

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

The Power of *Questions*



Tools for Negotiation, Leadership, and High-
Stakes Communication



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THE POWER OF QUESTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Why Questions Change the Direction of Conversations

In many cases, one well-timed question can achieve more than ten arguments.

A manager walks into a meeting prepared with strong arguments. He has data, examples, and a clear explanation of why his proposal makes sense.

At first, the conversation seems constructive. But twenty minutes later, something changes. The other person becomes defensive. The tone of the conversation shifts. Both sides keep repeating their arguments, and the discussion slowly turns into a debate — and eventually into a conflict.

This situation is surprisingly common in professional communication. In negotiations, meetings, and difficult conversations at work, people instinctively rely on arguments. They explain. They justify. They defend their position.

But the more they argue, the more resistance they often create.

When people feel that someone else challenges their position, they naturally begin to defend it. Instead of moving closer to a solution, both sides become more entrenched in their viewpoints.

People try to win the conversation with arguments, while experienced negotiators know that the real leverage often comes from asking the right questions. A well-placed question can completely change the dynamics of a discussion: instead of confrontation it creates dialogue; instead of resistance it invites reflection; instead of pushing the other person into a defensive position, it opens space for cooperation.

THE RIGHT QUESTION CAN

- Reduce tension in a difficult conversation
- Uncover hidden concerns or motivations
- Encourage the other person to think more deeply about the situation
- Shift the focus from emotions to problem-solving
- Help people reconsider their position without feeling pressured

Another common trap in communication is assumption. When something feels unclear, people often begin interpreting the situation instead of clarifying it — assuming what the other person meant, why a proposal was rejected, what silence means. But assumptions are often wrong.

This guide explains why that shift matters and how to apply it in practice.

PART ONE

Why Questions Are More Powerful Than Arguments

The stronger the arguments become, the stronger the resistance on the other side.

When people want to convince someone, they explain their reasoning, present facts, and defend their position. This approach seems logical — yet conversations rarely work this way.

Very often the opposite happens: the stronger the arguments become, the stronger the resistance on the other side. Understanding why this happens is essential for anyone who regularly takes part in negotiations, decision-making discussions, or difficult workplace conversations.

1. Questions reduce resistance

When people feel that someone challenges their position, they naturally move into a defensive mode. This is not always conscious — it is a normal psychological response to perceived pressure, and arguments easily trigger it. Statements such as:

- “This approach doesn’t make sense.”
- “This proposal is unrealistic.”
- “You’re looking at the problem the wrong way.”

turn a discussion into a debate. Both sides begin defending their views instead of exploring possible solutions.

Questions work differently. A well-formulated question creates space for reflection instead of confrontation. Compare the following responses:

STATEMENT

"This deadline is unrealistic."

QUESTION

"What constraints are most important for you when setting this deadline?"

The second version invites the other person to explain their reasoning rather than defend it. Instead of escalating the conversation, a question slows it down and reopens the dialogue.

2. Questions reveal information arguments cannot

Arguments focus on presenting your perspective — but the most valuable information often lies on the other side. People carry concerns and constraints that are not immediately visible:

- Internal pressure from management
- Budget limitations
- Fear of creating a precedent
- Reputational risks
- Previous negative experiences

These factors rarely appear in the first minutes of a conversation, yet they frequently determine how people make decisions. When you ask people to explain their thinking, they often share information that would otherwise remain hidden — context that can completely change how a negotiation develops.

3. Questions help avoid false assumptions

When information is incomplete, people interpret the situation based on their own expectations. They may read:

- Silence as disagreement
- Hesitation as a lack of competence
- Emotional reactions as hostility

In reality the situation may be entirely different. Silence may signal uncertainty; hesitation — a need for more information; emotion — pressure from other stakeholders. Questions provide a simple way to test those assumptions directly:

INSTEAD OF INTERPRETING — ASK

- *“What concerns you most about this proposal?”*
- *“How does this timeline affect your team?”*
- *“What factors are important for you in this decision?”*

Practical principle

A simple principle captures the essence of this approach:

Don't assume — ask.

