



3 Questions Leaders Should Ask Themselves To Expand Perspectives

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 1 September 2022

Perspective-taking is a valuable leadership skill. The ability to see things from another person's position facilitates productive debate, helps us work through problems, and build trusting relationships. Considering a range of perspectives is also an essential part of conflict resolution. Yet when people find themselves in challenging situations, perspective is often the first thing to go because they become entrenched in their viewpoint and less able to see those of others.

Leaders will be aware of ways to gain more perspective, for example, through brainstorming, recognizing feelings, or putting themselves in another's position. However, there are three deeper questions that leaders can ask themselves to broaden their perspective, especially if they find themselves in a conflict situation.

Q1: As well as thinking 'What are my options?', Ask 'What's my BATNA?'

When facing a difficult situation, it's helpful to think through or note down possible options to help open the mind to other possibilities. Even more effective is to borrow from the negotiation toolkit and consider the BATNA, a term coined by Fisher and Ury, in the seminal work "Getting to Yes." BATNA refers to the 'best alternative to a negotiated settlement,' i.e., what's your plan if an agreement can't be reached?

While a BATNA is more commonly used in contract negotiation, it can also be used when there's a relationship of conflict at work. Suppose you need to have a difficult conversation with a colleague about a complaint you have received. In that case, thinking through possible scenarios before your discussion can be helpful. Your aim (the negotiated settlement) might be that the colleague agrees to speak directly to the aggrieved team member. Your best alternative, or BATNA, might be to get agreement from all sides to attend a workplace mediation or team facilitation to clear the air. Your worst alternative (or WLATNA) may be that the colleague decides to raise a grievance. And the most likely alternative (or MLATNA) is that the colleague asks you to be present for the conversation.

The benefit of considering BATNA, WATNA, and MLATNA, is that it paves the way for more thorough analysis and decision-making. The approach also helps you view several implications for a course of action, rather than become attached to one desired outcome.

Q2: As well as querying 'What am I feeling?', Ask 'Where am I feeling it?'

Self-awareness is fundamental in most situations, especially when navigating conflict. Identifying your feelings, such as anger, frustration, hurt, or panic, helps you make sense of a challenging situation.

It is also helpful to be aware of *where* you are feeling these sensations. The body can reveal much if this insight can be tapped into. Somatics is the understanding that the mind and body are intrinsically connected, and the whole body is actually a part of thinking. Amanda Blake, somatic coach and author of “Your Body is Your Brain,” talks about the ‘distributed brain.’ With hundreds of millions of neurons in the gut and the enteric nervous system, and 95% of the body’s mood-regulating hormone serotonin in the gut, the distributed brain is the only part of the nervous system that can regulate messages from the brain.

Blake argues that the way the body moves and functions significantly affects thoughts and feelings, so the body can be used as a tool to help change cognition. For example, a manager may be aware of tension in their shoulders and stomach when encountering a colleague with whom they have a difficult relationship. Consciously relaxing and regulating their breathing during their subsequent encounter can significantly impact mood and mindset, helping them to be more open to listening to their colleague’s perspective.

Q3: As well as saying ‘Can I put myself in the other person’s shoes?’, Ask ‘Can I raid the wardrobe?’

It may be a common phrase, but putting oneself in another person’s shoes is very helpful. Imagining what the other person is thinking, feeling, and why they might have said what they did, helps to build empathy and gain a broader perspective.

Taking this one step further, don’t just try on one pair of shoes, but explore the whole shoe rack. There are a range of ways to do this. First, try to look at a situation from different personal perspectives, for example, by zooming in or out on the issue. What would a younger me have thought? What would I want to see when I reflect on this episode? Picturing the future can help gain a sense of proportion, such as thinking about how you will feel about this in a few years. Then, try looking at it from other people’s perspectives. What would your boss think, or a respected colleague or loved one? Considering multiple possibilities prevents us from becoming wedded to one point of view and opens our mind to more flexible thinking.

These three perspective-widening questions can help leaders look for learning in any situation. Learning not just about others and their viewpoints, but about the self. Managing the mind and body as one, and following a ‘BATNA’ might reveal that navigating the leadership journey is as comfortable in someone else’s boots as in our own much-loved pair of loafers.