THE ART OF POWERFUL QUESTIONS

Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action

by Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs

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WE'D LIKE TO THANK KEN HOMER FOR HIS INVALUABLE ASSISTANCE IN SHAPING THIS ARTICLE AND FRAN PEAVEY FOR HER PIONEERING WORK IN MAKING STRATEGIC QUESTIONS PART OF OUR LEXICON.

THE ART OF POWERFUL QUESTIONS: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action
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"If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

—Albert Einstein

When was the last time you sat through a meeting and said to yourself, "This is a complete waste of time!"? Was it yesterday, or even just a few hours ago? Why did that gathering feel so tedious? Perhaps it's because the leaders posed the wrong questions at the start of the session. Or, worse yet, maybe they didn't ask *any* engaging questions, and as a result, the meeting consisted of boring reports-outs or other forms of one-way communication that failed to engage people's interest or curiosity.

The usefulness of the knowledge we acquire and the effectiveness of the actions we take depend on the quality of the questions we ask. Questions open the door to dialogue and discovery. They are an invitation to creativity and breakthrough thinking. Questions can lead to movement and action on key issues; by generating creative insights, they can ignite change.

"I WENT FOR THE JUGULAR QUESTION."

ARNO PENZIAS, NOBEL LAUREATE

Consider the possibility that everything we know today about our world emerged because people were curious. They formulated a question or series of questions about something that sparked their interest or deeply concerned them, which lead them to learn something new. Many Nobel laureates describe the "Eureka!" moment of their discovery as when the "right" question finally revealed itself—even if it took them considerable time to come up with the final answers. For example, Einstein's theory of relativity resulted from a question that he had wondered about when still a teenager: "What would the universe look like if I were riding on the end of a light beam at the speed of light?" Einstein regularly practiced this kind of "thought experiment," which, over time, led to significant advances in the field of physics. Many years later, an empirical demonstration showed that light from distant stars actually curved as it passed through the gravitational force of our sun. Einstein's graduate students rushed to him as he was walking through the Princeton campus and exclaimed, "Dr. Einstein, light really *does* bend!" Einstein looked at them quizzically and said, "Of course!" He had come to this conclusion through exploring the question in his own thought experiment years before.

Another Nobel-prize winner, physicist Arno Penzias, when asked what accounted for his success, replied, "I went for the jugular question." Still practicing his questioning discipline today, Penzias recently commented at a *Fast Company* Conference, "Change starts with the individual. So the first thing I do each morning is ask myself, 'Why do I strongly believe what I believe?' Constantly examine your own assumptions." It's this type of self-questioning that keeps creativity alive.

In other key examples of the importance of powerful questions, a query by James Watson and Francis Crick, "What might DNA look like in a 3D form?" led to the discovery of the double helix and forever altered the scientific landscape. During the Tylenol crisis in the early 1980s, considering the question, "What is the most ethical action we might take?" enabled Johnson & Johnson to restore consumer trust and become a leader in corporate responsibility. And asking, "Where can I get a good hamburger on the road?" motivated Ray Kroc to create McDonald's, the fast-food chain that became an international icon. Even for ordinary folks, asking a question as simple as, "What does all this mean?" or "What can we do that could help shift this situation?" or "What haven't we thought of that could make a difference?" can have a startling impact on creating new knowledge and insight.

Why Don't We Ask Better Questions?

If asking good questions is so critical, why don't most of us spend more of our time and energy on discovering and framing them? One reason may be that much of Western culture, and North American society in particular, focuses on having the "right answer" rather than discovering the "right question." Our educational system focuses more on memorization and rote answers than on the art of seeking new possibilities. We are rarely asked to discover compelling questions, nor are we taught why we should ask such questions in the first place. Quizzes, examinations, and aptitude tests all reinforce the value of correct answers. Is it any wonder that most of us are uncomfortable with not knowing?

The aversion in our culture to asking creative questions is linked to an emphasis on finding quick fixes and an attachment to black/white, either/or thinking. In addition, the rapid pace of our lives and work doesn't often provide us with opportunities to participate in reflective conversations in which we can explore catalytic questions and innovative possibilities before reaching key decisions. These factors, coupled with a prevailing belief that "real work" consists primarily of detailed analysis, immediate decisions, and decisive action, contradict the perspective that effective "knowledge work" consists of asking profound questions and hosting wide-ranging strategic conversations on issues of substance.

The reward systems in our organizations further reinforce this dilemma. Leaders believe that they are being paid for fixing problems rather than for fostering breakthrough thinking. Between our deep attachment to *the* answer—any answer—and our anxiety about not knowing, we have inadvertently thwarted our collective capacity for deep creativity and fresh perspectives. Unfortunately, given the unprecedented challenges we face both in our own organizations and as a global community, we need these skills now more than ever.

