



Episode 57: How to get someone to open up

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Tell me if this type of situation has ever happened to you. You're talking with someone, and you ask them a question. Let's say this is someone you're working on a project with and you're deciding what to do next, and you ask them what they think.

Instead of answering with an idea, they say, "I don't know."

And that feels frustrating. You know they have ideas. You know they have a point of view. You want to hear their thoughts.

What do you do?

Today's strategy is a communication tool to help someone open up to share their thinking. It's a tool that uses two words intentionally in a question to help overcome the "I don't know's" and invite the other person to engage and share their thoughts.

Having engagement in communication is critical, because more back and forth in a conversation often helps increase trust and improve relationships. In addition, having a way at work to invite people to open up more can lead to more idea sharing, stronger partnerships, and more potential solutions.

With people who tend to be quiet, having a way to invite them to talk more easily can help you understand them better. After all, we can't read other people's minds. When people feel comfortable to share their thoughts, it helps you more clearly see their thought process and strengths.

Today's strategy is the antidote for the "I don't know" responses. It's helpful for people who tend to be quiet. It's also helpful to open up someone's thinking when they are stressed or overwhelmed. That's because when the brain is overwhelmed, worried, or feeling hopeless, we cannot think effectively.

When we're not thinking effectively, different things can happen. Some people get loud and yell, and some people get really quiet and shut down.

Whether someone is naturally reticent or in an overwhelm and brain shut down, having a way to get them talking is helpful. It helps people who are usually quiet to build their confident communication muscle. It helps people who are stressed to have a brain-friendly way to access more productive thinking.

When thinking about other people, it's always helpful to start by remembering what's in our control and what's not in our control. Obviously, other people are not in our control. We cannot control how much they talk, what they think, and what they share.

What we can control, though, is our approach and our communication.

It is in our control how much we listen, how actively we listen, and the questions we ask – in other words: our words, tone, and body language.

Today's strategy to invite people to open up more and share their thinking involves asking certain questions, in a certain way, with a certain tone.

The tool today is based on these two words: if and might.

As in, if there was someone you might want to invite to open up more, who might that be?

The words if and might are magical. They can help overcome resistance in someone's thinking. They can allow people's thinking to generate one idea or one thought in a way that still feels relatively safe.

This is especially helpful when we think about people who are overwhelmed.

Let's say you're working with a team member and they seem stressed out. You're talking about a project they're working on, and you're sensing a lot of resistance. The conversation feels really hard.

You're trying to figure out what's going on and you're not sure why it's so hard to get them to communicate. You're not sure whether it's because they have a really loud inner critic making them fearful, or there's a lot on their plate, or it's because they don't know how to prioritize in this situation.

And let's say you want to a boss who helps empower other people. You ask them this question: how do you want to prioritize things?

In our scenario when you ask this, let's imagine they answer, "I don't know" and look at you blankly.

What's going on? It doesn't seem like a hard question to answer and you know that they're capable.

Again, here's the thing to remember. When brains are overwhelmed, worried, or feeling hopeless, they are not thinking effectively. Questions that are easy to answer when we're calm often feel overwhelming and too difficult to answer when we're stressed.

Here's where the conversation is usually derailed. After hearing "I don't know," many people don't know what to do. They fall back on what's most comfortable; they become directive and give advice.

Being directive might be fine, and it's a missed opportunity to step into the role of coach. It's missing an opportunity to use coaching questions to help the person calm their brain enough to shift into more effective thinking.

If you want to help someone open up and share their thinking, even if they're usually quiet or stressed out, remember the words if and might.

Take a breath, pause, and ask the question again, this time inserting the words if and might, and bring a gentle, inquisitive, and patient tone.

You could ask the question like this:

If there was one piece of the work that feels most important to start with, what might that be?

Or you could ask it like this:

If there was one place you felt stuck right now, where might that be?

Do you see how these questions feel? They're powerful because they are questions that soften resistance. They allow the mental door to open up a tiny bit so that someone feels comfortable sharing one idea. More often than not, when you ask and wait, you'll get an answer.

Asking the brain "What do you want to do?" when it's stressed can feel overwhelming.

Asking the brain, "What's one thing that might be helpful to do?" can feel answerable. It's a way to break down a large problem and focus on one piece of the solution.

Here's an example of how to use an if and might question. A few years ago, I was running a workshop for leaders, helping them use coaching questions more. At one point, I asked the group a question. We were talking about putting their new learnings into practice, and I asked, "Where can you bring these tools to your work?"

No one raised their hand. It was silent.

So, I quickly pivoted to an if and might question.

I asked again, this time, like this:

If there was one person who you might try one of these questions with, who might that be?

Hands went up. People were now able to think of others they were excited to try coaching questions with.

Using the tool of an if and might question helps both us and the person we're talking with. It reminds us to shift our tone into one that's more welcoming and open. That naturally creates space for ideas to be shared. When we show up differently, it allows other people to show up differently.

The words if and might also help the person we're talking with because they're words of possibility and permission. When a question feels like too much, these words make it ok to simply share one thought. One idea. That's doable...and it's often a baby step toward opening up a conversation.

Let's bring this to you.

In the next few weeks, when someone feels like they're shutting down in a conversation, put on your coaching hat and ask an if and might question. For example, if there was one thing that might be fun to do this weekend, what might that be?

See what happens, what opens up, and what you learn.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you would like help with your communication so that you are a more effective communicator, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com to schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!