

Need More Information? Stop Talking

By Bonnie Budzowski
President, inCredible Messages, LP

An executive and I were discussing the use of questions to uncover what's behind a person's position on a particular issue. We discussed a number of open-ended questions, like the following:

1. Can you give me a bit of the history behind this process? What problem did it originally solve? Who was on the team of developers?
2. Here are the facts as I see them. What else do I need to look at? What am I missing?
3. In an ideal world, we would proceed in the following way.... What concerns does this raise for your department?

The executive expressed some disappointment: "I was hoping you'd tell me some questions to get *behind* these issues."

Later, I realized the opportunity I had missed. Nothing was wrong with the list of questions. The secret the executive was hoping to find lies in the way we *handle the responses we get* to the questions. For example, if a person's answer to a well-formulated question still leaves us murky about what she really thinks, we can respond with a simple statement: "Please tell me more."

The secret, then, is to stop talking. Assuming you are not asking for private or embarrassing information, a pause is a powerful tool. In western culture, if one person is silent after a question is answered, someone else will rush in to fill the vacuum. In the process, that person will often provide more information in relation to the question—exactly what the silent person is looking for.

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