



TOOLS & METHODS

POWERFUL QUESTIONS

*“AN ANSWER IS ALWAYS PART OF THE ROAD THAT IS BEHIND YOU;
ONLY QUESTIONS POINT TO THE FUTURE.” Jostein Gaarder*

DESCRIPTION AND CORE PRINCIPLES:

In a culture obsessed with answers, the art of asking powerful questions is highly under-rated. Questions open important doors 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. 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 led them to learn something new.

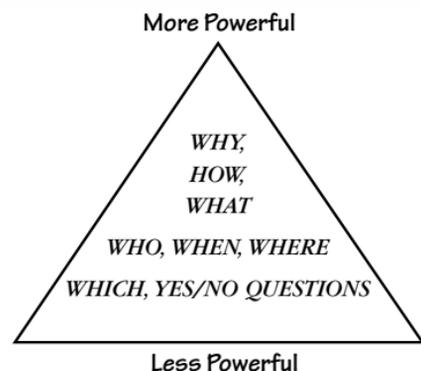
THREE DIMENSIONS OF POWERFUL QUESTIONS:

The Construction of a Question

A powerful question is one that provokes thoughtful exploration and evokes creative thinking. The linguistic *construction* of a question can make a critical difference in either opening our minds or narrowing the possibilities we can consider.

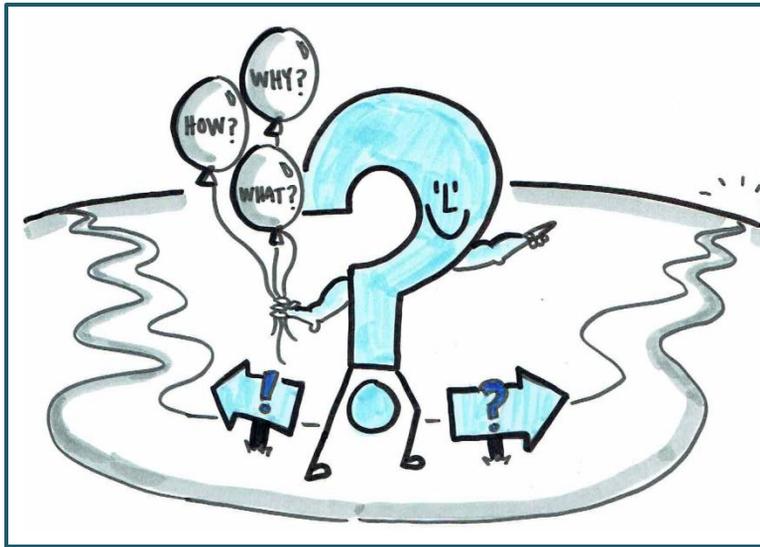
By using the words toward the top of the pyramid we can make many of our questions more robust. For example, consider the following sequence:

- 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.

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. 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.



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.

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 example, compare *“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 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.

Questioning

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

How Can Leaders Engage Powerful Questions?

- *Engaging with Strategic Questions.*
- *Convening and Hosting Learning Conversations.*
- *Inviting and Including Diverse Perspectives.*
- *Supporting Appreciative Inquiry.*
- *Fostering Shared Meaning.*
- *Nurturing Communities of Practice.*
- *Using Collaborative Technologies.*