

Proposition 100

Asking Effective Questions

In a Word Questioning is a vital tool of human thought and interactional life. Since questions serve a range of functions, depending on the context of the interaction, the art and science of questioning lies in knowing what question to ask when.



Background

Seeking information is a vital human activity that contributes to learning, problem solving, and decision-making. Questioning¹ is a vital tool of human thought and social interaction² with which to open doors to data, information, knowledge, and

¹A question is any statement—even nonverbal, e.g., hmmm?—that invites an answer. Of course, most questions are verbal in nature (even if nonverbal signs often accompany them).

²Social interaction is a dynamic, changing sequence of social actions that take into account the actions and reactions of other individuals (or groups) and are modified based on them. Put differently, they are events in which people attach meaning to a situation, interpret what others are meaning, and respond accordingly.

wisdom. Questions serve a range of functions,³ depending on the context of the interaction. Therefore, the art and science of questioning lies in knowing what question to ask when.⁴ A question is only as good as the answer it evokes, and questions thus contribute to success or failure across different contexts.⁵

Typologies of Questions

Derived from the context of social interaction, different classifications of questions have been proposed. The most common refers to the degree of freedom, or scope, given to the respondent. Those that leave the respondent free to select any one of several ways in which to answer are termed open questions; those that require a short response of a specific nature are labeled closed questions. Other types include recall and process questions, affective questions, leading questions, probing questions, rhetorical questions, and multiple questions (Fig. 100.1).

*I keep six honest serving-men,
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When,
And How and Where and Who.*

—Rudyard Kipling

³For example, questions can be used to (i) obtain information; (ii) maintain control; (iii) express interest; (iv) stimulate interest and curiosity; (v) sustain attention; (vi) diagnose difficulties; (vii) ascertain attitudes, feelings, and opinions; (viii) communicate that participation is expected and valued; (ix) foster participation; (x) assess the extent of a respondent's knowledge; (xi) encourage comments on the responses of others; and (xii) prompt critical thinking and evaluation.

⁴In Western thought, investigation of knowledge owes much to Socrates (469–399 BC), an Athenian moral philosopher concerned with the conduct of virtuous human life through critical reasoning. The Socratic method requires participants to clarify their beliefs and understanding through questioning and dialogue.

⁵In 1956, Benjamin Bloom proposed a taxonomy of the different educational objectives that teachers set for students, encompassing psychomotor (manual or physical skills), affective (growth in feelings or emotional areas), and cognitive (mental skills) domains. Like most taxonomies, Bloom's cognitive domain is hierarchical—meaning that learning at the higher levels is dependent on having attained prerequisite knowledge and skills at lower levels. The six levels, moving through the lowest order processes to the highest, are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. In 2001, Lorin Anderson and David Krathwohl revised the taxonomy and its verbiage.

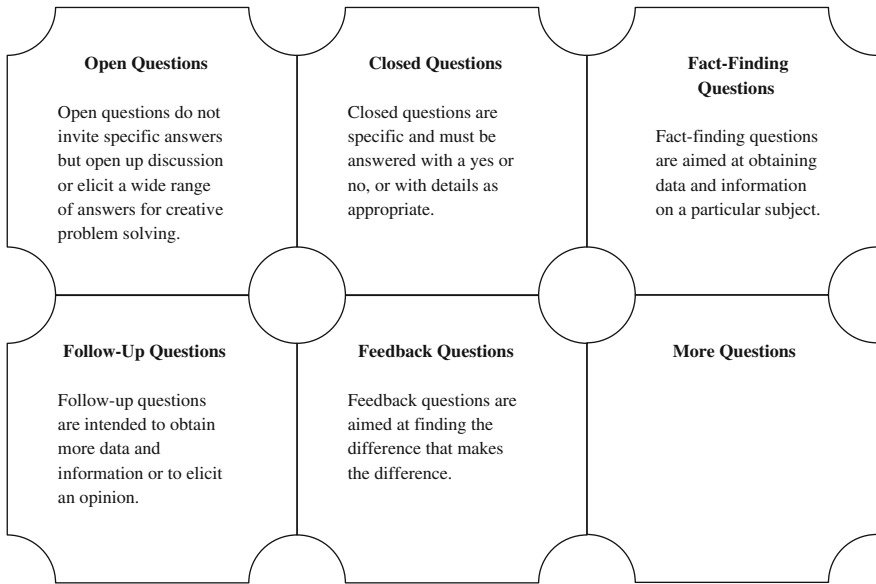


Fig. 100.1 A basic typology of questions. *Source* Author

The Art and Science of Powerful Questions⁶

Questions are a prerequisite to learning. They are a window into creativity and insight. They motivate fresh thinking. They challenge outdated assumptions. They lead us into the future. A powerful question

- generates curiosity in participants;
- stimulates reflective thinking and conversation;
- surfaces and challenges assumptions;
- is thought-provoking;
- channels attention, focuses inquiry, and promises insight;
- invites creativity and new possibilities;
- generates energy, a vector to explore, and forward movement;
- is broad, enduring, and stays with participants;
- touches a deep meaning; and
- evokes more questions.

⁶This section and the next draw heavily from Vogt et al. (2003).