Are there organizations that do place a high value on questions? Consider this: In Germany, the job title *Direktor Grundsatzfragen* translates as "Director of Fundamental Questions." As a German colleague said:

> "Yes, there's a job title of *Direktor Grundsatzfragen*. Some of the larger German companies have an entire department of *Grundsatzfragen*. These are the people who are always thinking about what the next questions will be. Of course, these people are only in the German companies headquartered in Germany, such as Daimler, Bayer, Siemens, or SAP. If the German company is acquired by a U.S. company, they usually eliminate the *Grundsatzfragen* positions."

The German understanding and appreciation of *Grundsatzfragen* may stem from a culture that highly values philosophy and the ongoing questioning of priorities and the meaning of life. Even today, this focus is reflected in some unique aspects of high-school education. In the German *Gymnasium*, from the ages of 14 to 17, students are typically assigned to study groups with 30 of their peers. In the words of one graduate, "We work intensely together in every subject, and then in the second year, we meet Goethe (the famous 19th-century German philosopher), and we question our entire world for two years. We emerge with a greater appreciation for the power of questions and the power of conversation."

As we enter an era in which systemic issues often lie at the root of critical challenges, in which diverse perspectives are required for sustainable solutions, and in which cause-and-effect relationships are not immediately apparent, the capacity to raise penetrating questions that challenge current operating

POWERFUL QUESTIONS AND KEY OUTCOMES

Who	Question	Outcome
Watson and Crick	"What might DNA look like in 3D form?"	Discovery of the double helix
James Burke, CEO, Johnson & Johnson	"What is the most ethical action we might take?"	Restoration of consumer confidence
Ray Kroc	"Where can I get a good hamburger on the road?"	Creation of McDonald's

assumptions will be key to creating positive futures. As Einstein said, "The problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them." And in her book *The Art of the Question,* Marilee Goldberg adds, "A paradigm shift occurs when a question is asked inside the current paradigm that can only be answered from outside it." It's this kind of paradigm shift, based on powerful questions, that may be necessary to create truly innovative solutions to our most pressing concerns.

What Makes a Question Powerful?

In a wonderfully evocative description, Fran Peavey, a pioneer in the use of strategic questions, observes:

> "Questions can be like a lever you use to pry open the stuck lid on a paint can. . . . If we have a short lever, we can only just crack open the lid on the can. But if we have a longer lever, or a more dynamic question, we can open that can up much wider and really stir things up. . . . If the right question is applied, and it digs deep enough, then we can stir up all the creative solutions."

> "A PARADIGM SHIFT OCCURS WHEN A QUESTION IS ASKED INSIDE THE CURRENT PARADIGM THAT CAN ONLY BE ANSWERED FROM OUTSIDE IT."
>
> MARILEE GOLDBERG, *THE ART OF THE QUESTION*

While you may not immediately know the characteristics of a powerful question, it's actually quite easy to recognize one. For instance, if you were an Olympic judge scoring the power of questions on a scale from one to ten (with ten being the highest), how would you rate the following queries?

1. What time is it?
2. Did you take a shower?
3. What possibilities exist that we haven't thought of yet?
4. What does it mean to be ethical?

We have tested questions such as these in several different cultures. In the process, we've discovered that, despite cultural differences, people quite consistently rate questions one and two as being less powerful, and questions three and four as being more powerful. Clearly, powerful questions are ones that transcend many boundaries.

Not long ago, we hosted a conversation with a group of international colleagues about what makes a compelling question. Here are some of their reflections:

Finn Voldtofte (Denmark): The question has to catch people where they are, to meet them where there is the most energy and relevance for them, and then use that energy to go deeper. Action will flow naturally from that energy.

Felipe Herzenborn (Mexico): The question also needs to be simple and clear and penetrating. It's like a laser beam. A good question invites and challenges you to reflect at a deeper level—to find the knowledge or wisdom that's already there beneath the surface.

Verna Allee (U.S.): To me, the most energizing questions are those that involve people's values, hopes, and ideals—questions that relate to something that's larger than them, where they can connect and contribute. People don't have a lot of energy around questions that are only about removing pain.

David Isaacs (U.S.): Even though it's useful to acknowledge pain, I think it's also important to shift the question away from a problem focus or fix-it focus to a possibility focus. There's always a subtle feeling of disempowerment in a problem, a feeling that all the doors are shut. "We've got a problem . . . oh no! Not another problem!" There's a weariness and stuckness about it. Simply asking, "What's the possibility we see in this situation?" can make a big difference.

Toke Moller (Denmark): Here's an example of that approach. I was working with a local school to frame a possibility-oriented question. We asked teachers, students, parents, and administrators, "What could a good school also be?" This way of posing the question helped people to see their school in a different light. It resulted in some amazing new ideas. I'm quite sure they would not have been as innovative if the question had focused only on fixing problems.

