

Questions to Resolve Conflict

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Description

Often in conflict, we become so entrenched in our own story of the situation, we lose our sense of curiosity. We forget that other people in the conflict have their own story that feels equally real and valid to them. Our grievance narrative or “stuck story” – as it is sometimes called – prevents us from finding solutions. If parties don’t understand each other and their sense of curiosity breaks down, it can be hard or even impossible to move forward.

Asking good questions is crucial for building the understanding people need to successfully resolve conflicts and move beyond impasse. It is also true that asking questions and listening deeply to others is one of the most powerful ways to successfully navigate conflict.

Definition

- Listening is personally attentive and responsive communication that leads to awareness, understanding, and empathy. (Listen First Coalition, 2022)

Question examples¹

The questions below can be used in many conflict situations including the workplace, communities, and families. They can be used in both informal and formal resolutions as well as on any topic area. Asking just one question from each category can go a long way toward resolution.

The next time you find yourself in conflict:

- set aside time to reflect on some of the questions below for yourself;
- schedule time to talk with the other person/people and ask them some of these questions.

What you learn might surprise you!

For sharing a concern with someone...

- I’ve noticed [specific issue or behavior], and I’d like to discuss how we can improve this. Would you be open to a conversation?
- Can we talk about [issue or behavior]? I think it’s affecting our [work, community, family].
- I am struggling with an aspect of our working relationship. Could we put our heads together and talk through the issue?

¹ See [Banninker, F. \(2010\)](#), [Clope, K. \(2024\)](#), and [Ringer, J. \(2022\)](#)

- I've observed some interactions that don't sit right with me. Could we discuss these together? I'm curious how you see the situation.

When someone has shared a concern with you...

- Could you help me understand your concern about that?
- Could you say more about that?
- Can you tell me more about how that has impacted you?
- What is that experience like for you?
- What do you find most troubling or worrisome about this issue?
- How does this issue affect you personally or professionally?

To understand the roots of an issue...

- What is at the heart of this issue for you personally?
- If you had to sum up this issue in a few words, what is most [frustrating, problematic] about this?

To check for understanding and get clarity...

- I'm hearing that [...] is very important for you. Do I have that right?
- What do you want me to most understand about the issue from your perspective?
- What am I missing about how you are experiencing this issue?

To zoom out and see the bigger picture...

- Is there more to the story/more history about this issue I should understand?
- How is this conflict going to impact [you, us, the team, the organization] over the long-term?
- If we solve this issue, what might happen? What if we don't solve it?
- How does this conflict fit into [our, your, the team's, the organization's] overall goals or priorities?

To understand what's needed for successful resolution...

- Are there any needs or values you feel strongly about that must be considered before we talk about solutions?
- What would make you feel heard or understood in this situation?
- What have you tried already to address this? How well have those approaches worked?

To develop solution ideas...

- How do you think we could solve this issue?
- What steps can we both take to move forward and improve the situation?
- What would a fair compromise look like to you?
- It sounds like we have some common ground on _____. Can we explore ways to move forward based on what we both care about?
- Are there other options or solutions that you think we should consider?

To confirm a solution...

- Based on our conversation, what do you think the next steps should be?
- I am hearing that we both think _____ will meet our needs. Does that sound right?
- I like your idea about _____. What if we tried that?
- We might not be able to solve everything today, but is there one thing we could agree to do right away?
- I can commit to [a specific change or small step forward you will agree to take], would that feel helpful to you?

To make a plan...

- Let me list the things we said we each can do: _____. Does that sound right? When should we get started?
- I am committing to _____. I heard you say you are committing to _____. Can we check in soon and see where we are at?
- It sounds like we are both committing to _____. How will we know if we are on the right track?
- Where should we document this plan so we don't forget it?
- Does anyone else need to be involved in this solution? Who could help us move it forward?
- What are the biggest obstacles to following through with this agreement? How can we overcome those?

Reflection questions

1. In what situations is it easier to ask open-ended and collaborative questions? In what situations is it harder?
2. What questions could be added to the list above? Do you have favorite open-ended questions that have worked for you in the past?
3. Which question or questions do you want to try the next time you have a difficult conversation?