



"THE QUESTION NEVER FAILED US!"
THE ART OF ASKING CATALYTIC QUESTIONS.

Effective Advising in Statebuilding and Peacebuilding Contexts.
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Asking powerful, compelling questions that matter is a central skill of an adviser, mentor or coach, or of a thought leader, seeking to catalyse in others the energies to develop competencies and capacities and to move towards a stronger future.

CATALYTIC QUESTIONS ENCOURAGE FURTHER THOUGHT, DEEPER REFLECTION, SHARPER INSIGHT, INNOVATION AND ACTION.

“Questions have impact even before they are answered. They can close a door or turn on a light. They can intensify conflict or deepen mutual understanding.” (Laura Chasin 2011)

“Sometimes the most important thing to do is to help the people themselves shape the questions in the most powerful way, since they know their own situation the best of anyone.” (Vogt et alii 2003:4)

“Sometimes as leaders it’s important not to collectively work on what the answer is but to work on what the question is.” (idem p. 8).

“Reflexive questions allow the system to talk to itself about itself in new ways and so become more aware of its capacity to behave differently and to be different, to co-evolve to new forms of organizing. Such questions, and the responses and sense-making they provoke, serve to open space for the system to see new possibilities and to evolve more freely of its own accord. In this way change is evolutionary, growing from inside the system, rather than imposed from outside the system.” (Lewis et alii 2011:69)

1. Why Do We Ask Questions?

We ask questions for different purposes: to express an interest in another person; to explore the personality of another person or the circumstances in which another person found or finds her/himself; to bring more people into a conversation; to obtain information; to test someone's knowledge; to obtain clarification; to learn about and orient ourselves into a new environment; to catalyse certain changes in the environment; to maintain control of a conversation – but also to encourage further thought, deeper reflection, insight, innovation and action. The latter type of questions are 'catalytic' questions.

ASKING BUILDS RESOURCEFULNESS

Five key reasons to ask instead of tell:

- *All the information is with your interlocutor(s).*

For many aspects of the situation you find yourself in, your interlocutor(s) is/are the resident experts. They may also know what has been tried in the past and what worked and didn't work.

- *Asking creates buy in.*

The key to change may not be 'knowing what to do' but 'being motivated to do it'. People are more motivated to carry out their own ideas and solutions. Even if their solution seems less optimal than ours, it often has a much higher chance of being implemented. "Asking creates buy-in, and buy-in gets results."

- *Asking empowers.*

People often ask for advice why they already know what to do. But they may not have the confidence to actually go and do it. "Self confidence is a huge factor in change." When you ask people for their views and ideas, you send an affirmative message of belief in their abilities to contribute and to effect change.

- *Asking develops leadership capacity.*

Leadership is the ability to take responsibility. Asking 'what could you do about this?' moves people away from relying on your answers to take leadership in the situation. "Asking builds the responsibility muscle, and that develops leaders."

- *Asking creates authenticity.*

Taking the time to ask significant questions (and listen to the answers) communicates that we really want to know and learn at a deep level. An asking approach is a good way to build rapport and trust. (Stoltzfus 2008:9)

- *Asking evolves thinking.*

Skillful questioning facilitates new awareness, insights and perspectives. Often we get stuck in our own 'construct' of reality. We are limited by our current way of thinking. Our past experiences and beliefs about life, ourselves, others and the world determine our level of creativity. A narrow self or world view limits our ability to envision new possibilities and generate new solutions. By asking questions we can free our perception and allow new dimensions of thinking. (Louise Le Gat)

2. Types of Questions We Can Ask.

'Open' and 'closed' questions: We all know the difference between 'open' and 'closed' questions. Closed questions lead to a brief answer, either 'yes' or 'no' or a specific piece of information ("In what year was this unit created?") or a choice among options provided with the question (as in a multiple choice questions). Open questions (there are degrees of openness and closed-ness) leave room for longer answers that can go in unexpected directions.

A particular type of closed question is the "solution-oriented" question. SOQs are pieces of advice with a question mark attached. We want to give the answer but remember that we are actually advising or mentoring, and so offer our solution in the form of a question e.g. '*Shouldn't you postpone the hiring of new staff given that you don't have the budget?*'

There is a tendency to look negatively upon ‘closed’ questions. That is not necessary: they fulfill essential functions such as testing knowledge, preferences etc. They can also provide new information and confirm our existing information. They can therefore also contribute to ‘shared understanding’, also an important element that can allow us to move together.