Carlos Mota (Mexico): It's a real art to find as well as to shape the right question for your situation. Once a friend told me about a time she was being interviewed. The interviewer said, "We're just going to ask you one question: What's the question we

should be asking?" 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.

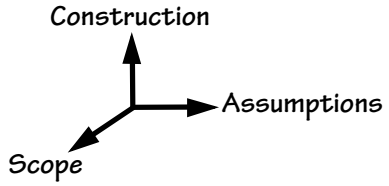
Thus, a powerful question:

- 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

A powerful question also has the capacity to "travel well"—to spread beyond the place where it began into larger networks of conversation throughout an organization or a community. Questions that travel well are often the key to large-scale change. As we'll explore below, how such queries are crafted can make a difference in their capacity to move a system toward innovative futures.

The Architecture of Powerful Questions

As shown at the start of this volume, powerful questions can dramatically improve the quality of insight, innovation, and action in our organizations, in our communities, and in our lives. Therefore, understanding the basic architecture of formulating powerful questions is a key skill in today's knowledge economy. There are three dimensions to powerful questions: *construction, scope,* and *assumptions.* Each contributes to the quality of learning and knowledge creation that emerges as we engage with others in a generative inquiry.

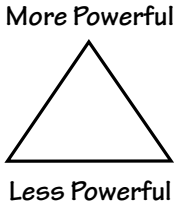


THE FIRST DIMENSION:
The Construction of a Question

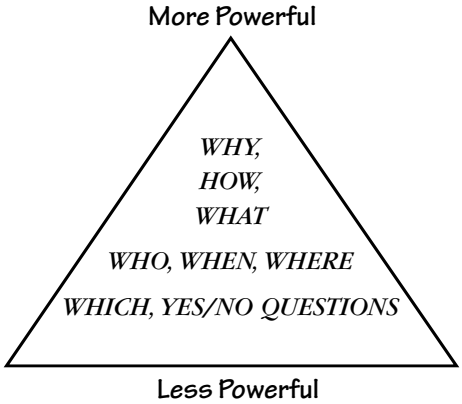
The linguistic *construction* of a question can make a critical difference in either opening our minds or narrowing the possibilities we can consider. Is it a yes/no question? Is it an either/or question? Does it begin with an interrogative, such as Who, What, or How?

WHO WHAT
WHEN WHERE WHICH
WHY HOW?

Just for fun, try placing these words in a pyramid of lower to higher power. Don't think too much; use your intuition.



When asked, most people rank these words from more powerful to less powerful as follows:



By using the words toward the top of the pyramid, we can make many of our questions more robust. For example, consider the following sequence:

- Are you satisfied with our working relationship?
- *When* have you been most satisfied with our working relationship?
- *What* is it about our working relationship that you find most satisfying?
- *Why* might it be that that our working relationship has had its ups and downs?

As you move from the simple "yes/no" question at the beginning toward the "why" question at the end, you'll notice that the queries tend to stimulate more reflective thinking and a deeper level of conversation.

That's what we mean by a powerful question—one that provokes thoughtful exploration and evokes creative thinking.

However, a note of caution: Unless a "why" question is carefully crafted, it can easily evoke a defensive response, as people try to justify their answer rather than proceed in a spirit of inquiry. For instance, the questions, "Why can't you ever tell me exactly what you are thinking?" or "Why did you do it *that* way?" can cause someone to defend a given position or rationalize some past decision, rather than open new possibilities. In contrast, when a "why" question stems from genuine curiosity, such as "I wonder why that happened?" then the inquiry has the potential to create useful insights.

Just because a question is situated near the top of the pyramid does not necessarily mean that it is more important or more relevant than its counterparts at the bottom. Depending on your goals, a "yes/no" question can be extremely important (particularly if you are closing a large sale!). Likewise, a question that gets at the facts of who, when, and where can often be crucial, such as in a legal case. However, when you want to open the space for creativity and breakthrough thinking, questions constructed around the words at the top of the pyramid will have more strategic leverage than those that use the words at the bottom.

