



Resolving Issues with Your Boss (Part 6): *The Art of asking the right question*

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Summary of Part 5

Part 5 explored the Prisoner's Dilemma, a classic game theory model that illustrates the conflict between individual and collective interests. In the scenario, two individuals must choose between cooperation and betrayal. While rational self-interest often leads to mutual betrayal, cooperation would yield a better outcome for both. This dilemma highlights the importance of communication, incentives, and cultural factors in fostering collaboration.

By understanding the dynamics of the Prisoner's Dilemma, we can better navigate real-world situations where individual and collective goals may clash.

The Importance of Questions

The philosophical interrogatory, "What is a question?" is virtually unexplored within what has been passed down to us from ancient philosophical thought up to and including the present. Both Felix Cohen (1929) and Lani Watson (2021), writing nine decades apart, expressed surprise at the limited scholarly attention given to what would seem to be a fundamental social and epistemic issue.

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Philosophical inquiry often serves as a foundation for other forms of inquiry, guiding and shaping the development of fields like science, ethics, and political theory. While philosophical questions can lead to further investigation in various disciplines, such as by developing scientific methods or ethical frameworks, this process is not always linear. Other forms of inquiry, mainly empirical science, may sometimes evolve independently of philosophical reflections driven by practical goals or technological advances.

This may be the case in conflict analysis and dispute resolution strategies and tactics. While I respect the philosophical approach to this issue, I believe that a practical, functional approach may provide a clearer understanding of what a question truly is and is not. Observing discrepancies between an individual's words and identifying discrepancies in actual behavior is a better guide to asking the next follow-up question.

Feelings and How We Communicate

In fields ranging from medicine and law to construction and business, we frequently encounter situations where the application of knowledge involves human interaction and communication. Understanding the emotional and psychological states of those involved—patients, clients, or colleagues—can make or break success. The challenge, however, is that achieving clarity in such interactions is not always straightforward. Often, the intricacies of one's emotions, drives, and desires, as well as those of others, are not immediately visible or easily articulated.

Threat/Safety State	Associated Drive	Associated Emotions (Threat)	Associated Emotions (Safety)	Questions	Responses
Physical Threat	Avoidance of Pain	Fear, Anxiety	N/A	Physical: Am I in danger? Example: Is there a predator nearby?	Fight/Flight: Run away or defend. Example: Escaping or fighting a predator.
Physical Safety	Avoidance of Pain	Calmness, Relief	Calmness, Relief	Physical: Am I safe? Example: Is my environment secure?	Rest: Relax and restore. Example: Enjoying a peaceful environment.
Social Threat	Attachment and Affiliation	Shame, Rejection	N/A	Social: Do they accept me? Example: Am I being excluded?	Avoidance: Withdraw or conform. Example: Hiding from social rejection.
Social Safety	Attachment and Affiliation	Trust, Belonging	Trust, Belonging	Social: Do I belong? Example: Am I supported by my group?	Engagement: Build connections. Example: Reaching out for support.
Resource Threat	Resource Acquisition	Stress, Fear	N/A	Resource: Do I have enough? Example: Do I have enough food or money?	Hoarding: Gather resources. Example: Stockpiling food or money.
Resource Security	Resource Acquisition	Security, Contentment	Security, Contentment	Resource: Is my future secure? Example: Do I have stable finances?	Confidence: Plan or share. Example: Investing in stable assets.
Existential Threat	Existential Purpose	Despair, Uncertainty	N/A	Existential: What is my purpose? Example: What happens after death?	Freeze: Overwhelm or despair. Example: Existential crisis or apathy.
Existential Safety	Existential Purpose	Purpose, Stability	Purpose, Stability	Existential: Is my life meaningful? Example: Do I have a fulfilling purpose?	Growth: Seek meaning. Example: Volunteering or creating art.
Cognitive Threat	Curiosity	Frustration, Confusion	N/A	Cognitive: Can I understand this? Example: Is this situation too complex?	Confusion: Pause or question. Example: Hesitating when faced with a puzzle.
Cognitive Safety	Curiosity	Confidence, Assurance	Confidence, Assurance	Cognitive: Can I figure this out? Example: Do I have the knowledge to solve this?	Curiosity: Learn or explore. Example: Researching a topic in depth.

Figure 1: Threat- Safety Matrix

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We have already discussed how emotions are our brain attempting to predict our present state based on our basic human drives, our understanding of the current situation, and our past experiences. We have also discussed how important it is to understand and control our emotions. We have discussed how important it is to appraise our feelings and how important regulating our emotions is to dispute resolution and tension-reduction efforts.

Figure 1 displays the Threat/Safety matrix, which categorizes states of threat and safety into specific domains, and associates them with key psychological drives, emotional responses, diagnostic questions, and behavioral reactions.

An overview of the key components is as follows: 1). Threat/Safety States are divided into Physical, Social, and Resource categories, each addressing whether the individual feels threatened or safe in these domains; 2). Associated Drives list specific psychological drivers like avoidance of pain, attachment, or resource acquisition typically accompanying each state; 3). Emotional responses differ based on whether the individual perceives a threat; 4). Diagnostic Questions help assess whether a person perceives themselves in a state of threat or safety; and 5). Behavioral Responses are actions arising from perceived states of threat or safety, not actual states of threat or safety.

Perception is reality.

