Because you’re an expert on all things financial, you may believe you know what’s best for others – in their financial lives and otherwise.

But it’s unlikely you do. The culprit is your inability to communicate effectively, as these “bloopers” illustrate.

What’s unspoken?

An advisor told me this story. He was meeting with a couple who had inquired about his services. He followed his “process,” which was geared to determining if there was “a good fit.” In order to “set expectations,” when he scheduled the meeting, he advised the couple he had allocated one hour.

He discussed his background, how his firm approaches investments and financial planning, and his elaborate “three-meeting process,” which involved detailed discovery and goals for each meeting. As the end of the hour neared, he asked if they had any questions.

The wife looked at him nervously and said, “Can you help us set up a trust?” He indicated his expertise in working closely
with lawyers who did that “all the time.” She then said (as the clock wound down), “We have a special needs child, who is seriously developmentally disabled. We are terrified about who will look after him after we are gone.”

To his credit, he apologized to the couple for his insensitivity in taking most of their allotted time to focus on his agenda and ignoring theirs.

While this story is particularly poignant, I’ve heard versions of it many times. You believe you know what should be discussed. You have boxes in your mind and you set about checking them. You view the person in front of you as a pawn in your chess game.

In reality, they are the king and queen. Your agenda is irrelevant. theirs is primary.

Fortunately, there’s a simple way to avoid this communication blooper: Ask.

Ask them what’s on their mind.

Ask them what they would like to talk about.

Ask them how you can make the meeting as productive as possible for them.

Then, ask follow-up questions.

**We view facts differently**

I was surprised to learn most conflicts don’t involve facts. We argue over our interpretation of facts.

Social worker Larry Laverman illustrated this point in his blog post on naïve realism. In Woody Allen’s film, *Annie Hall*, there’s a split-screen segment showing a couple (Alvy and Annie) meeting separately with their therapist. Here’s the dialogue:

Alvy’s therapist: How often do you sleep together?

Annie’s therapist: Do you have sex often?

Alvy: Hardly ever, maybe three times a week.

President Trump’s recent effort to buy Greenland is another example. To his detractors, it was another wacky idea by an unstable, unpredictable leader. To his supporters, it was a brilliant attempt to secure an area of strategic significance and protect our national security.

In both examples, the facts weren’t in dispute, but the interpretation was very different.

You have no idea how your prospects view the world. You aren’t familiar with their life experiences and psychological background. Consequently, you can’t possibly understand how they will react to what you are saying.

This is the perfect storm for miscommunication.

There’s a simple solution. Instead of conveying information, elicit it. Draw them out. Get them talking. Find out who they are, what’s important to them, what they value. Let them control the direction of the conversation. Set aside your agenda. Don’t try to spin the conversation in any direction (by asking cliché questions like, “What keeps you up at night?”).

It’s a counter-intuitive approach. Using it will be transformational.

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