

The Power of Asking the Right Questions: *How to Steer Any Diplomatic Conversation*

Columbia Law School Mediation Clinic

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Welcome & Introductions

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Let's start with a game!

In groups of two, elect one partner (A) to think about a memorable event from their past summer. The other partner (B) will then try to discover information about this event, using only yes or no questions. Partner B can only ask 5 questions.

Takeaways?

Agenda

Introduction

Tools for Information Gathering

Types of Questions

Active Listening

Summarizing

Reframing

How to Ask the Right Questions

Framing Your Questions

The Mirror & the Window

Practice

Mock Negotiation

Conclusion

Questions & Reflection

Thanks

Case Study:
Christiana
Figueres's
Endeavors
Brokering the 2015
Paris Agreement



Information- Gathering Tools

1. Types of Questions

1. Active Listening

1. Summarizing

1. Reframing

Purpose of Questions

- Clarifying
- Focusing
- Stimulating
- Suggesting
- Building relationships
- Encouraging participation
- Exploring and evaluating alternatives
- Moving toward closure

1. Types of Questions

Open Questions	Closed Questions
Cannot be answered with yes or no	Limited response/point of view
Allows respondent to express point of view	Answers are either right or wrong
Can be time-consuming	Quick responses
Builds trust and allows unrestrained response	Can feel interrogating or threatening

Exercise: Are These Questions Open or Closed?

1. Will you attend the meeting today?
2. How will your organization achieve its goals?
3. Did you reflect on your goals for this year?
4. What does your country need?
5. Would you be willing to renew our agreement?

When to Ask Open Questions

Usage	Example
To develop an open-ended conversation	<i>How did you approach this task?</i> <i>How do you remain focused on your work?</i>
To find out more about a person: their wants, needs, thoughts, and beliefs	<i>What motivated you to make that decision?</i> <i>What makes this so important to you?</i>

When to Ask Closed Questions

Usage	Example
Testing understanding (asking yes/no questions)	<i>So, you want to move forward with signing the agreement—right?</i>
For setting up a desired positive or negative frame of mind in them	<i>Are you happy with the current state of the Global Compact on Migration?</i> <i>Would you like to focus on the Gender-Related SDGs?</i>
Moving to action (seeking assent)	<i>If I can deliver this tomorrow, will you sign for it now?</i>

2. Active Listening

- Be genuinely **curious**
- Listen to **understand** participants':
 - Concerns
 - Needs
 - Wants
- **NOT** to prepare your response

Non-Verbal

- Stop talking
- Maintain eye contact
- Mimic posture/facial expression

Verbal

- Acknowledge what is being said
- Acknowledge feelings
- Clarify the message
- Summarize interest, issues, and feelings

3. Summarizing

SUMMARIZING

Repeating the **essence** of what the person said, focusing on the issues in the conflict and the person's interests and feelings

- Use phrases like:
 - “If I understand you correctly. . .”
 - “What I’m hearing from you is. . .”
- When summarizing two or more people, highlight any **common ground** they have

Summarizing Exercise

We need a volunteer!



4. Reframing

REFRAMING

Removing hurtful or escalating words but **keeping the force** of what the person said

Statement:

→ “I’ve asked you for this a thousand times now. Why can’t you ever do your job right?”

Reframe:

→ “I hear that you’re on a tight deadline, and it’s really important that I get this to you on time. Can you tell me more about the timeline we’re working with?”

Let's Practice

EXAMPLE

“We’ve tried to work with the local community but we can’t. They’re lazy! Each time we reach out to set up a meeting, they take multiple days to respond, and we keep struggling to schedule a time to talk.”

EFFECTIVE SUMMARY

So you’re saying that you have been trying to work with the local community, but you have been having difficulty communicating with them, and you feel like the community isn’t contributing equally towards scheduling a meeting.

Let's Practice

EXAMPLE

“He’s a nightmare! Although he’s my subordinate, he takes decisions without consulting with me, and communicates directly with the Minister. What am I supposed to do?”

EFFECTIVE SUMMARY

I hear that you are upset because your subordinate is undermining your authority. You feel cut out of communications that are necessary to do your job, and you are wondering how to move forward in this relationship.

Asking the Right Questions

Framing Your Questions

The Mirror and the Window

Framing Your Questions

Avoid making **assumptions**.

“John didn’t finish an important research project before a big meeting and made the team look bad.”

→ Assumption: John doesn’t care about his work or his team. John is selfish.

Did you just ignore the fact that this was due today?



Tell me what happened with the research project.