> "A VITAL QUESTION, A CREATIVE QUESTION, RIVETS OUR ATTENTION. ALL THE CREATIVE POWER OF OUR MINDS IS FOCUSED ON THE QUESTION. KNOWLEDGE EMERGES IN RESPONSE TO THESE COMPELLING QUESTIONS. THEY OPEN US TO NEW WORLDS."
>
> VERNA ALLEE, *THE KNOWLEDGE EVOLUTION*

THE SECOND DIMENSION:
The Scope of a Question

It's important not only to be aware of how the words we choose influence the effectiveness of our query, but also to match the *scope* of a question to our needs. Take a look at the following three questions:

- How can we best manage *our work group?*
- How can we best manage *our company?*
- How can we best manage *our supply chain?*

In this example, the questions progressively broaden the domain of inquiry as they consider larger and larger aspects of the system; that is, they expand in scope. As you work to make your questions powerful, tailor and clarify the scope as precisely as possible to keep them within the realistic boundaries and needs of the situation you are working with. Avoid stretching the scope of your question too far. For example, compare the following question to the ones above:

- How can we best manage *the economy?*

While extremely interesting, this query is clearly outside the scope of most people's capacity to take effective action, at least in the short term. In many situations, this would be a less strategic question than one for which those involved had the capacity to make a more immediate difference.

THE THIRD DIMENSION:
The Assumptions Within Questions

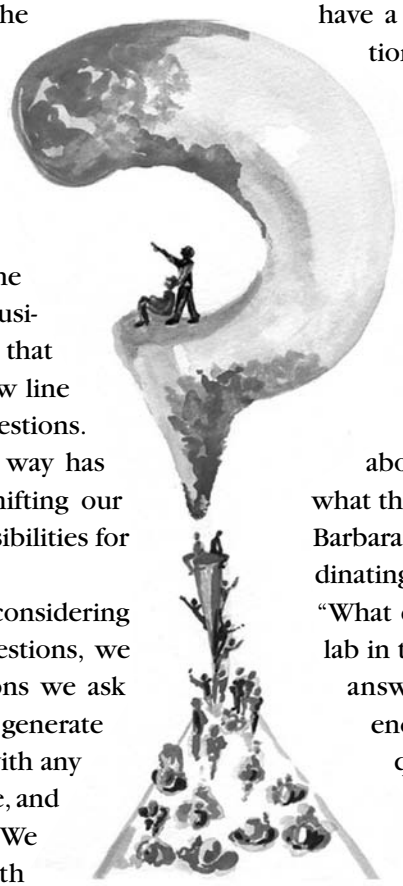
Because of the nature of language, almost all of the questions we pose have assumptions built into them, either explicit or implicit. These assumptions may or may not be shared by the group involved in the exploration; for instance the question, "How should we create a bilingual educational system in California?" assumes that those involved in the exploration have agreed that being bilingual is an important capacity for the state's students. However, some powerful questions challenge everyone's existing assumptions. For example, ask yourself what assumptions the following question might challenge: "How might we eliminate the border between the U.S. and Mexico?"

To formulate powerful questions, it's important to become aware of assumptions and use them appropriately. So, 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; it is a safe bet that whoever is responding will feel defensive. The second question encourages reflection and is much more likely than the first query to stimulate learning and collaboration among those involved.

It's often helpful to examine a question for any unconscious beliefs it may introduce to the situation. You can do so by simply asking your team, "What assumptions or beliefs are we holding that are key to the conversation we are having here?" and "How would we come at this if we held an entirely different belief system than the one we have?" Each of these questions invites an exploration into both conscious and unconscious assumptions and opens up the space for new possibilities to reveal themselves.

By surfacing or altering assumptions, we can shift the context of a strategic inquiry and create new opportunities for innovation. Compare the following two questions:

- How can we *compete* with the Chinese?
- How can we *collaborate* with the Chinese?



The second question changes the context by challenging our traditional business paradigm and the assumptions that underlie it. As a result, it opens up a new line of exploration and set of subsequent questions. The art of reframing questions in this way has important implications for not only shifting our assumptions, but also creating new possibilities for constructive action.

By understanding and consciously considering the three dimensions of powerful questions, we can increase the power of the questions we ask and, as a result, increase our ability to generate insights that help shape the future. As with any new skill, the best teacher is experience, and the best coach is a thoughtful listener. We encourage you to experiment with increasing the power of your questions and see what impact you have.

For example, in advance of an important meeting or conversation, spend a few minutes with a colleague and write down several questions that are relevant to the topic. Rate them in terms of their power. Referring to the three dimensions outlined above, see if you can spot why certain questions are more compelling than others. Experiment with changing the construction and scope, to get a feel for how doing so changes the direction of the inquiry. Be sure to examine the assumptions that are embedded in your questions and check to see if they will help or hinder your exploration. Just a few practice sessions will greatly enhance your ability to engage in productive conversations stimulated by dynamic questions.

Using Powerful Questions in Organizations

There are more and more examples of how the disciplined use of compelling questions is making a difference in organizational life. These changes often happen in surprising ways, opening new avenues that people never considered before.

