

## Questions

When you find yourself in a dispute resolution role, it is easy to slip into 'interrogator' or problem solver mode, and either over focus on 'facts' or move too quickly into solutions and options. Adjust your orientation so you are asking questions not for your own understanding but also and more importantly to help the other person make sense of their position, interests and needs. Once they are clear about these, then resolution will be far easier.

A simple way of adopting a 'curious questioner' mode is to follow the 'SPIN' structure originally developed by Neil Rackham as a method of selling. This will ensure you ask questions which will lead to resolution, rather than drive people into their positions, and avoids the pitfall of most managers which is trying to resolve a conflict for someone rather than with them.

1. **Situation questions** – what's going on, what are the facts as they see them.  
Eg. "Could you tell me about the situation?" "What's been going on for you?" "Tell me what has happened."
2. **Problem questions** – help the person explore and explain the pain of their situation. Eg. "How did you feel about that?" "How has this affected you?" "What was it like for you when that happened?"
3. **Implication questions** – this helps the person see the wider picture and explore the effects of the problem on them, their role, their home life, their career, their health, and so on. Eg. "What impact is this having on you?" "What are the consequences of this continuing?" "What might happen if this goes on?"
4. **Need questions** – these help the party to explore what underlies their position/proposed solution. Eg. "What's most important for you in all of this?" "What do you need to be different?" "What would you like to change?" "You have said you wanted X, what would X give you?" "What is good about X?" "How does X change the situation?" "Is there any other way of achieving what you want?"

Equally important when you are working as a conflict manager is to build or offer rapport, and questions are an essential tool for this as they allow you to explore other people's experience, stay open to it, and demonstrate interest and attention.

To ensure your questions don't become interrogative or destructive of rapport, follow these tips:

- Soften questions with rapport building openers: 'I'm wondering...' 'I'd like to ask you about' 'Can we just move on to talk about...' 'Is it okay if I ask you about...'  
Ask questions using neutral language – "What did you do to make him fly off the handle" is better reframed as "Could Barry have misinterpreted anything in what you said or did in the meeting?"
- If you interrupt someone who is mid flow, to ask a question, then ensure you acknowledge the frustration your interruption might cause before asking the question.
- Using probing not prying questions; think, why am I asking this question? If it is not helping the party to articulate what is important for them, it's probably prying. Be sensitive and responsive.
- If your questions are not producing disclosure, and rapport is going down, then summarise what has been covered so far, and signpost what still needs to be covered.

**Contact CMP Resolutions for further guidance, to outsource your service requirements or to train your managers in questioning skills.**

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