Paul Gilbert (2024, p. 455) points out the distinction between "safety" and "safeness." Threats are not only external; they are also connected to our internal experiences, including our thoughts, fantasies, emotional fluctuations, traumatic flashbacks, and challenges in processing complicated feelings. We are all capable of keeping ourselves in a perpetual state of chronic stress and threat arousal through threat anticipation and safety checking.

Of course, all models are only approximations of reality. Theories, frameworks, and systems, whether they concern social dynamics, economic trends, or even the intricacies of human emotions, offer simplified representations of the complex world in which we live. The inclusion of Figure 1 serves only as a reminder of the complexity of human behavior and a forerunner of our upcoming discussions on tension-reduction strategies to follow in subsequent talks.

Knowledge is invaluable but only genuinely transformative when applied to real-world scenarios. Yet, to effectively apply knowledge, understanding the human components—our goals, desires, emotions, and behaviors—is essential. These elements are often subjective, fluid, and nuanced, making them difficult to capture within rigid models or frameworks—a point where the art of asking the right question becomes crucial.

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Asking the right question is never a simple task.

Asking Questions to Define Our Circumstances

Asking and evaluating questions for accuracy or the necessity of asking follow-up questions is how humans define our general and specific circumstances and conditions. Regardless of circumstance and context, we ask questions to gather information, clarify ambiguities, and elicit responses to help us make informed decisions. In this sense, questions are tools for defining and navigating the complexities of social life.

However, asking the right questions in the correct sequence requires sophisticated skill sets. The phrasing of a question can significantly impact the nature of the response we receive. For example, a well-placed question can reveal emotions that someone may not have consciously acknowledged, while a poorly phrased question may shut down communication or lead to misleading answers. Additionally, the same question, under a slightly different set of circumstances, may elicit a completely different response. Humans constantly navigate many emotional and psychological states, often profoundly influenced by our underlying drives. These drives—ranging from the need for physical safety to the need for social belonging or existential meaning—are tied intricately to our emotional responses.

Our drives are the motivational forces that push us to act, seek comfort, or avoid pain. Emotions are often the feedback mechanism that signals when these drives are being fulfilled or frustrated. In this sense, the act of asking questions becomes even more critical. By asking the right questions, we can better understand our emotional states and those of others, paving the way for more effective communication and conflict resolution.

When Is a Question Not a Question?

Asking questions takes time—often more time than circumstances allow or others are able or willing to provide.

Humans have various ways of seeking agreement or validation without genuinely seeking information. One common tactic is the "leading question," designed not to elicit a genuine answer but to guide the respondent toward a predetermined conclusion. A leading question may suggest an expected answer or assume the existence of disputed facts or premises that have not been established. In these cases, questions serve more as a tool for manipulation than for gathering information.

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The interrogative: "Don't you think the defendant should be held accountable for their actions?" is a leading question because it implicitly suggests that the defendant is guilty and that accountability is the appropriate response. The questioner is not genuinely seeking the respondent's opinion; instead, they are trying to push the respondent toward a specific stance. Similarly, a question like "Why do you always fail to meet deadlines?" assumes that the respondent consistently fails; any response given implicitly accepts the premise to be true. In both instances, the question acts more like a statement to guide or influence the answer than a genuine inquiry.

While we may not be able to guess what someone is feeling or what their intent is, it is a sign that we should take care not to inadvertently accept someone's point of view that we do not share.

It is essential to differentiate between questions meant to gather information and questions worded —intentionally or not— as disguised assertions. Genuine questions are open-ended and invite authentic responses. They allow for various perspectives and do not presume that the answer is already known. In contrast, leading questions limit the scope of the reaction and often reflect a hidden agenda.

The Impact of Safeness

We have noted Paul Gilbert's distinction between "safety" and "safeness". This distinction is subtle but essential, particularly regarding the emotional and psychological experiences necessary for formulating and responding to questions.

Safety typically refers to the absence of external danger or threat. It's about being free from physical harm or existential risks. On the other hand, safety goes deeper into the internal emotional and psychological experience. Even in the presence of a possible threat, it is more about how an individual feels within a space or relationship.

Safety is more about external protection, while safeness refers to an internal, emotional state of comfort, security, and, at minimum, temporary, conditional trust. You can feel "safe" from physical harm but still not feel "safe" emotionally or psychologically. Conversely, one may feel "safe" in a particular space but may not experience the internal comfort and openness that safeness provides.

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Conclusion

The act of asking questions plays a pivotal role in human communication, particularly when navigating emotional states, human drives, and the goal of achieving effective interactions. By understanding the intricate connection between emotions and motivations, individuals can tailor their questions to foster openness, empathy, and clarity.

The right questions can bridge gaps, resolve misunderstandings, and promote deeper understanding in professional settings or personal relationships. Conversely, poorly constructed or leading questions may inadvertently steer conversations in unproductive directions, reinforcing biases or stifling authentic responses. Effective question-asking requires not only the awareness of one's emotional state but also sensitivity to the emotions and drives of others.

While based on science, ultimately, it is a hard-won Art. Different people feel differently and express themselves differently. And the same individual is more likely than not to respond differently in slightly different circumstances.

By recognizing the importance of context, emotional safety, and the underlying human drives that influence communication, individuals can enhance their ability to connect meaningfully with others, facilitating more productive, empathetic, and insightful exchanges. Thus, asking the right question is essential to fostering successful communication, and successful dispute resolution.

* Note: A pdf copy of this article can be found at:

https://www.mcl-associates.com/downloads/resolving_issues_with_your_boss_part6.pdf

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