HP "for the World." Sometimes something as simple as changing a preposition in a sentence can have a dramatic impact on how an organization conceives of its mission and role. Consider how a small shift in the construction of a question led to major changes in the scope and context of strategic inquiry at Hewlett-Packard, resulting in effective innovation and targeted action. The director of HP Labs wondered why the organization was not considered the best industrial research laboratory in the world. As he thought about it, he realized that he did not know what that designation really meant. He charged Barbara Waugh, a key staff member, with coordinating the effort to respond to the question, "What does being the best industrial research lab in the world mean?" Instead of looking for answers outside the company, Barbara encouraged the director to share his core question with all HP Lab employees around the world.

To that end, Waugh initiated a global network of conversations around that question, using the company's technology infrastructure along with face-to-face gatherings to support the dialogues. Just by exploring the practical implications of the question in a disciplined way, the Lab began to see productivity gains. But one day, an HP Lab engineer came into Barbara's office and said, "That question is okay, but what would really energize me and get me up in the morning would be asking, 'How can we be the best industrial research lab *for* the world?'"

That one small shift changed the entire game by scaling up the meaning of and shifting the assumptions embedded in the original question. It profound-

ly altered the context of the inquiry—to become the best *for* the world as the larger context for becoming the best *in* the world. This question obviously "traveled well"—it was no longer just the Lab's question, but something that many others at HP began to ask themselves as well. Employees at HP Labs and throughout the whole company responded to this new focus with a tremendous surge of collective energy.

> "THE QUESTION NEVER FAILED US."
>
> MIKE PFEIL, CORPORATE EXECUTIVE

Once they reworded the original question, Barbara and her colleagues could change the scope of related questions depending on the situation. For example, shifting the scope downward meant focusing on "What does HP for the World mean for me? What does it mean in my life, in my own work?" HP employees could also scale up the scope by asking, "What does HP for the World mean for my work group? For my department? For HP as a company? And what might it mean for the world itself?"

HP's E-Inclusion effort, a major project to enable the world's poor to enter the new economy while providing critical medical and other information to communities in the third world, stemmed in large measure from the HP for the World exploration. The question has now traveled far beyond the company: "What does it mean for us to be 'for the world'?" was a key question explored at a State of the World Forum with a group of more than 1,000 global leaders from every continent.

Creating a Sales "Community." Another case in which a catalytic question empowered leaders in new ways occurred in the sales organization of a major U.S. corporation. Mike Pfeil, the area director of sales, wondered how a *community*, rather than a traditional company, might deal with the challenges it confronted. As a learning experiment, he began to host conversations with employees from all levels in his organization to explore the meaning of community at work and how they might apply community principles to enhance performance.

To depart from the group's traditional focus on problems, the sales director framed questions that shifted the context within which workers normally look at their organization. He asked people to examine their best experiences of community and to reflect on times they had participated in a community experience that really worked, using queries such as, "What allowed that positive experience to happen? What kinds of activities were taking place? How did you fit into that?" As members shared what they knew from their own best community experiences, they began to see the analogies to business life. They posed follow-up questions, such as, "How does a community deal with adversity and adapting to change? What happens with members who don't uphold the community's standards?"

As the conversations evolved, important values that people really

HOW CAN I FRAME BETTER QUESTIONS?

Here are some questions you might ask yourself as you begin to explore the art and architecture of powerful questions. They are based on pioneering work with questions being done by the Public Conversations Project, a group that helps create constructive dialogue on divisive public issues.

- 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

cared about started to come forward—values like learning, mutual respect, contribution, and sharing with others. Another simple but powerful question emerged from those early dialogues: "How can we create a community at work that enables each person to contribute our best, inspires us to keep learning, and produces valued results?" This simple shift of lens led other leaders in the company to look how it functioned *within* the larger communities in which it operates. The learnings from this project informed subsequent work in the area of corporate responsibility and in the creation of mission goals that include the perspectives of both internal and external stakeholders in creating the company's future.

> "QUESTIONING BREAKS OPEN THE STAGNANT, HARDENED SHELLS OF THE PRESENT, OPENING UP OPTIONS TO BE EXPLORED."
>
> FRAN PEAVEY

The local leader who launched this effort is now a corporate vice president. In looking back on his experience with engaging powerful questions to shift the context for exploring business realities, he shared the following:

> "As we learned more, the meaning of the question continued to evolve. We asked ourselves, "How can we go out and plant this seed? How do we frame it as we bring other people into the conversation?" The question always worked in stimulating the dialogue. Sometimes as leaders it's important not to collectively work on what the answer is but to work on what the question is. That was a big insight for me as we did this work. *The question never failed us.*"

Improving Questions at Pfizer. In another recent case, professionals at Pfizer, the world-renowned pharmaceutical firm, are experimenting with a systematic method of improving the quality of their questions. Through a custom-designed workshop, marketing and finance professionals in Pfizer's European business unit have been learning to articulate powerful questions. These executives have discovered that meetings have more energy and creative ideas flow more quickly when they place attention on formulating catalytic questions. With this discipline in place, new ideas are more easily finding their way into key products and services.

