



Episode 77: The Best Check-In Questions for a Meeting

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. Here are the starting questions today: when you hop on to a virtual meeting or sit down with someone in your office, how do you get an initial read on them? How do you know where they are emotionally, physically, or cognitively?

The big idea today is that meetings and conversations are a valuable use of everyone's time. They matter. Meetings and conversations are how information is shared, how problems get brainstormed, and how follow up gets discussed.

We all want our conversations and meetings to be productive.

And many times, they are. People come prepared, they're ready to go, and you accomplish your agenda. Other times, though, they're not. You start talking only to realize that the other person is not in the right mental space. They start voicing frustrations or seem like they're not present.

This can quickly derail a conversation. Then, you need to back up, figure out what's going on, and find a way to get back on track. That can lead to frustration for everyone.

The way to avoid this is to start a meeting with more clarity about where people are cognitively, physically, and emotionally when you sit down or join the virtual space. Having clarity about where someone is, is helpful, because then you know how to guide the meeting.

Today, let's talk about how to help meetings and conversations be most productive right at the outset. Everyone's time is valuable, and effective leaders keep that in mind.

Today's tool brings helps make meetings and conversations more focused and productive. It helps quickly engage higher-level prefrontal cortex thinking. And it reminds people that they are personally responsible for how they show up and the impact they have on others.

Today's tool is a set of 3 questions that I call 'check-in questions.' Check-in questions are questions that you can ask at the start of a conversation to quickly assess how the other person is thinking and feeling. Because when you know how someone is thinking and feeling, you can adapt a conversation and pivot as needed.

Many of my clients use some sort of check-in question at the start of a meeting like, How are you? Or, on a Monday, how was your weekend?

Those questions are fine, and the ones I'm going to share are more focused. They're a quick way to understand the other person, and a way to help the other person shift into effective thinking.

That's important, especially in the virtual world. Virtual meetings make it hard to get a read on someone. We see only a small part of their body, and that's if their camera is on. How are you supposed

to know how someone is doing and whether they're ready to have the conversation that needs to happen?

That is the goal of check-in questions. Here are the 3 questions we're talking about today:

The first question is this: "What is one word to describe your thinking right now?"

The second question is this: "What is one word to describe how your body feels right now?"

The third question is this: "What is one word to describe how your spirit is right now?"

And yes, I only let clients give one-word answers.

Here's why I love these questions.

First, they tell you where someone is cognitively and emotionally. When you get on a virtual call and see the other person, you do not know how they're thinking and feeling. And the way they're thinking and feeling matters.

What we think and how we feel influences what we say and do. If we come to a conversation from a frustrated mindset, the conversation is going to go very differently than if we come to a conversation from an optimistic mindset.

When we feel worried, we cannot see all of the solutions and possibilities that we can see if we're feeling courageous.

Conversations are how things get done, and you want people to bring their best thinking and their best energy. When they do, that is great. When they don't, it means that you cannot expect to immediately jump into a productive problem-solving conversation. You have to first deal with the frustration or worries.

Here's what I mean. One day, I started a coaching call with a client. He seemed like he was present. Then I asked the check-in questions. I asked him:

"What is one word for how your thinking is in this moment?" He said, "Scattered."

"What is one word for how your body feels right now?" He said, "Tense."

"What is one word for how your spirit is right now?" He said, "Calm."

When clients tell me that their thinking is scattered or overwhelmed, that's a sign that we need to do a few minutes of centering. We might breathe, stretch, or use the coaching strategy of clearing.

It takes only a minute or so, and it allows my clients to return to more effective and productive thinking. Then we're ready to dive in to the topic at hand.

The same goes for the question about how someone's body feels. Our body and brain are connected. When our body is tense and tired, our thinking is affected. When someone uses words like "tense" or "hurting" to describe how their body feels, we take a moment to move and stretch to help the body relax. It's amazing how a little movement of the body can make a big difference in someone's demeanor and thinking.

The check-in question about someone's spirit gives you a sense of their capacity for handling whatever it is you're going to talk about. Most of the time, clients tell me that their spirit is calm or resilient, even when their thinking is overwhelmed.

When I hear that someone's spirit is more fragile or shaky, that's important. I then get curious. We want to think about our lives from a place of feeling OK in the world. We need resilience and a strong sense of self to tackle the challenges that come our way.

These questions give me a quick peek at how someone is doing, in only 3 words. No long stories, no long answers. Three words only.

The other main reason this set of questions is helpful is that it requires our prefrontal cortex higher level thinking to answer them. One of the ways our prefrontal cortex thinks is that it assesses a field of choices and chooses intentionally. When you ask people for one-word answers, their prefrontal cortex gets activated. It sorts through the different words it could choose, and chooses a single word.

This immediately helps people start shifting into a more positive thinking mode.

So, let's recap. If you want to help meetings and conversations be more productive, you can use today's tool as a way to quickly understand where someone is when they sit down in front of you or join the virtual meeting.

Here are the 3 check-in questions:

What is one word for how your thinking is right now?

What is one word for how your body feels right now?

What's one word for how your spirit is right now?

When you hear someone's answers, you'll know what to do and say next. If their words indicate that they're excited and engaged, you're ready to dive in, think big, and collaborate.

If their answers indicate that they're stressed or overwhelmed, you'll want to invite them to recenter so that the stress does not undermine the conversation.

Asking these check-in questions shows that you care. It shows that you know that how people think and feel impacts what they say and do. Using these questions reminds people that they have control over their self-awareness and how they show up. It roles models treating meetings and people's time as valuable resources. It's inviting everyone to engage and bring their most effective thinking. And that's how problems get successfully solved.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you would like to build your coaching skills as a manager or leader, 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!