



# ROARING FORK LEADERSHIP

## Back Pocket Questions: Tools for Navigating Conflict and Building Understanding

Conflict and discomfort are inevitable in relationships, whether personal or professional. They can be moments of frustration, but they're also opportunities for connection and growth—if approached thoughtfully. That's where back pocket questions come in.

Back pocket questions are intentional tools to shift the focus from discomfort, powerlessness, or frustration to understanding and collaboration. They're a way to keep conversations constructive, even when emotions run high. Here's how to integrate them into your interactions.

### 1. Self-Awareness: The Foundation for Constructive Conversations

The first step to using back pocket questions effectively is understanding your own emotions. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is crucial because emotions influence thoughts, decisions, and behaviors—often subconsciously. Recognizing when frustration or anger is building allows you to pause, take a breath, and choose a thoughtful response. For example, if you feel irritation bubbling up during a disagreement, acknowledge it internally: *"I'm feeling frustrated right now. How can I respond in a way that moves this conversation forward?"* Self-awareness creates space for constructive dialogue instead of reactive outbursts.

### 2. Stay Curious: Seek to Understand

Conflict often arises from misunderstanding. Approaching these moments with curiosity instead of judgment can open up pathways for resolution. Ask questions that encourage the other person to share their perspective:

- "Can you help me understand what's most important to you here?"
- "Tell me more about that."
- "It seems to me that [insert observation]. Am I understanding that correctly?"
- "Here's what I understand so far. I'd appreciate your perspective."
- "How does this situation make you feel, and why?"
- "What outcome would feel best for you?"

These open-ended questions signal respect and a willingness to collaborate, defusing defensiveness and inviting honesty.

### **3. Keep It Neutral: De-escalate Tension**

In uncomfortable situations, emotions can escalate quickly. Neutral, open-ended questions can help lower the temperature and create space for thoughtful responses. For example:

- “What’s the biggest concern on your mind right now?”
- “What do you think we might be missing?”

These questions shift the focus from blame or frustration to problem-solving and shared understanding.

### **4. Focus on Values and Needs: Uncover What Matters**

Many conflicts stem from unmet needs or differing values. By uncovering these deeper layers, you can address the root causes rather than surface-level symptoms. Consider questions like:

- “What’s driving your perspective on this?”
- “What does success look like to you in this situation?”
- “What’s most important to you here?”

These inquiries help both parties articulate what they need, paving the way for more meaningful and effective solutions.

### **5. Plan Ahead: Be Prepared for Tough Conversations**

Anticipating potential conflict or discomfort? Preparing a few versatile back pocket questions in advance can help you navigate challenging moments with confidence. Practice these questions or role-play scenarios to build comfort and readiness.

Here are a few go-to examples:

- “What do you think is the best way forward?”
- “How can we find common ground?”
- “What would make you feel heard and supported?”

Preparation empowers you to remain calm and focused, even in emotionally charged situations.

## **The Power of Back Pocket Questions**

At their core, back pocket questions shift the focus from defending positions to understanding each other. They’re a way to create space for meaningful dialogue, helping you navigate conflict with empathy and clarity. By fostering curiosity, neutrality, and a focus on values, these questions transform moments of discomfort into opportunities for connection and growth.

So, the next time you’re faced with conflict, pause, take a breath, and reach for one of your back pocket questions. You might be surprised at how much they can change the conversation—and the outcome.

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