



A practical resource to help you ignite best thinking through powerful questions

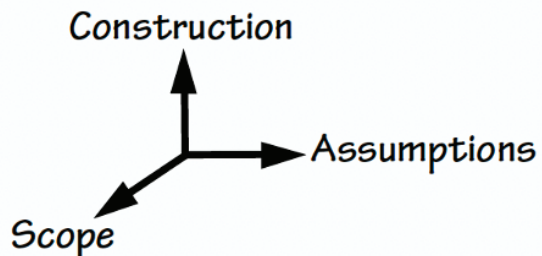
Questions open the door to dialogue, discovery and breakthrough thinking. When crafted with precision, questions remove limitations and create space to think creatively and focus on new possibilities.

If asking good questions is critical, why don't we spend more time learning how to frame them? One reason may be that Western culture teaches us to find the "right answer" rather than discover the "right question".

This shift in mindset is particularly important as we enter an era in which systemic issues lie at the root of critical challenges. To find sustainable solutions, we therefore need to ask powerful questions that probe our underlying assumptions and stimulate reflective conversation.

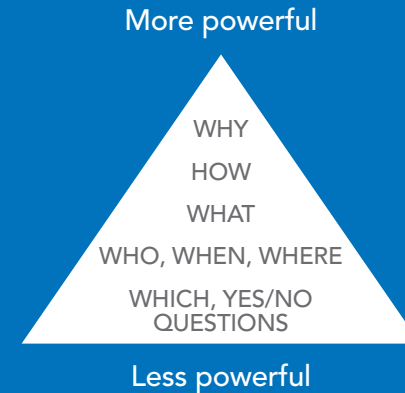
As Einstein said, "The problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them".

So, what makes a question powerful?



The first dimension: The construction of a question

How questions are constructed can make a critical difference in either opening our minds or narrowing the possibilities we consider.



In his book, 'Start with Why', Simon Sinek explains that 'Why' is probably the most important question that organisations, teams and individuals can explore. It taps into purpose - our reason for existing and behaving the way we do. The neuroscience behind this theory is that humans respond best when messages connect with those parts of their brain that control emotions, behaviour and decision-making.

By using the words towards the top of the pyramid, we can make our questions touch a deeper meaning. This stimulates reflective thinking, meaningful conversation and breakthrough ideas.

The second dimension: The scope of a question

The words we choose when framing a question will impact its effectiveness and whether it meets our information needs.

Take a look at the following three questions:

- How can we best manage our workgroup?
- How can we best manage our company?
- How can we best manage our supply chain?

To make our questions powerful, we make them as precise as possible and keep them within realistic boundaries.

The third dimension: The assumptions within questions

Almost all questions we pose have assumptions built into them. It's important to become aware of these assumptions and use them appropriately.

For example, contrast the question, "What did we do wrong and who is responsible?" with "What can we learn from what's happened and what possibilities do we now see?" The first question assumes error and blame and whoever is responding will likely feel defensive. The second, encourages reflection and is more likely to stimulate learning and collaboration.

By understanding and consciously considering these three dimensions (construction, scope and assumptions), we can increase the power of the questions we ask.

Source: *The Art of Powerful Questions* by Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown and David Isaacs

How can leaders leverage powerful questions?

Create a Thinking Environment™

In today's world, we need everyone's best thinking to solve complex work and life challenges. This means creating an environment where thinkers feel safe to contribute their independent thinking – to be bold, courageous and creative.

When leaders do this, fresh thinking, new ideas and solutions emerge. Painful feelings can subside, and confusion can dissipate. As a leader, first ask "What do you think?" before answering a question or giving your opinion.

Engage Whole Brain® Thinking

To engage our best thinking, we need to ask questions that leverage the team's whole brain. Without a clear purpose and structure, team members may not fully engage in authentic dialogue, generative listening and appreciative inquiry.

To make it an effective engagement for everyone, it's important to determine what we want to accomplish in the session and design an agenda with this context in mind.

Whole Brain® Walk-Around

A practical tool using powerful questions to debrief a team's shared experience.

Learning through shared reflection as a team is critical to team effectiveness: to avoid repeating mistakes, ensuring clarity of actions, commitments and accountability; building trust by learning together and experiencing how questions are more powerful than answers because they invite active exploration.

Note: If the group is 10–12 people or smaller, conduct the debrief with the whole group. Otherwise, break the group into small groups.

Analytical: WHAT? 1

After a team's shared experience, ask, "WHAT?"

"What happened? What did you notice, what facts or observations stood out?"

Salient facts are shared with the whole group and collected.

Experimental: WHY? 2

Then, after all the salient observations have been collected,

"Why is that important? What patterns or conclusions are emerging? What hypotheses can we make?"

Salient patterns, hypotheses, and conclusions from small groups are shared with the whole group and collected.

Structured: WHAT NOW? 3

Then, after the sense making is over, ask, "WHAT NOW?"

"What actions make sense?"

Actions are shared with the whole group, discussed, and confirmed.

Relational: WHO? 4

Finally, as a team, ask "WHO?" to ensure ownership and follow through.

"Who does what? Who will take accountability?"

Accountability for action and execution are shared with the whole group and agreed.