From these examples, it's clear that improving the quality of the questions you ask and creating a framework of engagement that encourages their exploration can create business value. Because learning to engage thoughtful questions can lead to insight, innovation, and action, doing so will become an essential strategic capability for leaders of organizations who want to create sustainable results in the face of both short- and longer-term challenges and opportunities.

Fostering Strategic Inquiry

Beyond building the capacity of individual employees to ask powerful questions, an organization can design processes that use such queries to enhance the emergence of knowledge creation and strategic thinking. As the chairman and CEO of a major multinational corporation says, "Discovering strategic questions is like panning for gold. You have to care about finding it, you have to be curious, and you have to create an anticipation of discovering gold, even though none of us may know ahead of time where we'll find it. You head toward the general territory where you think the gold may be located, with your best tools, your experience, and your instincts. And then you begin a disciplined search for the gold." We've partnered with this leader to create a set of tools for fostering strategic inquiry and working with powerful questions in the service of positive futures called the "Game Plan" process. The following steps may not apply to all situations and they may not always play out in the same sequence. However, the Game Plan suggests ways that organizations can create both formal and informal processes to support individuals as well as teams in discovering the "gold" for themselves.

The Game Plan Process

The steps in the Game Plan can be used both as a process discipline by individuals looking at a particular situation, as well as by functional and cross-functional groups and leadership teams charged with the responsibility for key decisions regarding future courses of action. The Game Plan can also involve diverse stakeholders to provide important perspectives both on the current situation and on possible future actions.

THE GAME PLAN PROCESS

- Assess Your Current Situation
- Discover the "Big Questions"
- Create Images of Possibility
- Evolve Workable Strategies

Assess Your Current Situation. Get a feel for the larger context in which you are operating. Scan the internal and external business and organizational environments that may affect the future of the system or project you are working with. This situation analysis might include the assessment of critical results data, meetings with key stakeholders, and the mapping of your strengths, opportunities, and threats. It might also involve looking for "signals"—internal and external events, developments, and trends that can affect the future of your situation. Like trackers in the mountains, look for both obvious and subtle indicators that point to storms as well as sunny skies. Allow your curiosity and imagination to take the lead as you begin to identify the many questions that the broader landscape within which you're operating reveals.

It will be challenging, but important, to frame your findings as questions rather than as problems or concerns—questions that end with a question mark, not with a period or an exclamation point. To help in designing these queries, ask yourself, "How does *A* affect *C* and what questions does that suggest? If *X* were at play here, what question would we be asking? What's the real question underneath all this data?"

Discover the "Big Questions." Once you think you've posed most of the relevant questions (and there may be many of them), look for patterns and themes. This is not a mechanical process, even though it should be disciplined and systematic. 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. Cluster related questions, and consider the relationships among them. Begin to clarify the "big questions" that the initial clusters reveal. Frame these as clear and concise queries, not as problems. Something fundamental changes when people begin to ask questions together—they go beyond the normal stale debate about problems that passes for strategy in many organizations.

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. This part of the conversation can also provide clues for refining or reframing your big questions as well as inventing creative strategies. Developing scenarios—stories of the future based on different ways your big questions might be answered—can also be useful. These often reveal new territory and opportunities for action that are grounded in real life.

> "STRATEGIC QUESTIONS CREATE A RESONANT FIELD INTO WHICH YOUR OWN THINKING IS MAGNIFIED, CLARIFIED, AND NEW MOTION CAN BE CREATED."
>
> FRAN PEAVEY, *STRATEGIC QUESTIONING*

Evolve Workable Strategies. Workable strategies 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." Once you clarify key initiatives, you can formulate and implement specific action plans.

Of course, the cycle is never complete. You need continuous "sensing" based on relevant business and organizational data, ongoing conversations with internal and external stakeholders, informal conversations among employees, and feedback from the organizational environment. This input enables you to continually reassess the landscape you're operating in—revealing new questions for exploration.

The innovative leader with whom we developed the Game Plan process has shared this tool with the entire organization. People from throughout the company have found that it provides a way to discover questions that matter to the future of individual units and to the firm as a whole. The company has also used the Game Plan as part of refining the corporation's

IS YOUR ORGANIZATION AN INQUIRING SYSTEM? ASSESSING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S CAPABILITIES

- To what degree do leaders in your organization foster an environment in which discovering the "big questions" is encouraged as much as coming up with workable solutions?
- Does your organization have rewards or incentives for members to work across functional boundaries to find challenging questions that create common focus and forward movement for knowledge creation?
- Do your leadership development programs contain as much of a focus on the art and architecture of framing powerful questions as they do on techniques for solving problems?
- Do your organization's strategic planning processes include structured ways to discover the "big questions" that, if answered, would have real strategic leverage?
- What enabling tools or technologies does your organization employ to "seed" itself with strategic questions that "travel well" and catalyze learning conversations both within and across functions?
- Does your organization use collaborative technology tools to enable people on the frontlines to ask each other questions related to their daily work (i.e. customer service, equipment maintenance) and receive help with these questions from colleagues in other locations?
- Do senior leaders in your organization see the process of strategy evolution as one that engages multiple voices and perspectives in networks of conversation?