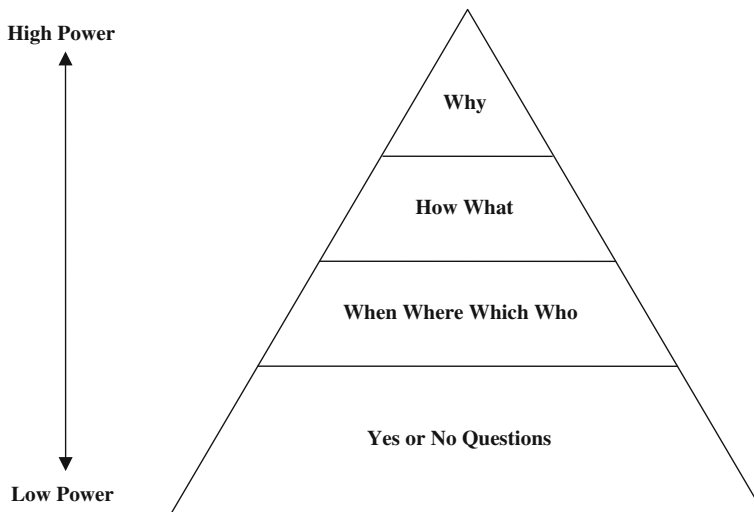


Fig. 100.2 The architecture of a question. *Source* Author

Powerful questions have three dimensions: (i) architecture; (ii) scope; and (iii) assumptions (context, meaning). Most work on the first dimension, *architecture*, produces a variant of the general hierarchy illustrated below—the hypothesis is that any question can be transformed into a more powerful question by moving up the pyramid (Fig. 100.2).

In other words, the linguistic construction of a question can make a critical difference in either opening our minds or narrowing the possibilities we can consider. Is it a yes or no question? Is it an either/or question? Does it open with an interrogative, such as when, where, who, how, what, or why?

- If a question asks “when”, it is inquiring about time or duration.
- If a question asks “where”, it is looking for a location.
- If a question asks “who”, it is soliciting identification.
- If a question asks “how”, it is requesting an instruction or procedure.
- If a question asks “what”, it is inviting a description.
- If a question asks “why”, it is calling for an explanation.

The unexamined life is not worth living.

—Socrates

Next, it is important to know that, besides the words we choose, the *scope* of a question affects the effectiveness of a query. Powerful questions, typically beginning with how or why, encompass more people, more resources, more volume,

more time, and more concerns. Obviously, the scope of a question must be tailored and kept within realistic boundaries and the needs of an investigation if an answer is to emerge at all, at least in the short term.⁷

A prudent question is one-half of wisdom.

—Francis Bacon

Lastly, the *assumptions* that underlie a question comprise a more complex, subtle axis. All questions are nourished by explicit or implicit assumptions that may not be shared by the individuals (or groups) taking part in the discussion. These presuppositions and axioms are taken for granted but have implications and consequences that will flow logically as effects. Assumptions must be surfaced if the question being raised is to display the powerful characteristics mentioned earlier.

It is error only, and not truth, that shrinks from inquiry.

—Thomas Paine

The trouble with the world is that the stupid are cocksure and the intelligent are full of doubt.

—Bertrand Russell

Fostering Strategic Inquiry

In *The Art of Powerful Questions*, Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs outlined the steps of a game plan that organizations might follow to use query to catalyze insight, innovation, and action. The game plan involves (i) assessing the current situation, (ii) discovering the big questions, (iii) creating images of possibilities, and (iv) evolving workable strategies. In support, they devised a questionnaire to help judge the degree to which an organization is an inquiring system. (Only when an answer generates further questions does thought continue as inquiry that stimulates new ways to think and new paths to follow.) They also formulated sample questions to focus collective attention on a situation, connect ideas and find deeper insight, and create forward movement. Focusing on effective questioning,

⁷The domains that might be embedded in a complex question include mathematics and quantitative disciplines, physical and life sciences, arts and humanities, and social disciplines.

they identified the roles that leaders might play to design inquiring systems that coevolve the future.⁸ They are

- Engage in shared conversation,
- Convene and host learning conversations,
- Include diverse perspectives,
- Support appreciative inquiry,⁹
- Foster shared meaning,
- Nurture communities of practice, and
- Use collaborative technologies.

Reference

Vogt E, Brown J, Isaacs D (2003) *The art of powerful questions: catalyzing insight, innovation, and action*. Whole Systems Associates

Further Reading

Browne N, Keeley S (2009) *Asking the right questions: a guide to critical thinking*. Allyn & Bacon
 Paul R, Elder L (2002) *Critical thinking: tools for taking charge of your professional and personal life*. Prentice Hall

⁸It is not possible to be a good thinker and a poor questioner. With a nod to critical thinking, the intellectual standards that leaders might apply to assess reasoning are (i) clarity, (ii) accuracy, (iii) precision, (iv) relevance, (v) depth, (vi) breadth, (vii) logic, (viii) significance, and (ix) fairness. As they help their organization focus on asking effective questions, the elements of thought that will be implied are (i) what is our fundamental purpose?, (ii) what is the key question we are trying to answer?, (iii) what information do we need to answer our question?, (iv) what is the most basic concept in our question?, (v) what assumptions are we using in our reasoning?, (vi) what is our point of view with respect to the issue?, (vii) what are our most fundamental inferences or conclusions?, and (viii) what are the implications of our reasoning (if we are correct)?

⁹Appreciative inquiry is the process of facilitating positive change in organizations. Its basic assumption is uncomplicated: every organization has something that works well. Appreciative inquiry is usually worked out using a 4-D Cycle of discovery, dream, design, and delivery.

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