

HANDOUT FOR VIDEO 5: BETTER QUESTIONS FOR BETTER CONFLICT

This handout accompanies the five-minute video in the Better Conflict exercises from the Conflict Transformation Collaborative at Middlebury. This is the fifth video in a five-part series. Below, you will find the exercise, a transcript of the video, and additional resources.

EXERCISE

You need a partner for this ten minute exercise. Each person will choose to share a statement that they believe to be true – it can be more low-stakes, like which is the best ice cream flavor, or it can be more high-stakes, like a position on immigration. The important thing is that you choose to share a statement that you really believe in.

Round 1: Person A states their position. Then, for two minutes, Person B asks questions designed to change Person A's mind. Person A answers honestly.

Round 2: Person A states their position. Then, for two minutes, Person B asks questions designed to better understand Person A's position. Person A answers honestly.

After you have done these two rounds, switch roles. Now Person B states their position and Person A asks questions.

TRANSCRIPT

Speakers: Sarah Stroup, Mandy Berghela, Teyonce Allison

Sarah: In this video, we will focus on the quality of the questions that we ask when we are working on a conflict with someone. When we hear something that we disagree with, often our first instinct is to challenge that position. In our listening exercises, we focused on moving away from this rush to respond. What about when it is our turn to speak? One idea is that we might ask a question. But all questions are not created equally. We are going to show you what it looks like when a person is asked different types of questions. After we show you some examples, we will encourage you to do this on your own.

Let's imagine Teyonce and Mandy run a local coffee shop together. They are talking about what they want to purchase in their business, and they have a disagreement. First, let's hear what Teyonce's position is:

Teyonce: I think we should only purchase locally roasted beans to serve in our coffee shop.

Sarah: Ok, Mandy hears this and disagrees. How will she follow up? Let's start by seeing what happens when Mandy asks questions designed to change Teyonce's mind. We're going to watch them go back and forth for a minute.

Teyonce: I think we should only purchase locally roasted beans for our coffee shop.

Mandy: Aren't locally roasted beans incredibly expensive?

Teyonce: They are, but they're for a worthy cause.

Mandy: The beans we have already are fine, aren't they?

Teyonce: Yes, but they don't have the same ethical virtue behind how they're sourced.

Mandy: Are the local roasters any good?

Teyonce: They are quite good.

Mandy: Do you not care about being fiscally responsible, or is this some virtue signalling?

Teyonce: I do believe it's important that we are fiscally responsible, but supporting our local economy is a good way of doing so.

Mandy: Since when do you care about the local economy?

Teyonce: Since always!

Mandy: Didn't you say you wanted to leave the purchasing decisions to me?

Teyonce: I did, but we're also a team, and so it's important that we make these important decisions together.

Sarah: The questions that Mandy just asked are all examples of questions of persuasion. Some of them are leading questions. Others aren't really questions - they are Mandy's judgements stated in question form. Others are oversimplifications or offer a false choice. Now let's see what happens when Mandy asks different types of questions. Again, let's watch their conversation for a minute.

Teyonce: I think we should only purchase locally roasted beans for our coffee shop.

Mandy: What is important to you about getting the locally roasted beans?

Teyonce: I think I'd be really great to know that our shop is supporting local businesses.

Mandy: And what do you mean when you say locally roasted?

Teyonce: So, they would be sourced from small farms that are in our community and we'd be able to give back not only to our customers, but promote these small businesses.

Mandy: Okay, that sounds good. Can you say more about how this would work in practice?

Teyonce: I recognize that it's a bit more of an expensive proposition than what we're currently doing, and I haven't thought through all this small details, but I just thought it could be a really great ethical idea to enhance the appeal of our store and I just would love to flush through it more with you.

Mandy: Yeah, I think I like that too. Are you feeling uncertain or conflicted about this idea?

Teyonce: I can see how it could be difficult for us to manifest in a way that is fiscally sound, but I think that if we make some cuts here and there, we can really make it work.

Sarah: When Mandy asks questions of curiosity, Teyonce becomes less defensive and is more willing to admit that her proposal isn't fully fleshed out. Importantly, Mandy hasn't said that she agrees with Teyonce - she isn't abandoning her own position! But her questions invite Teyonce to share more information about her priorities, the details of the plan, and what might be missing.

This is an example of the situation that we made up in order to illustrate the exercise. Now we invite you to try this exercise on your own. Taking turns with a partner, each of you should share a position and have the other person ask you the two different types of questions. After you have gone one way, then switch roles with your partner.

When you have done the exercise, you might debrief afterwards. Here are a few questions to consider:

What happens when you are asked questions of persuasion?
What happened when you were asked questions of curiosity?
Finally, what is an example of a curious question that you think you could ask in a conflict?

Enjoy the practice!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The "questions of persuasion and questions of curiosity" exercise comes from Essential Partners, who trains community groups, businesses, and schools in dialogic practice. You can learn more about their approach below, and see some additional resources.

Essential Partners, "Designing Questions"

<https://whatisessential.org/higher-ed/designing-questions>

Lara Schwartz, *Try to Love the Questions: From Debate to Dialogue in the College Classroom and*

Beyond. Princeton University Press, 2024.

Sharon Strand Ellison, *Taking the War out of our Words: the Art of Powerful Non-Defensive Communication*. Voices of Integrity Press, 2016.

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