The habit of asking thoughtful questions helps professionals:

- Reduce unnecessary conflict
- Uncover important information
- Understand the real interests behind positions
- Move conversations from confrontation to collaboration

For this reason, experienced negotiators rely less on persuasion and more on inquiry. The next section introduces five types of strategic questions to guide professional conversations more effectively.

PART TWO

Five Types of Strategic Questions

Open · Clarifying · Reframing · Challenging · Closing

Questions are not all the same. Different types serve different purposes — gathering information, clarifying vague statements, guiding toward solutions, testing assumptions, or moving toward a decision.

Understanding these distinctions lets you choose the question that best supports your objective instead of reacting impulsively.

TYPE	PURPOSE	EXAMPLE
Open	Encourage the other person to share information and perspective	<i>“How do you usually approach situations like this?”</i>
Clarifying	Remove ambiguity and define what the other person means	<i>“What exactly do you mean by ‘flexible terms’?”</i>
Reframing	Shift perspective and open new options	<i>“What might change if we looked at this differently?”</i>
Challenging	Surface hidden concerns, objections, or risks	<i>“What might prevent this from working for you?”</i>
Closing	Confirm agreements and move toward action	<i>“Can we confirm that these terms work for both sides?”</i>

This framework is not rigid — in real conversations these types often overlap. But understanding each one's primary function helps you use them intentionally.

1. Open Questions

Open questions invite the other person to share their perspective. They cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no,” and usually encourage a more detailed response. They are especially useful at the start of a discussion, when your goal is to understand the other side and surface hidden information.

When to use them

- Understand how the other side sees the situation
- Explore the interests behind a position
- Encourage the other person to reflect more deeply
- Create a more collaborative tone

EXAMPLES

- *“How do you usually approach situations like this?”*
- *“What outcome would be most valuable for your team?”*
- *“What concerns do you have about this proposal?”*

2. Clarifying Questions

In many conversations, people use vague or subjective expressions. Terms such as “reasonable price,” “flexible conditions,” or “tight deadlines” can mean very different things to different people. Clarifying questions define what the other person actually means — preventing misunderstandings and letting both sides work with precise information.

When to use them

- Statements are vague or ambiguous
- Expectations are not clearly defined
- Different interpretations may exist

EXAMPLES

- “What exactly do you mean by ‘flexible terms’?”
- “Which part of the proposal concerns you most?”
- “How would you define a realistic timeline for this project?”

3. Reframing Questions

Reframing questions encourage the other side to look at the issue from a different angle. Instead of proposing a new solution directly, they invite the other person to reconsider the situation — opening space for new options without creating resistance.

When to use them

- Introduce a different perspective
- Move the conversation away from a fixed position
- Encourage the other side to reconsider assumptions
- Explore alternative ways of approaching a problem

EXAMPLES

- *“How might this situation look from the client’s perspective?”*
- *“What would happen if we approached the issue differently?”*
- *“What options might become possible if we adjusted the timeline?”*

4. Challenging Questions

Some concerns remain unspoken. People may hesitate to express objections directly to avoid conflict, embarrassment, or reputational risk. Challenging questions help surface these hidden concerns — they encourage honesty and bring the real issues to the table.

When to use them

- The other side seems hesitant or uncertain
- Objections remain implicit rather than explicit
- The conversation feels stuck on the surface level

EXAMPLES

- *“What might prevent this proposal from working for you?”*
- *“Are there any risks that we may not be addressing?”*
- *“What concerns would you still have if we moved forward with this plan?”*

5. Closing Questions

Closing questions move the conversation toward a clear outcome. They confirm agreements, clarify next steps, and prevent misunderstandings about what has actually been decided. Without them, conversations often end with vague assumptions about the outcome.