mission and values in the midst of a volatile and changing external climate. By moving from a problem orientation toward a more rigorous and disciplined focus on essential questions, the organization is slowly shifting from a "fix-it" mode to an inquiry model for business and organizational strategy evolution.This company has found that maintaining a rigorous focus on "questions that matter" and hosting strategic conversations on the organization's "big questions" is a core competence for leaders at all levels.

How Can Leaders Engage Powerful Questions?

For all organizations, in today's turbulent times, engaging people's best thinking about complex issues without easy answers will be the key to creating the futures we want rather than being forced to live with the futures we get. Leaders will need to develop capacity in the design of "inquiring systems" in order to learn, adapt, and create new knowledge to meet emerging opportunities and challenges in the more fluid organizational structures of the future. For example, the leadership challenges of the next 20 years are likely to revolve around the art of engaging and energizing networks rather than solely managing hierarchies as in the past. Successful leaders will be those who see organizations as living networks of conversation and collective meaning-making through which members create new knowledge and bring forth the future.They will understand how to operate in networks that are both internal and external to their organization.

In particular, we believe the following core capabilities, rarely taught in today's MBA or corporate leadership programs, will help define leadership excellence in a networked world where knowledge and learning are keys to success:

Engaging Strategic Questions. How many leaders today know how to frame strategic questions that open the space for thinking about possibilities rather than solving problems? How many leaders are comfortable with not knowing and can constructively help others bring forth their collective knowledge? How many leaders can engage their workers in discovering the "big questions" that lie at the heart of their organization's future?

In a volatile and uncertain environment, one of the strongest steps leaders can take is to assist their organizations in discovering the right questions at the right time. One of their key responsibilities is creating infrastructures for dialogue and engagement that encourage others at all levels to develop insightful questions and to search for innovative paths forward. Leaders also need to consider reward systems that provide incentives for members to work across organizational boundaries to discover those challenging lines of inquiry that create common focus and new knowledge.

Convening and Hosting Learning Conversations. A core aspect of the leader's new work involves creating multiple opportunities for learning conversations around challenging questions.

However, authentic conversation is less likely to occur in a climate of fear, mistrust, and hierarchical control. When the human mind and heart are fully engaged in authentic conversation and listening for core questions, new knowledge often begins to surface. Thus, the ability to facilitate working conversations that enhance trust and reduce fear is an important leadership capability.

To succeed in this pursuit, it's essential for leaders to strengthen their skills in the use of dialogue and other engagement approaches that deepen mutual inquiry and foster collective intelligence. These capabilities include:

- Creating a climate of discovery
- Suspending premature judgment
- Exploring underlying assumptions and beliefs
- Listening for connections between ideas
- Encouraging diverse perspectives
- Honoring everyone's contributions
- Articulating shared understanding
- Harvesting and sharing collective discoveries

These skills are especially important in situations in which there are no simple answers and finding creative paths forward can make a positive difference.

Including Diverse Perspectives. Leaders must become connectors—of both people and ideas. Diverse voices and new perspectives that aren't limited by traditional boundaries of function, hierarchy, discipline, technology, tenure, and geographic region play an increasingly important role in a company's strategizing. As Gary Hamel of the London School of Economics points out, "Strategizing depends on creating a rich and complex web of conversations that cuts across previously isolated pockets of knowledge and creates new and unexpected combinations of insight."

"A QUESTION NOT ASKED IS A DOOR NOT OPENED."

MARILEE GOLDBERG, *THE ART OF THE QUESTION*

The connections among these diverse voices and perspectives allow employees to fruitfully explore critical strategic questions. Building and encouraging personal relationships through networks of collaborative conversations across traditional boundaries helps critical strategic questions travel well. In this way, workers enhance their collective intelligence and their capacity to nurture creative futures together.

QUESTIONING

- Stimulates creativity
- Motivates fresh thinking
- Surfaces underlying assumptions
- Focuses intention, attention, and energy
- Opens the door to change
- Leads us into the future

Supporting Appreciative Inquiry. Opening spaces of possibility in our organizations requires a shift in leadership orientation from focusing primarily on what *is not* working and how to fix it, to also discovering and appreciating what *is* working and how to leverage it. Appreciative Inquiry (AI), developed by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western University, is a process for leveraging emerging possibilities rather than just fixing past mistakes. When used in a disciplined way, this kind of inquiry stimulates lively conversations that use the best of what is as the foundation for what might be.