Single and compounded questions: ‘Compounded questions’ are inquiring phrases that actually have multiple questions in them e.g. “*How satisfied are you with your pay and your job conditions?*”, or “*Suppose you would get a devolved budget every year and the possibility to directly keep 20% of your locally raised taxes, would you then feel that decentralization is feasible, or what other conditions would you see as necessary for it to be able to work?*” That makes them difficult to understand (even more so if people do not all communicate in their native language), and is very likely to reduce their catalytic potential. Stick to ‘single’ questions – they allow the respondent to go focus, and move step by step.

‘Leading’ or ‘loaded’ questions: These are questions that appear ‘open’ but point towards a certain answer, often because they contain an assumption or a judgment on the part of the one asking the question. Often the asker is not aware of implicit assumptions or judgmental/evaluating undertones. “*How are you coping with the restructuring?*” is an open question but seems to suggest that the restructuring is problematic and that staff may be struggling with adapting to it. “*What are the top three problems here that need to be fixed?*” seems a more open question, but is still loaded with a focus on ‘problems’ that are presumed to stand in the way of more effective performance. “*What in the current situation do you feel needs to be preserved and what needs to be changed?*” is already a more ‘balanced’ way of inquiring.

Problem-focused and appreciative questions: Problem questions focus on what is not working, on the ‘gaps’. They may be required but do not create energy for change. Appreciative questions focus the attention on positive experiences, on things that go (fairly) well, that can be built on or generate energy for improvement. You would, for example not ask:

‘*Can you think of a time when your unit was working well...?*’ as this is a fairly closed question: it leaves doubt whether such time ever existed, and can easily generate a ‘no’ answer.

But you might ask:

‘*Think of a time when your unit worked well. What did it feel like, what were the factors that made that possible?*’

Another type of positive, energising question might be:

“*At this point, what do you feel most passionately about, have the most energy to do something about?*”

Cause-effect and systems-perspective questions: We are very used to cause-effect thinking and this may be reflected in our questions: ‘What is the problem here? What/who caused it? Why did they do that? This linear type of thinking has underpinned much ‘planning’ as the ‘problem-tree’ is turned around into the ‘solutions tree’. A systems-perspective however sees the relationships between different contributing factors as more complex and, given the inclination of systems (physical but also human situations) to want to preserve the ‘status quo’ very resistant the change efforts that focus on one or two contributing factors alone. Systems-perspective questions therefore inquire more into broader patterns (of the past) and invite attention and imagination about new patterns (in the future). A similar inquiry from a systems-perspective generates a different type of question e.g.

“*What was the last time this problem didn’t exist for your department? What was different then to now?*”

“*What would people observe about your unit’s way of working and performance is this problem were resolved? What would be different for you working in the unit?*”

‘Recall’ and ‘inquiry’ questions: Recall questions invite attention to the past, and call upon the respondent’s memory. ‘Inquiry’ questions invite the respondent/conversation partner to think deeper and more creatively while looking towards the future. “*What were the criteria for recruitment into this department over the past five years*

and how were applicants assessed?" is a recall question. "What competencies will our department need in the next five years and how can we assess them in individual applicants?" is a forward-looking inquiry question.

3. What is a Powerful, Catalytic Question?

Here are some questions you might ask yourself as you begin to explore the art and architecture of powerful questions.

- *Is this question relevant to the real life and real work of the people who will be exploring it?*
- *Is this a genuine question—a question to which I/we really don't know the answer?*
- *What "work" do I want this question to do? That is, what kind of conversation, meanings, and feelings do I imagine this question will evoke in those who will be exploring it?*
- *Is this question likely to invite fresh thinking/feeling? Is it familiar enough to be recognizable and relevant—and different enough to call forward a new response?*
- *What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?*
- *Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, creative action, and new possibilities or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?*
- *Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored?*

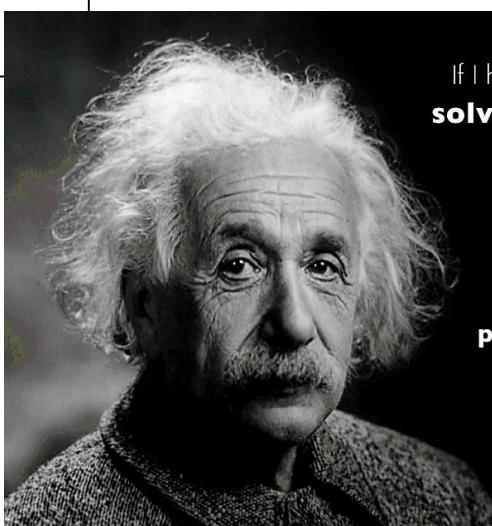
Adapted from Sally Ann Roth Public Conversations Project c.1998