When to use them

- The discussion is approaching a decision
- Agreements need to be confirmed
- It is necessary to define the next steps clearly

EXAMPLES

- *“So we are agreeing to start the project next month, correct?”*
- *“Can we confirm that these terms work for both sides?”*
- *“What would be the next step from your side?”*

How strategic questions guide a conversation

In real conversations, different types of questions appear in a natural sequence. A productive discussion frequently moves through several stages — each benefiting from a different type of question.

-
- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | Understanding
Open Questions | Learn how the other side sees the situation. |
| 2 | Clarifying
Clarifying Questions | Remove ambiguity and define key details. |
| 3 | Exploring options
Reframing Questions | Introduce new perspectives and possibilities. |
| 4 | Testing concerns
Challenging Questions | Surface hidden risks or objections. |
| 5 | Moving forward
Closing Questions | Confirm agreements and next steps. |
-

This sequence is not rigid — real conversations rarely follow a perfectly linear structure. But understanding the flow helps you guide discussions deliberately and avoid getting stuck in unproductive debates. Experienced negotiators move back and forth between these stages as the conversation develops.

The key is not to rely on arguments alone, but to use questions strategically to move the conversation forward.

QUICK PRACTICE

Before moving on, reflect: in a recent difficult conversation, would you typically respond with a statement or a question? Later in this guide, a dedicated practice section will help you develop this skill further.

PART THREE

Using Questions in Difficult Conversations

*Six real situations — and the questions that turn
confrontation into progress.*

CASE 1

When a conversation turns into conflict

Conflicts in professional environments often begin with a disagreement that escalates. A discussion about a decision, a project, or responsibilities gradually becomes emotional. The tone changes, and instead of exploring solutions, people start defending their positions.

At this moment, the instinctive reaction is to respond with arguments — but this usually pushes the conversation deeper into conflict. Strategic questions can redirect the discussion back to problem-solving.

MOST USEFUL HERE

- **Open questions** encourage the other person to express their concerns more fully.
- **Clarifying questions** turn emotional reactions into specific issues that can be discussed.

Situation 1 — A proposal is criticized

You present a proposal during a meeting. A colleague responds sharply:

TYPICAL REACTION

A common response might be:

“You’re wrong. We’ve already analyzed the numbers, and this is the best option.”

QUESTION-BASED RESPONSE

The conversation quickly becomes a debate about who is right. Instead, use open and clarifying questions:

“What specifically concerns you about this approach?”

“Which part of the proposal seems unrealistic to you?”

RESULT

These questions shift the conversation from confrontation to explanation — often revealing operational constraints, resource limitations, or pressure from other stakeholders. Once these concerns are visible, the discussion can move toward solutions.

Situation 2 — An employee resists new responsibilities

A manager assigns new responsibilities to a team member. The employee reacts emotionally: *“Why should I do this? This isn’t my job.”*

TYPICAL REACTION

A manager might respond:

“It’s part of the project now, and everyone has to contribute.”

QUESTION-BASED RESPONSE

This usually increases frustration. Instead, use open and clarifying questions:

“What specifically about this responsibility feels unfair to you?”

“How could we distribute these tasks in a way that works better for the team?”

RESULT

The real issue may not be the task itself, but workload imbalance, unclear responsibilities, or feeling excluded from the decision. Once it becomes apparent, manager and employee can discuss practical adjustments rather than continuing the conflict.

CASE 2

When the other person becomes aggressive

A discussion that begins calmly may suddenly shift in tone — a colleague raises their voice, dismisses your idea, or uses harsh language. This often happens when people feel pressure, frustration, or a loss of control.

The instinctive response is to defend yourself or attack back. Both escalate the situation. A more effective approach is to slow the conversation down and redirect it using questions.

MOST USEFUL HERE

- **Open questions** reduce emotional tension and invite the person to express their concerns.
- **Clarifying questions** turn emotional criticism into specific issues to discuss.

Situation — A strong reaction to your idea

During a meeting, a colleague reacts strongly to your idea: *“This is a terrible plan. Did you even think this through?”*

TYPICAL REACTION

A common response might be:

“That’s not true. We’ve analyzed everything carefully.”

