Do you want to grab a coffee? **Listener hears:** *I'd like to grab a coffee and want some company.*
- **Question:** Do you really think that's the best way to do that? **Listener hears:** *I think you're out of your mind!*
- **Question:** Are you planning to wash the windows today? **Listener hears:** *The windows had better be washed today!*
- **Question:** Are there any questions? **Listener hears:** We're done with this meeting, but I need to go through motions of inviting feedback

Each of these questions are *closed ended* – requiring only a "yes" or "no" from the responder. These questions usually contain a judgement or assumption, which in turn foster defensiveness in the responder.

Three tips for asking questions (especially in conflict):

1. Ask yourself "why do I ask?" to ensure you are genuinely curious and interested in the other person's answer or perspective. If you're not, you're probably better off making a statement instead of asking a question.
2. Let the other person know why you are asking -what prompted your question or why you need information or their opinion.
3. Ask an open ended question (what, when, where, who, why or how) to encourage the other person to answer in their own words.

You don't have to wait until you are in a conflict to practice open ended questions. Try them in conversation – you'll be amazed at what you'll learn about people. Here are some examples:

- What are the greatest challenges you're facing in your work/organization?
- What do you find to be most important to success in your field/job?
- How did you end up in your present job?
- Where do you see yourself down the road?

I remember a conversation with my wife in which she bemoaned the sexist attitudes in society. As a male, I initially assumed she was referring to me and some shortcoming in our relationship and I found myself beginning to react defensively. Fortunately, I caught myself, replaced my judgement with curiosity, and asked her "in what ways does that impact you?" It turned out that her comment was not a masked criticism of anything I had done, but reflected her frustration as a teacher dealing with students from cultures in which women were not respected. This led to a fascinating conversation on a previously undiscussed topic.

In conflict, effective questions can uncover the other person's perspectives and motivators. Here are a few examples of powerful questions:

- What's important to you about that?
- What do you mean by [inconsiderate]?
- How did you arrive at that conclusion?
- When and where does this impact you the most?

So replace your judgement with curiosity when you ask questions. In conversation, you will learn more about people and deepen your connection with them. In conflict, you will uncover new perspectives and previously unseen possibilities for resolution.