From Vogt et alii 2003:7)

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

Vogt et alii 2003:4



If I had an hour to
solve a problem and my
life depended on it,
 I would use the
 first 55 minutes
 determining the
proper questions to ask.

Albert Einstein

icoschedule.com

4. The Architecture of Powerful Questions.

There are three dimensions to powerful questions: construction, scope and assumptions.

- a. **Construction** - The construction of a question can make a critical difference in either opening our minds or narrowing the possibilities we consider.

Review the following key question construction words on a continuum from less powerful questions to more powerful questions:



Now consider the construction of the following questions:

- *Are the poor in our community getting the services they need?*
- *What is it about our community that supports healthy relationships for all of its citizens?*
- *How can we prevent youth violence from occurring here in the first place?*
- *Why is it that so many families in that area of town experience violence?*
- *What if we got it right? (Creating a community that supports non-violence and healthy relationships.)*

As you move from simple yes/no questions to why to what if, the question stimulates more reflective thinking and more creative responses.

- b. **Scope** - The scope of a question must match the need we are addressing or the discovery that we're trying to make.

Note the impact of scope below:

- a. *How can we best share information as a team?*
- b. *How can we best share information as a coalition?*
- c. *How can we best share information with our community?*

The questions above progressively broaden in scope. Sometimes questions are interesting, but are outside the scope of our capacity (e.g., *How can we change the social norms in our society that support male superiority and gender violence?*).

- c. **Assumptions** - Almost all questions, explicit or implicit, have some degree of assumptions built into them.

Review and discuss the assumptions imbedded in the following sets of questions:

- A. *How can we create a bilingual education system in this mixed population region of our country?*
- B. *What is best way to educate English and non-English speaking students alike?*

- A. *What did we do wrong, and who is responsible?*
- B. *What can we learn from what has happened, and what are the possibilities now?*

- A. *How can we address the lack of cooperation between collaborative partners?*
- B. *What are all the possibilities for collaboration between our agencies?*

Which questions assume a solution? Which assume error or blame, leading to narrow discussions or defensiveness? Which stimulate reflection, creativity, and/or collaboration among those involved?

Examine each question for any unconscious beliefs it may introduce:

- a. What assumptions or beliefs are we introducing with this question?
- b. How would we approach this issue if we had an entirely different belief system?

QUESTIONS TO DISCOVER DIFFERENT WAYS OF MAKING DECISIONS.

Most of us use at best a few styles of decision-making. Asking catalytic questions can help someone to discover other styles of decision-making. Running a major decision through different strategies can be very revealing.

1. Rational: *What are the pros and cons of pursuing each option? Which is most advantageous?*
2. Intuitive: *What is your gut saying? What feels right to you?*
3. Relational: *How will this course of action affect the people around you? Who will benefit, who will be hurt?*
4. Principled: *How do the key principles and values you live by apply here?*
5. Decisive: *What approach would lead you most quickly to a decision here?*
6. Adaptive: *What decisions could be left open to allow for new information or options? What things must be decided now that cannot be put off for later?*
7. Counsel: *What do your advisers, close friends or family...think?*
8. Team: *What do your team members think? What would happen if you decided as a team?*
9. Spiritual: *What decision would best align with your faith? What is God saying to you on this?*
10. Negative drives: *What fears or inner drives are influencing your response? How could you remove those things from the equation so you can make a better decision?*
11. Cost: *What would it cost in terms of time and resources to do this? What would it cost you if you don't do this? What's the cost if you don't decide and let circumstances overtake you?*
12. Risk/Reward: *What is the payoff for each option? The risk? Can you live with the worst-case outcome? What steps could minimize the risk if you took this path?*

From Stoltzfus 2008:70

5. Lines of Inquiry.

A series of successive questions can add up to a fairly conscious ‘line of inquiry’. Be conscious about the direction of your line of inquiry, and the timing for it: Do you pursue the inquiry ‘sideways’, towards the solution and how to overcome the obstacles to it; do you pursue the inquiry ‘downwards’, exploring what lies deeper underneath the issues being discussed so far, and when feels the right moment to go in what direction? (In an ongoing conversation there doesn’t have to be a ‘final choice’. You may first go sideways and then in a next conversation discover the need and opportunity to go ‘downwards’, to possibly repeat that in a third conversation before going ‘sideways’ again in the next one – but now with a much richer understanding of the various layers and dimensions to the issue at hand.