“If you think it’s so bad, maybe you should come up with a better plan.”

QUESTION-BASED RESPONSE

Instead of responding defensively, start with an open question, then follow with clarifying questions:

“What concerns you most about this plan?”

“Which part of the proposal seems most problematic to you?”

“What specific risk do you see in this approach?”

RESULT

These questions change the dynamic. Instead of continuing the attack, the other person is invited to explain their reasoning. Aggressive reactions often hide concerns that were never clearly expressed — doubts about feasibility, fear of operational risks, pressure from senior management, or previous negative experiences.

Once these concerns become visible, the conversation moves from emotional reaction to practical discussion. Instead of arguing about tone, both sides focus on the substance of the issue.

PRACTICAL PHRASES**Open Questions**

- *“What concerns you most about this plan?”*
- *“What part of the proposal worries you the most?”*
- *“What would make this approach more workable for you?”*

Clarifying Questions

- *“Which part seems unrealistic to you?”*
- *“What specific risk do you see here?”*
- *“What assumption do you think may not work?”*

CASE 3

When someone uses a manipulative or vague remark

Sometimes people use statements that appear to be questions but are actually accusations, relying on vague generalizations: “Many people think this decision was a mistake.” “Everyone knows this approach won’t work.”

Such phrases create pressure. They imply criticism but avoid responsibility for the claim. If you immediately defend yourself, you enter the frame the other person has set.

MOST USEFUL HERE

- **Clarifying questions** shift the conversation from vague accusations to concrete facts — inviting the other person to explain what they actually mean.

Situation — A vague accusation

During a meeting or interview, someone says: *“Many people believe your strategy is risky.”*

TYPICAL REACTION

A common reaction is to start defending the decision:

“That’s not true. Our strategy is based on solid data.”

QUESTION-BASED RESPONSE

This often strengthens the accusation. Instead, use clarifying questions:

“Who specifically has raised this concern?”

“Could you give an example of what you mean?”

“What particular aspect of the strategy do you consider risky?”

RESULT

These questions change the structure of the conversation — specifics must now support general accusations. Often the concern becomes concrete and the real problem can be addressed; or the accusation weakens, because vague criticism based on assumptions cannot supply examples on request.

CLARIFYING PHRASES YOU CAN USE**Ask for specifics**

- *“Could you give a specific example?”*
- *“Who exactly has raised this concern?”*
- *“Which part of the decision are you referring to?”*

Trace the reasoning

- *“What makes you see it this way?”*
- *“What information leads you to that conclusion?”*
- *“Can you walk me through what you mean?”*

KEY PRINCIPLE

When faced with vague accusations, resist the urge to defend yourself immediately. Use clarifying questions to move the conversation from assumptions to facts — one of the most effective ways to neutralize manipulative communication.

CASE 4

When the other side goes silent

During negotiations or difficult discussions, the other person sometimes simply stops responding — a long pause, an avoided question, very short replies. Silence can mean many things: they may be thinking, unsure how to respond, uncomfortable, disagreeing but not ready to say so, or trying to slow the conversation down.

Silence often makes people nervous, so they talk too much, repeat arguments, and weaken their position. Instead of reacting impulsively, questions can reopen the conversation.

MOST USEFUL HERE

- **Open questions** invite the person to share their perspective.
- **Reframing questions** shift the focus toward what would make the proposal work.

Situation — A silent response

You present a proposal. After you finish, the other person says nothing — they pause, look at the document, and remain silent.

TYPICAL REACTION

A common reaction is to start explaining more:

| *“Let me clarify what I meant...”*

| *“As I said earlier, the main benefit of this approach is...”*

QUESTION-BASED RESPONSE

Instead of filling the silence, ask an open question; if it still does not move forward, use a reframing question:

| *“What are your thoughts about this proposal?”*

| *“How does this approach look from your perspective?”*

| *“What would need to change for this proposal to work for you?”*

RESULT

These questions bring the conversation back into dialogue. Silence is no longer a barrier — it becomes an invitation for the other person to share their perspective. Often the pause simply means they are processing information or weighing risks. Once they begin speaking, hidden concerns, internal constraints, or competing priorities may emerge.

