

# THE BEST KEPT SECRETS TO A BETTER LIFE

## NINE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

- **Appearance versus Reality**...your perceptions are a part of the necessary information to form the real picture of any situation, but your image may be how reality appears only from your perspective. An awareness of the possibility of misinterpretation of the other person, events, or the general situation should make you willing to change your image in the face of any new information. Seeing the difference between your subjective view and actual reality could mean that you are wrong or biased, but your one sided images of the other person might block a constructive resolution process. An ability to reconsider interpretations is important for authentic relationships and for personal development. If you have a tendency to regard the images you form of the personality and motives of others as truth, you may be committing assumiside. Are you willing to accept the possibility that your images of reality may be one-sided, biased, or simply wrong, or is your view unequivocally authentic? Are you willing to permit information contradicting your images to influence or change your interpretation of the other person or the situation?
- **Feelings versus Value Judgments**...in conflicts the parties often develop aversions and other negative feelings toward each other, and these feelings are easily interpreted as proof of the moral attributes of the counterpart. All too often, negative reactions are caused by differences in personalities, values, actions, or aspirations between the parties. While an impartial person would view them not as right or wrong but only observe that there are differences, the parties are more apt to treat each other with disdain. Are you capable of not making value judgments about others solely on the basis of your spontaneous feelings? Can you separate your feeling from your natural instinct long enough to gather the necessary facts and data to form a more objective assessment? Do you tend to classify that which feels discomforting as morally wrong?
- **The Person as an Individual**...the human genome has demonstrated how we are alike, yet we are unique. We often exaggerate the common attributes of the members of a specific group and lose the awareness of the differences among the members. In conflicts this tendency is pronounced because of our need to keep it simple, and as the conflict escalates, it becomes more difficult to hold the image of a group and a differentiated image of an individual group member simultaneously in mind. Giving collective traits to individuals (prejudice) is common and any exaggerated emphasis on collective attributes is restrictive to resolution, making it very difficult to handle conflicts adequately. You may be attributing collective traits to individuals when you make sweeping opinions about “those others” in the form of stereotype or slang, or if

you reinterpret statements of individuals according to the image you attribute to their group. Are you capable of human interaction based on the common traits you have with others?

- **Staying Connected**...in conflicts, the fight or flight impulse, causes us to create a distance between ourselves and our adversaries to avoid harm or discomfort. This very avoidance, both physical and emotional, often exacerbates the conflict. In the absence of contact and communication, we are free to create images of the other person outside of reality testing, and we tend to steel ourselves for the worst by imagining it. Your relationship with your own feelings may be more damaging than the relationship between yourself and your adversary. Your challenge is to test your ability to tolerate discomfort in the presence of your counterpart without resorting to evasion, disconnection, or acting out. If you can identify how you normally react when confronted with someone or something that gives you a negative feeling, you can establish your reaction patterns. Your goal is not to suppress your reactions but to accept them without allowing yourself to be governed by them. If you can endure discomfort, you are free to relate to life as it is, and you may be able to then change situations and relationships that are limiting and frustrating to you. It is not easy to break your pattern of defense, but to go beyond familiar limits may give you opportunities to expand your emotional range and improve relationships. Are you willing to try this?
- **Balancing of Interests**...the ability to simultaneously consider your interests and the needs and interests of the others' in a detached way, where each is displayed as equally legitimate, may lead to democratic solutions to problems involving several people. If you can't see the different perspectives, then the only solution is competition, with a winner and a loser, and dominance usually prevails. To force obedience rather than work for acceptance based on interests, ultimately weakens relationships and discourages collaborative approaches to problem solving. People like to think their views have value, so, by catering to the concerns each party finds fundamentally important, a shared approach to problem solving is more gratifying and acceptable. Will you identify and share your important interest?
- **Empathy**...is the ability to compassionately and emotionally relate to the feelings of another, even when you don't agree with the other person's opinions or interpretations of the situation. This ability to relate emotionally to another person's feelings can be vitally important to any resolution, since emotions do not lie, but they are strongly affected by interpretations we make of the situation. By separating the other person's interpretation from their emotions, it may be possible to have sympathy for their feelings even without agreeing with their interpretation of events. Empathy is a way of relating directly to the reality of the other person, need not be passive, and should be a two way street. Your willingness to try to tune into what the other person is feeling behind the mask will contribute to a favorable environment for

better understanding. To create a climate which encourages empathy your communication should report what you have observed directly (rather than the explanations and diagnoses you have made) expressed in a clear and direct way with the feelings you had in relation to what you observed. When you state what wishes and values you had that gave rise to the feelings and what you expect now from the other person, without unconditional demands, the mutual empathy this fosters will improve or repair your relationship with your counterpart. Are you prepared to be honest with your feelings and attentive to the feelings of others?

- **Self-realization**...means the ability to relate to your own thoughts, emotions, and behavior without being imprisoned by them in decision-making during conflicts with stress, anxiety, or other strong emotions. As long as your feelings control you, you are likely to respond to someone who is a source of your anxiety only out of your anxiety, but if you can relate to your feelings, you might be able to see the big picture, which includes your anxiety, but it's not a key variable. If you fly into habitual or impulsive reaction patterns in critical conflict situations, your auto-pilot engages and you may have lost the freedom to choose another course. Be mindful of your reaction patterns and point out when your counterpart acts on the basis of habits, routines, and other stereotyped patterns. Are you capable of leaving the comfort zone of predictable reactions?
- **Truth-speaking**...the ability to be authentic depends on your motivation to be genuine in the face of the fear associated with the vulnerability of openly displaying feelings and wishes (openness exposes you to the risk of being rejected or hurt), the fear that openness may reduce your chances of getting what you want (loss of tactical advantage), and non-disclosure of motives (perhaps you can't defend them from a moral perspective). Truthspeaking requires of us that we can endure our vulnerability in situations where important interests and needs are at stake. Overcoming our fears and showing respect for the feelings and viewpoint of others can create a positive climate even though there may be disagreement with the actual content of those views. Can you be aware of any habitual communication styles you have and be attentive to the reaction of others to your manner of communicating?
- **Human Nature**...are you aware of the different motivations that influence your orientation in life? In conflict situations you may encounter a clashing of human needs and experience the extreme frustration of not being able to realize plans and goals, because they collide with other peoples' visions or plans, or with an inert environment or hostile climate. So long as you closely identify with your self-ego, your motivation will be derived from the needs of sustaining that ego. Often, conflicts reveal different layers of motivation; on the surface the issues may be money, positions, or division of work tasks, while in a deeper level there is a longing for respect, recognition, or acceptance. We usually have two reasons for the things we do, a good one and the real one. All too often, people in conflict argue and debate

over petty details and trivial points, when the true motivation is to uphold their self-respect by not “losing” to the other. We encounter in serious conflicts that which is too important to give up, and that provides a good opportunity to explore the nature of our motivation. A thorough and profound reflection of your own motives, elicited from conflict, could provide the transformation that might prove to be ultimately more meaningful and satisfying to you than the motives that guided your life in the past. Ask yourself if the issues which appear to be central to the conflict are as important as deeper layers of more fundamental needs and interests below the surface. Conflicts have a way of confronting us with issues we would not voluntarily seek out, and you can choose not to look at yourself in that mirror or you can scrutinize your actions or omissions and be aware that you can change the way you relate to personal interactions.

Tony Belak  
Office of the Ombuds  
University of Louisville  
[tony.belak@louisville.edu](mailto:tony.belak@louisville.edu)  
[tony.belak@yahoo.com](mailto:tony.belak@yahoo.com)  
(502) 345-6763 mobile  
(502) 852-7359 office