



Tool

# Meaningful stakeholder dialogue

## Asking the right questions

SEER





# Introduction

This tool is part of a collection of resources, including tools, knowledge documents, and training, designed to help companies prepare and conduct [meaningful dialogues](#) with their stakeholders. Meaningful stakeholder engagement is fundamental for (International) Responsible Business Conduct (IRBC) and is reflected in [all steps of the due diligence process](#) as included in the OECD guidelines.

Asking questions is a crucial part of any dialogue. It allows you to gather information, clarify points, show engagement, and elevate the level of discussion. This tool helps you enhance your questioning techniques by focusing on four key success factors:

1. [Context](#)
2. [Wording](#)
3. [Attitude](#)
4. [Your stakeholder's background](#)

## Context

The effectiveness of a question is largely dependent on the context. In some situations, you can address a topic directly, while in others, a more subtle approach is necessary. The appropriateness of your questions depends on several factors:

### **Trust between you and your stakeholder**

If you know each other well, you are likely aware of what topics are sensitive and can better assess when to pose more direct questions. However, if your relationship is still developing, it is important to tread more carefully.

### **The power balance between you and your stakeholder**

If you hold a more powerful position, be mindful that your questions might come across as coercive or judgmental. Consider how your position influences your attitude and the way you phrase your questions.

### **Cultural norms and sector-specific manners**

For instance, Dutch directness is not always appreciated in every culture. It is essential to consider the cultural norms and expectations of your stakeholder. For more insights, refer to the [tool](#) 'Considering country-specific and cultural factors'.



# Wording

What you ask may not always directly reflect what you want to know. Sometimes, taking an indirect approach can be more effective in obtaining the information you seek. The tips below can help you phrase your questions in a way that fosters equality, openness, and trust. Use these questions to introduce topics and deepen the conversation with targeted follow-up inquiries.

Tip	Do not ask this question	Ask this question instead
<b>Ensure your question is neutral and non-judgmental</b>	To the owner of a plantation you source from: “Why is the turnover of staff at your tea plantation so high?”	To the owner of a plantation you source from: “I read in an audit report that staff turnover rates have changed in recent years. Can you tell me more about that?”
<b>Focus on one topic</b>	In a survey among workers in your supply chain: “Do you feel safe enough to talk to your manager if your work becomes too demanding or to ask him or her for help if you have a problem with a colleague?”	In a survey among workers in your supply chain: “Do you talk to your manager if your work becomes too demanding?”
<b>Make your question clear and specific</b>	To your supplier: “What do you think of our new strategy on purchasing practices?”	To your supplier: “Our company recently developed a new purchasing policy. As part of this, we changed the standard payment term to 30 days. What do you think of this change?”
<b>Phrase your question appreciatively to focus on what is already going well</b>	To your supplier: “Surveys among your workers show that a number of workers are not satisfied with their working conditions. How are you going to improve that in the coming year?”	To your supplier: “Surveys among your workers show that a large proportion of them are satisfied with their working conditions. What changes were implemented in the past year to increase levels of satisfaction among your workers?”
<b>Your question is inquisitive</b>	To a supplier or an NGO you work with: “Have you tried [solution X] to solve the problem?”	To a supplier or an NGO you work with: “What have you tried so far to solve the problem?”
<b>Keep your question short and to the point</b>	To an NGO you work with: “I would like to know if you have ever been in a situation in which you have had to work with other trade unions or NGOs to bring a complaint from banana plantation workers in your region to a formal complaints mechanism?”	To an NGO you work with: “What is your experience with other organisations in the region to protect the rights of workers?”

## Tips for asking open questions

In dialogue, open questions can help your stakeholder to provide more detailed information or to share his/her thoughts or opinion. However, asking open-ended questions can be difficult. Below you will find a number of formulations that can help you get started:

- What do you think about [topic X or Y]?
- How do you think we could improve [X, Y, Z]?
- What do you like about working in this factory?
- What can your manager do so that you enjoy your work more?
- Why is [topic X] important to you?
- What more can you tell us about [topic X]?
- What are your ideas about [situation X]?
- What challenges do you see in your situation to solve [problem X]?