PRACTICAL PHRASES**Open Questions**

- *“What are your thoughts on this so far?”*
- *“How does this look from your perspective?”*
- *“What stands out to you in this approach?”*

Reframing Questions

- *“What would need to change for this to work?”*
- *“What concerns would we need to address?”*
- *“What would make this more realistic for you?”*

CASE 5

When someone rejects your proposal

A client declines an offer; a colleague refuses a suggestion; a partner says a solution will not work. Rejection can be frustrating, especially after time and effort have gone into the idea.

People often react by defending the proposal or pushing harder — but this rarely improves the outcome. A rejection usually signals underlying concerns that have not yet been fully expressed.

MOST USEFUL HERE

- **Clarifying questions** uncover what specifically does not work.
- **Reframing questions** explore what would make the proposal acceptable.

Situation — “This won’t work for us”

You present a proposal to a client or colleague. After reviewing it, they respond:
“This won’t work for us.”

TYPICAL REACTION

A common reaction is to defend the proposal:

| *“I’m not sure you fully understand the benefits of this approach.”*

| *“This is actually the best option available.”*

QUESTION-BASED RESPONSE

Instead, start with clarifying questions, then move to reframing questions:

| *“What specifically makes this option difficult for you?”*

| *“Which part of the proposal doesn’t work from your perspective?”*

| *“What would need to change for this solution to become more workable?”*

RESULT

These questions change the direction of the conversation. Instead of stopping at rejection, the discussion begins exploring possibilities. The real issue may be budget constraints, internal policies, competing priorities, risk concerns, or timing. Once identified, the conversation can move toward adapting the proposal rather than abandoning it.

In many negotiations, rejection is not the end of the discussion — it is the beginning of a deeper exploration of what might actually work.

PRACTICAL PHRASES**Clarifying Questions**

- *“What specifically makes this difficult for you?”*
- *“Which part doesn’t work from your perspective?”*
- *“What concern stands behind this decision?”*

Reframing Questions

- *“What would need to change for this to work?”*
- *“What conditions would make this acceptable?”*
- *“What alternative might work better for you?”*

CASE 6

When the conversation gets stuck

Even productive discussions can reach a point where progress slows or stops. Participants repeat the same arguments, the same concerns are raised again and again, and the conversation begins to circle the same points.

When this happens, people often repeat their arguments more forcefully — but repetition rarely changes the outcome. At this stage, questions help shift the conversation toward a decision.

MOST USEFUL HERE

- **Reframing questions** move the focus from what doesn't work to what could.
- **Closing questions** guide the discussion toward next steps.

Situation — A circular negotiation

Both sides have discussed a proposal in detail, but the conversation keeps returning to the same objections: *“We’re still not convinced this is the right approach.”*

TYPICAL REACTION

A common response is to repeat previous arguments:

“As I explained earlier, this option gives you the best possible outcome.”

“Let me explain again why this approach makes sense.”

QUESTION-BASED RESPONSE

Instead, use reframing questions to shift focus, then closing questions to guide toward a decision:

“What would the ideal solution look like from your perspective?”

“What outcome would you consider a successful result?”

“What would need to happen for us to move forward today?”

RESULT

These questions break the cycle of repetition. Instead of focusing on what does not work, the conversation begins exploring what could — shifting attention from defending positions to identifying paths forward: adjusting conditions, redefining priorities, finding intermediate solutions, or agreeing on next steps.

