

The Art Of Getting Through To Closed-Minded Thinkers

By [Morey Stettner](#) Posted 01/09/2009 05:38 PM ET



If you're set on strengthening relationships this year, begin by flexing your personality muscles. Rather than try to make others act or think more like you, adjust to their style.

Consider how you deal with closed-minded people. It's tempting to argue and plead with them to accept your entreaties. But a better strategy is to dig for more information on how they arrive at their views.

"Asking questions is the best way to get others to be more open-minded," said Shari Frisinger, president of CornerStone Strategies, a consulting firm in Houston. Probing in a polite tone shows that you're more interested in learning than lecturing.

When people expose biases or faulty thought patterns, beware of trying to point them out. Instead, withhold your judgment and build friendly rapport. The resulting goodwill can help you break down their defenses and exert persuasive power.

By gently goading others to explain their deeply held beliefs, you let them bask in the spotlight. Many people enjoy expounding upon their views.

After they finish talking, resist the urge to disagree or otherwise challenge them outright. Hypothetical questions work better.

"Two questions that go well together are 'What if' followed by 'Why not'," said Frisinger.

Dissect the reasoning that shapes their analysis and then ask questions such as, "What if the process unfolds at a different pace?" or "What if unforeseen events influence the outcome?"

Give them ample time to answer free from interruption. Follow up with inquiries such as, "Why not take a different path to achieve that goal?" or "Why not integrate other factors into the equation?"

As long as you speak in a genial, nonthreatening manner, you can encourage closed-minded people to explore a wider range of possibilities. Their answers may cause them to reassess their position.

Using questions works well because it allows others to conclude for themselves that they're too limited in their thinking. Your curiosity can lead them to jettison certain assumptions.

"By keeping them talking, you get them to show you their own boundaries," Frisinger said. "That helps you figure out why they're closed to new ways of seeing the world and how their perceptions influence them."

Because closed-minded people will filter your comments through the lens of what they already know, induce them to weigh evidence that contradicts what they deem as true. Only after you let them hold court — and repeatedly ask them to elaborate so that they reveal their attitudes and assumptions — can you poke holes in their beliefs.

If closed-minded speakers misinterpret your remarks to fit their preconceived notions, don't rush to say, "You've got it wrong." Keep countering with "What if" inquiries.

"Eventually, your questions can lead them to realize they can no longer justify their position quite as strongly," Frisinger said. That's when they may grow receptive to evaluating your ideas.

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