Framing Your Questions

Another example:

“Jane is always negative in meetings. She shoots down suggestions and is not helpful.”

→ Assumption: Jane is a bad person who does not want to contribute in a helpful way.

Why do you always shoot down other people’s suggestions?



Tell me what you think would be a good alternative.

Framing Your Questions: Examples

Aim for **open questions** using **neutral language**. Focus on using *what, how,* and *tell me*.

Did you remember to discuss this with her?



Tell me about your conversation with her.

Don't you think the proposed plan will only make things worse?



What are your thoughts on the proposed plan?

Why didn't you approach it this way instead?



How do you think can we improve our approach next time?

Break



The Mirror & the Window

- Questions to ask yourself
- Questions to ask others

Why is it important to do both?

The Ask for More framework
*Using questions to guide your
negotiation*

The Mirror & the Window

What does asking *myself* questions have to do with diplomatic conversations?

A lot. Research finds a definite link between self-awareness and negotiation proficiency. Asking the right questions helps us cultivate self-awareness and knowledge.

How will asking *other people* questions help me navigate diplomatic conversations?

Asking the right questions helps us get the information we need to build better relationships and craft better agreements.

The Mirror



- Negotiation starts before you sit down with the other side—you need to steer your own internal conversation first.
- Ask yourself open questions to clarify your own goals, interests, emotions and solutions.
- Your source of power in negotiation is not bluster but knowledge.

Mirror Questions

*Questions you ask
yourself to find clarity
on who you are and
what you want to
achieve*

Examples:

What's the problem I want to solve?

What do I need?

What's the first step?

The Window



- Ask open questions in order to create trust, gather information, and design better solutions.
- Listening more than you talk generates better deals and more value.
- You also generate relationships that create more longer-term, mutual gain.

Window Questions

*Questions you ask
someone else to
understand their
perspective*

Examples:

What do you need?

What does that look like?

What are your concerns?

Case Study Exercise:

Now you are in Christiana Figueres's
Position



Instructions:

- Form groups with those around you (we will help arrange some breakout rooms for those on Zoom).
- You will play the role of Christiana Figueres.
- We will be giving you the “mirror” here and additional background information on the next slide.
- We want you to work through the “window” - what questions are you going to ask the other side to try and get the information you need?
- Try and implement the information gathering techniques we have just learned about - asking a variety of open and closed questions, summarizing, reframing.
- Each group will then select a representative to come up and write one window question they came up with.

The Mirror:

- As Figueres, you must first let go of your identity as a Costa Rican diplomat, and approach negotiations from a global perspective.
- In the course of negotiations, you will travel to Saudi Arabia multiple times to speak to their negotiators, but also to speak with their Minister of Energy, who is simultaneously the head of Saudi Aramco.
- You know that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries are in one of the already hottest regions of the world, and lack access to fresh water. They have to desalinate every drop of water, and import all of their food. Overall, climate change unchecked would continue to have a great negative impact on human life in Saudi Arabia.
- You also know that Saudi Arabia is also overly reliant on fossil fuel revenues, and the COP21 agreement would likely reduce fossil fuel revenues.
- Your goal is to come up with questions that will help you understand the Saudis' position, and how you can turn that position into support for a global agreement.

Case Study: Christiana Figueres's Success Brokering the 2015 Paris Agreement

How Figueres helped broker the 2015 Paris Agreement by asking the right questions:

Figueres reached a breakthrough with the Saudi Arabian Minister of Energy on a small plane after visiting an oilfield. She asked him “how are you going to deal with that heat? And is there anything that other countries can do for you?” A very different question than “what can you do for the rest of the world?” And he took out a little napkin... And he wrote down the words, ‘economic diversification.’ And she said, ‘Okay, so let me understand this. If the Paris Agreement recognizes economic diversification, as a true, sincere contribution to climate change, mitigation efforts, is that something that would be important to you?’ And his answer was yes.

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Wrapping Up

Reflections

Thank you

Questions and Reflection

- What questions do you have?
- What is one skill you're excited to use moving forward?
- What are some concerns you have?

Thank you!

Remember: in order to mediate and negotiate well, we need to understand the other side.

- To do this effectively, we can rely on several tools and methods. Today we explored four:
 - Tailoring questions - including asking open and closed questions
 - Engaging in active listening
 - Summarizing effectively
 - Reframing to de-escalate
- We built on these tools and methods by discussing the 'mirror' and 'window' concepts - which boil down to knowing yourself, and knowing other side.
- We looked at the way in which Christiana Figueres used these tools to reach unanimity at COP 21