PRACTICAL PHRASES**Reframing Questions**

- *“What outcome would you consider a good result?”*
- *“What would the ideal solution look like for you?”*
- *“What would need to change for this to work for both sides?”*

Closing Questions

- *“What would be the most reasonable next step?”*
- *“What would help us move this forward?”*
- *“What would need to happen for us to decide today?”*

Reflection exercise

Think about a recent professional conversation that became difficult or unproductive — a disagreement during a meeting, a rejected proposal, a tense discussion with a colleague or client, or a conversation that simply stopped moving forward. Then consider:

QUESTION 1

What was the turning point in that conversation? When did the discussion start becoming tense or unproductive?

QUESTION 2

Which type of question — open, clarifying, reframing, or closing — could have helped change the direction of the conversation?

QUESTION 3

What question could you ask if that conversation happened again today?

Many difficult conversations can change direction when the right question is asked at the right moment.

PART FOUR

Practical Rules for Asking Better Questions

Even a well-structured question can fail if it is too long, accusatory, or delivered with the wrong tone.

Knowing different types of questions matters — but a question's effectiveness depends not only on what you ask, but on how you ask it.

Even a well-structured question can fail if it is too long, sounds accusatory, or is delivered with the wrong tone. The following principles help make your questions clearer, more constructive, and more effective.

1. Keep questions short and clear

Long, complicated questions confuse the listener. When a question contains too many details or ideas, the other person struggles to understand what you are actually asking.

TOO MUCH AT ONCE

“Given the constraints we discussed and the concerns about the timeline, how do you see the feasibility of continuing with the current approach?”

CLEAR & FOCUSED

“What concerns you most about the current timeline?”

2. Use “why” questions carefully

Questions that begin with “why” can sound accusatory. Even when no criticism is intended, people may interpret “why” as a demand to justify their actions — “Why did you make that decision?” can trigger a defensive reaction. It is often more productive to rephrase:

INSTEAD OF “WHY”

- *“What factors influenced that decision?”*
- *“How did you arrive at that conclusion?”*
- *“What led you to that view?”*

3. Avoid sarcasm

In tense conversations, questions can easily become rhetorical or sarcastic — “So what exactly were you thinking?” Although it looks like a question, it is heard as criticism. Sarcasm increases tension and closes the door to dialogue. Questions should reveal information, not embarrass the other person.

4. Pay attention to tone and body language

The same question can produce very different reactions depending on how it is delivered. A calm tone, open posture, and attentive listening signal genuine interest. A sharp tone, interruptions, or dismissive body language can make even a neutral question sound confrontational. How a question is asked is often as important as the wording itself.

5. Rephrase the question if necessary

Sometimes a person hesitates, misunderstands, or avoids answering. Repeating the same question in the same form rarely helps. Instead, reformulate it — approach the topic from a slightly different angle. Rephrasing reduces pressure and helps the other person engage more openly.

How you ask is often as important as what you ask.

PART FIVE

Quick Reference Cheat Sheet

Keep this page open before important conversations or negotiations.

Strategic questions cheat sheet

TYPE	WHEN TO USE IT	EXAMPLE
Open	Encourage the other person to explain their perspective and share information	<i>“How do you see this situation?”</i>
Clarifying	Move from vague statements to concrete issues	<i>“Could you give a specific example?”</i>
Reframing	Shift the discussion toward possible solutions	<i>“What outcome would work best for both sides?”</i>
Challenging	Test assumptions or reveal hidden objections	<i>“What information leads you to that conclusion?”</i>
Closing	Move the conversation toward a decision or agreement	<i>“What would be the most reasonable next step?”</i>

QUICK REMINDER

One of the most common mistakes in communication is assuming instead of asking. If you are unsure what someone meant — ask. If you are not sure whether they agree — ask. A clear question is often the fastest way to move from uncertainty to a concrete answer.

CONCLUSION

Putting Questions to Work

A well-timed question can often achieve more than a long explanation.

Professional conversations rarely become difficult all at once. More often, tension builds gradually — through misunderstandings, assumptions, defensive reactions, or poorly framed arguments.

In these moments, the way we respond determines the direction of the conversation. Many people instinctively react with explanations, arguments, or attempts to defend their position.

