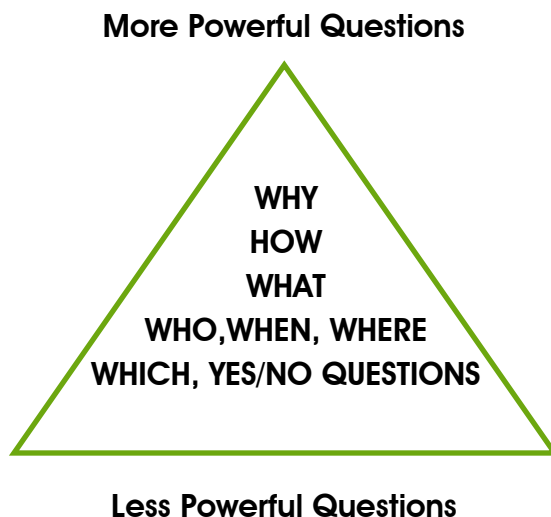


A Powerful Question:

- Generates curiosity in the listener
- Stimulates reflective conversation
- Is thought-provoking
- Surfaces underlying assumptions
- Invites creativity and new possibilities
- Generates energy and forward movement
- Channels attention and focuses inquiry
- Stays with participants
- Touches a deep meaning
- Evokes more questions



The Planning Process

1. Assess Your Situation

This situation analysis might include the assessment of critical results data, meetings with key stakeholders, and the mapping of your strengths, opportunities, and threats.

2. Discover the “Big Questions”

Look for patterns and themes. You are on a treasure hunt, seeking the core questions—usually three to five—that, if answered, would make the most difference to the future of the project or situation you are exploring.

3. Create Images of Possibility

Ask yourself, “What would our situation look like or be like if the ‘big questions’ were answered?” Creating vivid images of possibility differs from pie-in-the-sky visioning, especially if people with a variety of perspectives have participated in the earlier stages of your analysis.

4. Evolve Workable Strategies

Workable strategies or action plans begin to emerge in response to compelling questions and to the images of possibility that these questions evoke. In a sense, such strategies are the “big answers”—the key initiatives you invent to address your “big questions.”

Powerful Questions Foster Shared Meaning

We make meaning of our experiences through stories, images, and metaphors. To tap into this pool of shared meaning, which is the ground from which both powerful questions and innovative solutions emerge, leaders need to put time and attention into framing common language and developing shared images and metaphors. They can do so by constructing compelling scenarios—stories of the future—that provide a context for working on today’s “big questions.”

“A question not asked is a door not opened.” - Marilee Goldberg, *The Art of the Question*

Here is a series of generative questions that are useful to stimulate new knowledge and creative thinking in a wide variety of situations in organizations and communities.

Questions for Focusing Collective Attention on Your Situation

- What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of (your specific situation)?
- What's important to you about (your specific situation) and why do you care?
- What draws you/us to this inquiry?
- What's our intention here? What's the deeper purpose (the big "why") that is really worthy of our best effort?
- What opportunities can you see in (your specific situation)?
- What do we know so far/still need to learn about (your specific situation)?
- What are the dilemmas/opportunities in (your specific situation)?
- What assumptions do we need to test or challenge here in thinking about (your specific situation)?
- What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about (your specific situation)?

Questions for Connecting Ideas and Finding Deeper Insight

- What's taking shape? What are you hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed? What's in the center of the table?
- What's emerging here for you? What new connections are you making?
- What had real meaning for you from what you've heard? What surprised you? What challenged you?
- What's missing from this picture so far? What is it we're not seeing? What do we need more clarity about?
- What's been your/our major learning, insight, or discovery so far?
- What's the next level of thinking we need to do?
- If there was one thing that hasn't yet been said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?

Questions That Create Forward Movement

- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- What could happen that would enable you/us to feel fully engaged and energized about (your specific situation)?
- What's possible here and who cares? (rather than "What's wrong here and who's responsible?")
- What needs our immediate attention going forward?
- If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose?
- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?
- What challenges might come our way and how might we meet them?
- What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that created new possibilities for the future of (your situation)?
- What seed might we plant together today that could make the most difference to the future of (your situation)?

For Further Exploration

Brown, Juanita et. al. *The World Café: A Resource Guide for Hosting Conversations That Matter* (Whole Systems Associates, 2002; available at www.pegasus.com)

Goldberg, Marilee. *The Art of the Question* (John Wiley and Sons, 1997)

Leeds, Dorothy. *The Seven Powers of Questions: Secrets to Successful Communication in Life and Work* (Berkley Publishing Group, 2000)

Peavey, Fran. "Strategic Questioning" in *By Life's Grace: Musings on the Essence of Social Change* (New Society Publishers, 1994; more information is available at www.crabgrass.org)

Strachan, Dorothy. *Questions That Work: A Resource for Facilitators* (ST Press, Ottawa, Canada)