6. Trust the Process.

Do not always break your head trying to find the right question. “*Trust the process to help the person, not the greatness of your insight.*” (Stoltzfus 2008:13) When you are momentarily lost for what to ask next, you can simply ask your interlocutor to continue and expand: ‘You mentioned (repeat person’s key words)’ – can you elaborate on that / tell me more about that?’ It is important to literally repeat your interlocutor’s words and not to paraphrase or ‘improve’ their expression. Asking people to elaborate can shift the story from a ‘rehearsed’ account oriented towards people think you want to hear, to a more authentic and richer account.

7. Some Important Attention Points.

- The nature of an answer does *not* only depend on the type and shape of the question! It also depends on who is asking and in what context!
- People understand words in different ways, especially among non-native speakers or when working through translators. If you have to work with a translator, work extensively beforehand on the meaning – and appropriateness- of the questions you would like to ask.
- What are good questions to ask are not necessarily the same at the beginning of a relationship, compared to when a certain trust has been established;
- What may be a powerful question to ask in private, is not necessarily so appreciated when asked in public;
- The willingness to receive ‘more personal’ questions, will vary according to overall culture, particular organizational cultures, the formal social relationship between the asker and the person being asked (age, gender, social prestige, wealth....), and the nature of the individual;
- While ‘why’ is a powerful question, it can also be a threatening question: it inquires into motivations, which can be a sensitive. You might provoke a defensive reaction in which your interlocutor tries to justify something rather than join you into the inquiry. When the conversation gets personal, it might be better to replace ‘why’ with ‘what’: ‘What led to that decision?’ rather than ‘Why did you make that decision?’, ‘What are the potential risks and potential benefits of broader consultation on this?’ instead of ‘Why do you hesitate to consult on this?’ The focus remains the same but the phrasing is less personalised.

8. What Stands in the Way of Asking Catalytic Questions?

- Our habit of being focused on problems and fixing problems (quickly) rather than fostering breakthrough thinking.
- Our belief that real work is primarily about detailed analysis, quick decisions and decisive actions, and our difficulty of acknowledging that real ‘knowledge work’ and ‘strategic’ and ‘innovative’ thinking and leadership consist of asking profound questions and hosting wide-ranging strategic conversations on issues of great significance.
- The belief that ‘managers’ or ‘leaders’ need to have or be seen to have the ‘answers’ so they are uncomfortable with ‘not knowing’ and can’t see themselves as ‘leaders of inquiry’.

“We tend to be focused on “the right answer” rather than discovering the right question.” (Vogt et alii 2003:2)

“As the change process proceeds, the interviewer is likely to be concerned to move to a more influencing orientation; he or she wants to influence the system to change. (This intent can become expressed) as a desire to impose particular strategies or solutions upon the organisation, usually by asking leading, loaded or confrontational questions, e.g. ‘Why don’t you...? or ‘What would happen if you were to...?, as the consultant attempts to get their own sense-making and so their own solutions adopted by the organisation. This has a constraining effect on the system: its inventiveness is constrained to considering the options inherent in the question. At the same time this mode of intervention has an oppositional effect on the consultant as they try to oppose the local of the organisation and impose an alternative. Frequently these attempts at influencing a system don’t work, and sadly it is not uncommon to then hear the consultants, in their frustration, blaming their stubborn clients, who either reject outright or more often politely accept and then ignore, their considered advice.” (Lewis et alii 2011:68-69)

ANNEX – SOME EXAMPLES OF POWERFUL QUESTIONS.

QUESTIONS FOR FOCUSING ATTENTION

- *What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of (your situation)?*
- *What's important to you about (your 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 situation)?*
- *What do we know so far/still need to learn about (your situation)?*
- *What are the dilemmas/opportunities in (your situation)?*
- *What assumptions do we need to test or challenge here in thinking about (your situation)?*
- *What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about (your 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 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)?*

(Vogt et alii 2003:12)

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