Leaders who ask, "What's possible here and who cares?" have a much easier time gaining the cooperation and best thinking of their constituents than those who ask, "What's wrong here and who is to blame?" In assessing the results of more than a decade of research and practice in the area of Appreciative Inquiry, Cooperrider has stated unequivocally that "the most important insight we have learned with AI to date is that human systems grow toward what they persistently ask questions about." By asking positive questions, organizations have the opportunity to grow in new directions and tap innovative sources of knowledge, vitality, and energy.

Fostering 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, network 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," as in the case of the Game Plan process described earlier. In addition, leaders must

QUESTIONS FOR ALL SEASONS

Here is a series of generative questions that we and other colleagues have found useful to stimulate new knowledge and creative thinking in a wide variety of situations around the world. Look at these questions to stimulate your own thinking about questions related to your own specific situation. Play. Use your imagination.

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 discover 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)?

incorporate time for systemwide reflection in order to enable members to share insights and emerging questions. Collective reflection provides opportunities for the shared meaning-making that is essential in times of turbulence and change.

Nurturing Communities of Practice. Many of the most provocative questions that are vital to an organization's future are first discovered on the front lines, in the middle of the action of everyday life. But these key strategic questions are often lost because few of today's leaders have been trained to notice, honor, and utilize the social fabric of learning that occurs through informal "communities of practice" that exist throughout the organization.A community of practice is made of up people who share a common interest and who work together to expand their individual and collective capacity to solve problems over time.

Nurturing these learning networks and honoring the questions they care about is another core aspect of the leader's new work. It is important to understand how these communities deal with the questions and learning needs that arise in the course of the daily life of the organization. These understandings can provide clues about how the knowledge that resides in such communities might be engaged in the service of critical strategic questions. Leaders who take communities of practice into account as important strategic assets help assure that new work processes or organizational structures do not destroy the fabric of collective knowledge that is woven into these informal groups.

Using Collaborative Technologies. Intranet and groupware technologies are now making it possible for widely dispersed work groups to participate in learning conversations and team projects across time and space. As these tools become even more widely available, the notion of "network leadership" will expand to include supporting widespread online conversations where members throughout the organization can contribute their own questions and best thinking to critical strategic issues. The HP case shows how important enabling technology infrastructures are for strategic innovation. Several forward-looking companies, including Hallmark, Kodak, Discover Card, and General Motors, are now using an innovative online conversational technology, Communispace (www.communispace.com), to listen to their customers' concerns and questions at a deep level and generate insights about new products at a faster rate than was previously possible.

Such collaborative tools will be a critical factor in how well strategic questions can travel both within the organization and among customers and other stakeholders who are key to success. These technologies of engagement create possibilities for individuals and groups to connect with each other and to the larger whole in ways that were previously unimaginable. Leaders who are not skilled in their use or who do not recognize their strategic importance and support their use throughout their organizations will be at a significant disadvantage.

Co-Evolving the Future

It is quite easy to learn the basics of crafting powerful questions. However, once you understand the importance of inquiry, it's hard to turn back. As your questions become broader and deeper than before, so does your experience of life. There is no telling where a powerful question might lead you. Transformative conversations can result from posing a simple question such as, "What questions are we not asking ourselves about the situation in the Middle East?" Tantalizing possibilities emerge from the simple act of changing an article from "in" to "for," as in the HP example. Profound systemic change can emerge from creating a process discipline such as the Game Plan for discovering and acting on the "big questions" within a business setting.

For organizations that need collaborative learning and breakthrough thinking in order to create a sustainable future, asking "questions that matter" and engaging diverse constituencies in learning conversations are a core process for value creation. Because questions are inherently related to action, they are at the heart of an organization's capacity to mobilize the resources required to create a positive future. Seeing the organization as a dynamic network of conversations through which the enterprise develops encourages members at every level to search for questions related to real work that can catalyze collective energy and momentum. For all of us, thoughtful participation in discovering and exploring powerful questions can make a difference—to our team, to our organization, and to the larger communities of which we are a part.

Living systems evolve by developing a coherent identity, creating connections in complex webs of relationships, and distributing information widely throughout the organization. At the same time, human systems naturally evolve toward the questions that they ask. Seeing the ways in which the art and architecture of powerful questions can help an organization create its path into the future, and utilizing process principles, tools, and technologies that support this evolution, is everyone's job. For it is only in this way that organizations are able to cultivate both the knowledge required to thrive economically today as well as the wisdom needed to ensure a sustainable future.

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For Further Exploration

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www.interclass.com is a high-trust community of experienced practitioners in large organizations exploring innovations in learning and human performance.

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