

## *Thought for the day – 23*

### **‘Ask questions’**

Have you ever been in a meeting where somebody said something you did not understand? There is a tremendous temptation in these circumstances to sit quietly as though you understood what was said. This is a common human failing. Very often we are afraid to show our ignorance and rather than interrupt and ask a question we will sit quietly in the hope that we can catch up later in the meeting.

There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that in all business and social interaction, the most effective behaviour for taking control is to ask questions. Questions serve a number of purposes:

- At a basic level, they provide information – How does this work?
- They provide opinions and perspectives – What do you think the problems are they/we have to deal with at this negotiation?
- They test our understanding of what has been said – Are you saying that this product has unpredictable side effects?
- They can put pressure on an opponent – I have £800,000 of business to place, what are you prepared to do to get it?
- Questions can also be used to give time to think – Can you go through that again? I don't think I understand what you mean
- Skilled negotiators will frequently answer a question with a question, and thus take control back – Why do you ask?
- But the most important reason for asking questions is to take control of a negotiation – Having dealt with price, what are your views on quality?

There are many types of question, all of which serve different purposes. Some questions, however, betray our dislike of asking them. Perhaps this is because we feel embarrassed, perhaps because we think the other party may be offended. The net effect is that we sometimes ask poor or inadequate questions such as:

- You couldn't reduce your price could you? (*answer* – that's right, I couldn't)
- Is that your best offer? (*answer* – yes it is)
- You don't give discounts do you? (*answer* – no)
- Is there any way you could possibly see your way clear, to thinking again about your price, and maybe sharpening your pencil? (*answer* – definitely not)

Asking questions gives you information, time to think, and the opportunity to exploit the answers. First of all, however, we must learn to ask the right questions in the right way. You need to think about what you want to achieve, and then consider the best form of question and the most suitable wording.

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*This thought has been taken from Eric's book 'Mastering Negotiations'. A master negotiator himself, he is our expert trainer on the subject – click [here](#) for details of one of his most popular courses.*

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