Experienced negotiators, however, understand that a well-timed question can often achieve more than a long explanation. Questions shift the dynamics of a conversation:

- They reduce tension
- They uncover information that might otherwise remain hidden
- They encourage reflection instead of confrontation
- They create space for dialogue when a discussion stalls

Let this guide serve as a starting point. Like any professional skill, the ability to ask effective questions develops through practice. With each new conversation, you begin to sense more clearly which question to ask, when to ask it, and how to phrase it to keep the dialogue constructive.

Questions are not a tool for manipulation. They are a tool for understanding, clarification, and reaching better outcomes.

Experiment with different formulations. Observe how people respond. Adjust your approach as you gain experience.

KEEP GOING

The next section contains practical exercises designed to help you apply these techniques on concrete examples — in real conversations. To arrange training or an individual consultation with Marina Akchurina, visit **aksresolution.com**.

PRACTICE WORKBOOK

Turn Reading Into Skill

Real skill develops only when you begin using these techniques in real conversations.

This section helps you apply the ideas from this guide. Reading about communication is useful — but skill develops only through practice.

The exercises that follow help you practice turning statements into questions, recognizing different types of questions, and responding more effectively in difficult situations.

Exercise 1 — Transform statements into questions

People often respond to disagreement with statements that trigger resistance. Rewrite each statement as a question that could open a more constructive dialogue.

EXAMPLE

“We don’t have enough resources for this.”

— *“What resources do you think are currently missing for this project?”*

Exercise 1 — your turn

Rewrite each of the following statements as a question that invites dialogue.

1 “Your proposal is too expensive.”

Type here...

2 “This plan will not work.”

Type here...

3 “You didn’t deliver what we expected.”

Type here...

4 “This timeline makes no sense.”

Type here...

5 “This approach creates too many risks.”

Type here...

Exercise 2 — Identify the type of question

Below are questions used in professional conversations. For each, identify which type it represents: open, clarifying, reframing, challenging, or closing.

1 “What specifically concerns you about this proposal?”

Type the question type...

2 “How do you see this project developing over the next six months?”

Type the question type...

3 “Would you agree that reducing the scope might help us meet the deadline?”

Type the question type...

4 “What makes this option more attractive than the alternatives?”

Type the question type...

5 “Shall we schedule a follow-up meeting to finalize the details?”

Type the question type...

Check your answers on page 57.

Exercise 3 — Respond to aggressive comments

Aggressive remarks often trigger defensive reactions. Instead of arguing, practice using questions that shift the discussion toward clarification and problem-solving.

SITUATION 1

"This approach doesn't make any sense."

Your response (a question)

SITUATION 2

"You clearly didn't think this through."

Your response (a question)

Exercise 3 — continued

SITUATION 3

“This is going to cause serious issues for the whole team.”

Your response (a question)

SITUATION 4

“We’ve already tried this before. It doesn’t work.”

Your response (a question)

SITUATION 5

“This is not my responsibility.”

Your response (a question)

Exercise 4 — Handling difficult negotiation situations

Read each situation and write one or two questions that could move the conversation forward.

SITUATION 1

During a negotiation, the other side rejects your proposal without explanation.

Possible question

SITUATION 2

A colleague remains silent during an important discussion and avoids responding to your proposal.

Possible question

SITUATION 3

A stakeholder criticizes your decision but provides no concrete examples.

Possible question

SUGGESTED ANSWERS & EXAMPLES

Worked Responses

These are examples, not the only correct answers — the goal is to train your thinking.

The effectiveness of a question depends on context, tone, and timing. Use these examples to compare your thinking — not to memorize phrases.

Exercise 1 — Transform statements into questions

“Your proposal is too expensive.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- “Which part of the proposal feels too expensive to you?”
- “What budget range are you working with?”
- “How does this compare to what you were expecting?”

“This plan will not work.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- “What concerns you most about this plan?”
- “Which part do you see as most challenging?”
- “What would need to change for this to work?”

