

NEGOTIATING

How to Start a Successful Negotiation in 2 Words

In a new book, law school professor Alexandra Carter says great negotiators ask great questions. [🔗](#)

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Negotiation is something we do in our everyday interactions. Get better at it, and you'll go further in your business and your career.

According to Alexandra Carter, director of the Columbia Law School Mediation Clinic and

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relationships.

For example, if you ask your boss to let you work from home even when the office re-opens, you're entering a negotiation. If you ask for a break on your rent, you're negotiating.

Asking for a raise? You're negotiating.

Carter reminds us that a question can be open or closed, and that "93 percent of us are not asking the questions we need to ask in a negotiation to get the best results."

A closed question is one where you get a simple yes or no answer. An open question, however, does what it implies—opens up a conversation that might lead to the outcome you hope to get.

According to Carter, the ultimate open-ended question begins with two simple words:

The Ultimate Ice-Breaker

Carter says "tell me" is the most powerful way to open a question on any topic.

Professional negotiators use those words to build trust– the foundation of any successful negotiation.

"Tell me" is the key to learning the other person's perspective. It's the ultimate ice-breaker and rapport builder

"When the person across from you feels as though you're making a genuine effort to understand them and their perspective, rather than just pushing your own agenda, they'll share more with you and be more open to what you have to say," says Carter.

To illustrate the success of these words, consider one of Carter's students at Columbia who received job offers from every one of the law firms where she applied. The student had not achieved academic honors, normally a pre-requisite for a top law firm.

But by using the "tell me" prompt, the student got recruiters to talk about themselves and their path at the organization. After they opened up, the student picked up on the themes she heard, summarized them, and connected them to the value she could bring to the firm.

Carter recommends that you use "tell me" as part of the first question in any conversation where you want to build trust with another person. For example:

A successful photographer preparing to take a family portrait begins with, "Tell me about your family" to understand the dynamics better.

A physical therapist says, "Tell me about yourself" to gain a patient's trust and define treatment goals.

A partner in a successful marriage says "Tell me about your day." Ask a closed question ('How was your day?') and you'll get a one-word response: "Fine." Saying "tell me" builds closer relationships.

A senior banker asks her clients, "Tell me how things are going" to give the client space to discuss their current feelings.

"Tell me" is so fundamental to effective negotiation that Carter devotes an entire chapter to those two words. She says it's a secret weapon that many people don't know about.

JUL 18, 2020

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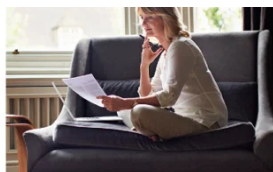
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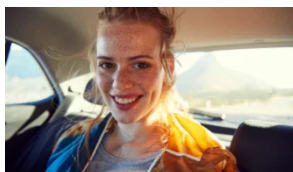
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