

Dynamic Listening and Strategic Questioning: Honing the Mediator Tool Box

(This article draws from a series of articles written by Fran Peavey and Vivien Hutchinson. If you are interested in reading more, send me an e-mail and I will send you the full articles. ann.mcbroom@kingcounty.gov)

What we ask, how we ask it, the spirit in which we ask, and the form and sequence of our questions – all invite some responses and discourage others. As mediators, what we do and how we do it effect and shape the experience of the parties. Our questions focus attention on what people consider about the situation. Therefore we must be as intentional as possible in our inquiry.

“Our questions are fateful.” (David Cooperider). The very act of asking a question influences people. Language invited through our questions, through either internal reflections or oral response, alters the responder’s thinking. The act of asking and answering questions has the power to shape meanings and expand or contract the potential for future action. Questions have power.

Strategic questions are questions with purpose and impact. These questions invite visions of a preferred future and strategic thinking about how to get there. The strategic questioner creates an environment for people to find the solutions within themselves. In order to form the question that will open thinking, the questioner must listen deeply to the other person. This dynamic listening involves immersing oneself in the context in which the other experiences the situation, paying close attention to the clues hidden in the story.

How do you do this? Your ears wander. They search out meaning, resolve, motion and need. You listen for obstacles to caring, blocks to action. You listen for what motivates and compels the person to action. You listen for how the person’s views change and how they think change happens. You listen for the path to change that the person sees, no matter how dimly. You listen for dreams and goals planted deeply in the person’s heart. You focus your attention on the other as if lives depend on it.

It is not your job figure out what a person should do and then somehow get him to do it. You stay out of the way. Your opinion does not serve. You believe the knowledge to resolve is alive within the person and the person knows intimately the problems they face. The point of your listening and your questioning is to help their new thinking emerge.

The strategic questioning process creates opportunities for focus, observation and analysis. It starts with developing an understanding of the problem in all of its complexities. “What disturbs you about the situation?” “What are the effects that you have noticed as a result of this situation?” “What are the reasons for this situation?” Keep in mind, these are categories of questions. In order to form a question that will

resonate with the other person, it must be posed in their context -- the context that you understand because of your deep listening.

Here is an example given by the Ms. Peavey. She was asked by an Indian friend to come to India to help with the clean up the Ganges. Knowing nothing about sewage, with no experience in cleaning up rivers, she began her questioning by inviting observation and listening for context. Her early questions were designed to understand how people saw the situation themselves. "What do you see when you look at the river?" "How do you explain the situation with the river to your children?" "How do you feel about the condition on the river?" These value-neutral questions allowed her to understand the cultural wiring associated with the river.

Once she understood the context, Ms. Peavey was able to shift her own thinking so that aligned more closely with the people she was working with. She learned that if she focused on pollution, it would be as if she were blaming this sacred river for its polluted state. She understood the context: the river is holy, the people are not taking care of her. She thought less about "what to do about the pollution" and more about "how to best care for the river."

Her next questions helped people think about how change occurs in their own context. What are the stories of change strategy embedded in the lives of these people? Her action questions engaged people in developing new strategies that relied on their knowledge and experience. She asked questions like, "How are you preparing your children to care for the river?" Creative solutions emerged that were unique to the people involved. The results motivated the community to take steps to a preferred future.

People need to come up with their own answers. Questioning are a catalyst in the process. Really great questions may not have an answer right away. A very powerful question rattles in the mind for days or weeks. The seed is planted and the answers grow!