## Attitude

Your own attitude supports asking a good question. Pay attention to the following:

- Align your attitude with the topic. If you are discussing a sensitive or serious issue, ensure that your facial expressions and body language reflect the gravity of the topic. For example, when discussing child labour, maintain a serious demeanour rather than smiling or appearing indifferent.
- Listen attentively. The purpose of asking a question is to understand the other person's perspective. Give their response your full attention and avoid steering the conversation towards your own anecdotes or observations.
- Confirm understanding. Regularly check that you have correctly understood the answers. Summarise what the other person has said and give them the opportunity to clarify or expand on their response.

## Your stakeholder's background

Your questions should match the knowledge level and experience of your conversation partner. If the person you are speaking with is not deeply familiar with a topic, avoid delving into complex details right away. Similarly, adjust your language to avoid abbreviations or technical terms they might not know. Instead, try to use terms that are familiar to them and that they frequently use. For more guidance, refer to the [tool](#) 'Considering country-specific and cultural factors in'.

## Sample questions

Asking thoughtful questions is essential when addressing sensitive or complex topics. Below are some sample questions tailored to specific subjects. The context, atmosphere, and participants in each dialogue will differ, so choose the questions that best suit your situation. Remember, the goal is not to complete a list of questions, but to gain insights into your stakeholder's views and the potential for collaboration by asking open-ended, contextual questions.

### Child labour

Child labour is a highly emotional and complex issue, beginning with differing definitions of what constitutes child labour. Establishing a productive dialogue on this topic requires time and an integrated approach, considering factors such as poverty, lack of education, migration, and inadequate enforcement. Here are some sample questions you can ask about child labour:

- "What is your definition of child labour? I'm curious to see if it aligns with ours. In our company policy, we define it as work performed by children under the age of 15 that prevents them from attending school or is dangerous or harmful to their health and development. This also includes work that is dangerous and performed by children between the ages of 15 and 18. Does this resemble your definition?"
- "Can you tell me what risks contribute to child labour in the region?"
- "How does your company contribute to preventing child labour in the region?"
- "Do you have any ideas on how to reduce child labour in the sector?"
- "Which organisations can we collaborate with to ensure that children attend school rather than work?"
- "When are the school holidays?"

## Freedom of association

The right to freedom of association, although protected by ILO Conventions 87 and 98, is not universally respected. Workers often face discrimination, disadvantages, or even threats when they attempt to unionise. As a company, you have a responsibility to support freedom of association where possible, including raising the subject with your suppliers. However, discussions about freedom of association can be sensitive due to negative perceptions and potential economic consequences of collective bargaining. The following questions can help raise awareness:

- “Can you tell me how workers’ interests are represented within your company? For example, is there a trade union or another form of worker representation?”
- “I understand that you have a worker representation committee at the factory. Can you share more about its activities?”
- “For our company, freedom of association is a key part of our Code of Conduct. Can we review this Code of Conduct together to ensure mutual understanding on this subject?”
- Formulate additional open questions based on the relevant information provided in the following tools:
  - [Questions](#) to address freedom of association and social dialogue in the agrifood sector (by CNV Internationaal and Fairtrade)
  - [Questions](#) on freedom of association and social dialogue (by CNV Internationaal and Fairtrade, in Dutch)

## Forced labour

Forced labour is a significant risk for many companies, yet it is often difficult to detect and address due to the lack of transparency in supply chains. Tackling this issue effectively requires collaboration with your supplier and their sub-suppliers, starting with a mutual understanding of what constitutes forced labour. The following questions can help build awareness:

- “More and more legislation in the field of forced labour is introduced, for example in the US and the United Kingdom. It is also important for our company that no forced labour exists in our chain. How is awareness created for this subject within your company?”
- “To what extent do you have insight into the links in your supply chain?”
- “Which regions and countries do your workers come from?”
- “I have seen no indications in audit reports that forced labour exists in your factory. What measures are you taking to continue to guarantee this?”
- “I read in an audit report that a number of workers live on your property. Can you tell me more about their living conditions?”



## Information and support

This tool is part of a collection of tools, knowledge documents and training to help companies set up and implement a [meaningful dialogue](#) with their stakeholders. Meaningful stakeholder engagement is fundamental for (international) responsible business conduct and is reflected in [all steps of the due diligence process](#) according to OECD guidelines.

Click on a topic below for more information and support preparing and conducting a meaningful stakeholder dialogue.



[Website](#)



[Self-assessment](#)



[Tools](#)



[Knowledge documents](#)



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[Guidelines & legislation](#)



[FAQs](#)



[Theory](#)

## Colophon

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