Exercise 1 — continued

“You didn’t deliver what we expected.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- _ “Can you clarify what expectations were not met?”
- _ “What specifically would you like to see improved?”
- _ “Where do you see the biggest gap between expectations and results?”

“This timeline makes no sense.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- _ “What part of the timeline seems unrealistic to you?”
- _ “What constraints should we take into account?”
- _ “How would you structure this timeline differently?”

“This approach creates too many risks.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- _ “Which risks are you most concerned about?”
- _ “What would make this approach feel safer to you?”
- _ “Which risks do you see as the most critical?”

Exercise 2 — Identify the type of question

- 1 “What specifically concerns you about this proposal?”
→ **Clarifying question**
 - 2 “How do you see this project developing over the next six months?”
→ **Open question**
 - 3 “Would you agree that reducing the scope might help us meet the deadline?”
→ **Reframing question**
 - 4 “What makes this option more attractive than the alternatives?”
→ **Open question**
 - 5 “Shall we schedule a follow-up meeting to finalize the details?”
→ **Closing question**
-

Exercise 3 — Respond to aggressive comments

“This approach doesn’t make any sense.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- “What specifically doesn’t make sense to you?”
- “Which part would you like to discuss in more detail?”
- “What would you approach differently here?”

Exercise 3 — continued

“You clearly didn’t think this through.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- “What do you think might be missing from the analysis?”
- “Which part would you like me to elaborate on?”

“This is going to cause serious issues for the whole team.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- “What issues are you most concerned about?”
- “Which team risks should we look at more closely?”

“We’ve already tried this before. It doesn’t work.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- “What specifically didn’t work last time?”
- “What would need to be different for it to work now?”

“This is not my responsibility.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- “How do you see the responsibilities distributed here?”
- “What would be a fair way to approach this?”

Exercise 4 — Handling difficult negotiation situations

“The other side rejects your proposal without explanation.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- _ “Could you share what concerns you about the proposal?”
- _ “Which part would you like to reconsider?”
- _ “What would make this proposal more acceptable to you?”

“A colleague remains silent during discussion.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- _ “How do you see this proposal?”
- _ “Is there anything you would approach differently?”
- _ “What are your initial thoughts on this?”

“A stakeholder criticizes your decision without specifics.”

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- _ “Could you give a specific example?”
- _ “What exactly would you change in this approach?”
- _ “Which part of the decision do you disagree with?”

YOUR PERSONAL QUESTION BANK

Make It Your Own

Even small changes in how we ask questions can significantly influence the outcome of a conversation.

Use the space below to write down questions you would like to start using in your professional conversations.

These could be questions that help you clarify unclear situations, reduce tension in difficult discussions, encourage others to explain their reasoning, or move conversations toward solutions.

Type here...

Your question bank

Type here...

PRACTICE TIP

Try using at least one strategic question from this guide in your next professional conversation. Notice how the other person reacts and how the direction of the discussion changes. Even small changes in how we ask questions can significantly influence the outcome.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Marina Akchurina

Legal precision, psychological insight, and 17 years of high-stakes negotiations across borders.

Marina Akchurina brings a rare combination of legal precision and psychological insight to every negotiation, mediation, and arbitration she takes on.

She spent 13 years at Cleary Gottlieb, one of the world's leading international law firms, working on complex commercial and investment arbitrations across multiple jurisdictions. She has since built an independent practice as a negotiations consultant, mediator, and arbitrator, advising executives, business owners, and legal counsel across North America, Europe, and Eurasia. Marina also practices law as an independent commercial litigation and arbitration counsel through [ArbitraLex Professional Corporation](#).

Marina holds an LL.M. from New York University School of Law and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators (FCIArb). She is also trained in psychodynamic coaching and is an internationally certified Class T Business Trainer, accredited by the International College of Business Trainers — a background that shapes a belief running through this guide: outcomes are rarely won by the strongest argument. They are won by the right question, asked at the right moment.

13 Years at Cleary Gottlieb

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