



Greater Sydney Conference

How to ask Powerful Questions:



How to ask Powerful Questions

Christo Norden-Powers, Spandah Publishing, 2008.

www.powerfulquestions.net

- a powerful new model that enables you to use questions and language to shift, shape and influence thinking and awareness so that you can:
 - negotiate more effectively
 - quickly identify potential risks
 - turn problems into solutions
 - coach with skill
 - resolve conflict
 - handle criticism and disagreement
 - improve performance
 - turn resistance to change into ownership of change
 - Significantly improve outcomes of meetings.



Powerful questions help people:

- Clarify their own thought processes and communication
- Sort fact from fiction
- Think from different perspectives
- Take ownership, commitment and accountability
- Uncover what is not being said

- Clarify meaning and intention
- Focus on underlying motivation
- Identify weaknesses in strategy and proposals
- Create solutions and processes that work
- Pinpoint issues
- Identify the beliefs and perceptions behind conclusions and opinions
- Cut through assumptions
- Enable better and more effective choices, decisions and behaviours.
- They are questions people want to avoid when they want to pass blame and responsibility to others.
- Give tremendous power to create useful outcomes in meetings and mentoring sessions, when mediating conflict and disputes, and when dealing with change.
- Empower people and the organization to perform at their best.
- Reveal facts
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Failing to ask the right questions contributes to the demise of even the most powerful and seemingly successful organisation.

Leaders must be able to recognise when a question needs to be asked.

Focus on the process – You do not need to know any background on the issues to be able to ask the right questions. Content can be generally useful however the main issue is the process.

Leaders must have excellent questioning skills

- What is the data really saying? Could it be interpreted from another angle?
- Empower people to develop answers as opposed to telling people the answers.
- There is no such thing as a silly question. If you need to know, you need to know.

- If you do not understand, then ask.

Effective leaders:

- Help others find the way forward
- Encourage other to challenge them, to ask the tough questions. The best business leaders actually prefer to be challenged by their colleagues.
- Engage and give time for open frank discussions and meaningful debate.
- Do not assume that the information is fair, accurate or unbiased
- Answer tough questions, or if they do not know the answer admit that and go to work on finding out.
- Obtain the best information possible so as to make an informed decision.
- Ask questions conversationally and with a relaxed attitude. An aggressive approach is usual counter-productive. However don't avoid the uncomfortable questions.
- Always maintain respect for the person you are asking questions of.
- Leave your ego at the door when working towards solutions. There is no element of blame, self-justification, denigration, put down or right v wrong.
- You are not there to judge or embarrass but to help them achieve an outcome that is better for them.

Three critical competencies:

- Knowing when a question needs to be asked
- Asking the right question and
- Ensuring that the question is answered.

E.g. what are you doing that's not working as opposed to what's not working?

Always support those who have the courage to ask challenging questions.

- The majority of miscommunication arises from the use of fuzzy language.
- If you want to understand the meaning, it is your responsibility to obtain clarification.
- A shift in language between specific – fuzzy is a clear indicator that questions needed to be asked.

Clarify the fuzzy nouns

Questions that seek specific data are the antidote to fuzzy language.

Fuzzy Nouns:

Communication, Staff, Policy, Them, Resources, Managers, Efficiency, Us

We (We are concerned about... Clarify the 'we')

- 'We need better communication between staff and managers, and more resources'
- What specifically do you mean by...?
- What/which ...specifically?
- Who specifically do you mean...?

The same questions can be asked in relation to facial expressions, gestures, touching or behaviours.

What did you mean when you raised your eyebrow? It is more useful to ask what behaviour means rather than making assumptions.

Level 1 – General – 'What do you mean by better communication?'

Level 2 – Specific – 'What specifically would you hear if there were vigorous conversations?'

Level 3 – Sensory Specific – 'What would they be saying/asking. Put it in quotes.'

- When what was said may be important, ask for the conversation to be described in quotes. If the person says "I don't recall exactly" simply say "As best you can recall".

- Ask 'What did you actually see/hear/feel?'
- Which 20% of fuzzy language will, when clarified, give you 80% of the meaning that will lead to a result?

Fuzzy Verbs

- Prepare, Make, Write, Present, Ask, Do, Instruct, Delegate, Organise, Plan
- Ask questions that help people clarify solutions and next steps
- As interfering help is given, ability and confidence are taken away.
- When someone describes a situation in terms of what is not, they often also delete vital information as to what is.
- If people have made a mistake, calmly choose questions that help people them grow.
- Ascertain specifics of what 'ought' to have been, and the basis for that position
- Ascertain what actually happened, what are the facts (sensory).
- Identify the difference
- Identify how the difference occurred
- Identify a course of action that person can be involved in and learn from

Softeners

- I'm wondering...
- I need to get a clear picture...
- Could you tell me...?
- I'm not sure I understand. Can you show/explain/outline...
- It would help me if...
- I'm curious...
- I'm not clear on something...

- Notice that all the softeners refer to 'I', and do not blame the other person for miss-communication. They ask for help from the other person.
- As a rule of thumb, focus on 'What...?' then 'How?'
- Make 'How can we improve it?' a standard question.
- We usually have more opportunities to learn from what didn't work than from what did work.
- Self reflection is an important part of the questioning process. It can be done in the privacy of your own mind. If you are serious about growth and improvement, self-reflection is essential. It takes courage and requires self-honesty.
- Verifying Facts and Challenging Assumptions
- How do you know that to be true/accurate?
- What did you see/hear/feel that leads to that conclusion/what are the facts and circumstances on which you base that?
- What's the evidence?

Be careful of absolutes

Can't , Have to, Should, Won't Is, Certain, Must, Essential, Compulsory, No choice, Isn't, Must not

- These words often reflect the opinion and values of the person using them as opposed to stating fact.
- Challenging Absolutes
- What would happen if..(we did/didn't)?
- Is it possible that...?

Universals

All, Always, Everybody, Everywhere, Anything, Only, Never, Nobody, Nowhere, Everything

- Is it possible that...?
- Can you imagine...?

- If
- If...what...?
- If...how...?
- If...who...?
- If...where...?
- If...when...?
- Imagine....

Fudging

I anticipate, I think, I believe, I feel, Should, I expect, Likely, Possible, Probably, Appears, Maybe, Perhaps, Could, Possible, Seems, Might, Try, Tried, Almost Certainly, Intends.

- These, and similar, words and expressions are often used to avoid commitment or responsibility for actions or for making decisions.
- Challenge for more certainty
- Ask for a solution/next steps

Dealing with negative feelings

- Which part...(of the proposal/strategy)...doesn't feel right
- If we did/didn't go ahead with this...proposal..., what (so you think) might be the result/problem? What would you see/hear?"
- You think that...the strategy might not work/the information is flawed or insufficient/the outcome is too uncertain.

Enthusiasm – sorting through the data behind 'good' feelings

- What specifically is it about this option that feels good?
- What is the difference between this option and the other options that makes this one more acceptable?
- Is there another way that might work even better.

Handling Disagreement

- Clarify what the other person disagrees with

- Obtain specific information about the other person's views, beliefs, opinions and 'facts', their evidence and higher purpose.
- State the fact. Choose one of the following questions:
- You don't...

Agree with what I said?

Think it will work (that way)?

Believe the data?

Agree with the data?

- Modify you idea/view and /or insert your opinion, evidence and higher purpose.
- Explore 'how specifically' to achieve any common purpose with a mixture of yours and the other person's ideas.

The art of asking questions is a vital leadership skill. Make time to sharpen your question asking skills and find out what is really going on.