

Appreciative inquiry: asking powerful questions

what is a powerful question?

While you may not immediately know the characteristics of a powerful question, it is actually quite easy to recognize one. Score the questions below from 1 to 10, with 10 being the most powerful.

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

A powerful question:

- ✓ Generates curiosity and invites creativity
- ✓ Focuses inquiry and stimulates reflective conversation
- ✓ Is thought provoking and surfaces underlying assumptions
- ✓ Touches a deeper meaning and stays with participants
- ✓ Travels well, spreading around the organization

engineering powerful questions

There are three dimensions to a powerful question.

CONSTRUCTION—The linguistic construction of a question can make a critical difference in either opening our minds or narrowing the possibilities we consider.

Place the following words on a continuum from less powerful to more powerful:

- ✓ yes/no questions
- ✓ why
- ✓ how
- ✓ what
- ✓ which
- ✓ what if
- ✓ who
- ✓ when

- ✓ where

Consider the following questions:

- ✓ Are children in our community getting the exercise they need?
- ✓ In our community's history, describe a time when kids enjoyed the best health and fitness.
- ✓ What is it about our community that supports health and wellness for children?
- ✓ Why is it that so many children are inactive and have poor diets?
- ✓ What if we got it right? (Creating a community that supports health and wellness for kids.)

As you move from simple yes/no questions to why to what if, the queries stimulate more reflective thinking and more creative responses.

Warning: Unless a why question is carefully crafted, it can evoke a defensive response, as people try to justify their answer rather than proceed in a spirit of inquiry (e.g., Why does our coalition fail to reach the larger community?).

SCOPE—The scope of the question must match the need we are addressing.

Note the impact of scope below:

- ✓ How can we best share information as a team?
- ✓ How can we best share information as a coalition?
- ✓ How can we best share information with our community?

The questions above progressively broaden the domain of inquiry. Sometimes questions are interesting, but are outside the scope of our capacity (e.g., How can we change the health behavior of our nation?).

ASSUMPTIONS—Almost all questions, explicit or implicit, have assumptions built into them.

Discuss the assumptions imbedded in the following questions:

- ✓ How can we create a bilingual education system in Kansas?
- ✓ What is best way to educate English and non-English speaking students alike?
- ✓ What did we do wrong, and who is responsible?
- ✓ What can we learn from what has happened, and what are the possibilities now?
- ✓ How can we address the lack of cooperation between agencies?
- ✓ What are all the possibilities for collaboration between our agencies?

Which questions assume a solution? Which assume error or blame, leading to narrow discussions or defensiveness? Which stimulate reflection, creativity, and/or collaboration among those involved?

Examine each question for any unconscious beliefs it may introduce:

- ✓ What assumptions or beliefs are we introducing with this question?
- ✓ How would we approach this issue if we had an entirely different belief system?

using appreciative inquiry

Pay attention to the construction, scope, and assumptions of the questions you ask. When working with groups, spend time crafting the questions they will address:

1. Start by discussing the end-in-mind for the discussion or process.
2. Work with colleagues to write down several questions relevant to the topic.
3. Discuss and rate the questions.
 - a. Which is best constructed to promote reflection and creativity?
 - b. Which has the right scope for the end-in-mind?
 - c. What are the underlying assumptions embedded in each question?
The goal is not always to make the question assumption free; work to make sure it has the right assumptions to move your group forward.
4. Experiment with changing the construction and scope to get a feel for how each can change the direction of the inquiry.
5. Give each question the "genuine test." Is this a question to which we do not already know the answer? If we already know the answer or have a preset right response, it is not inquiry.
6. Run the question by an outside key informant to see how well the question works and where it leads the discussion.

QUESTIONS FOR FOCUSING ATTENTION

- What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of (your situation)?
- What's important to you about (your 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 situation)?
- What do we know so far/still need to learn about (your situation)?
- What are the dilemmas/opportunities in (your situation)?

- What assumptions do we need to test or challenge here in thinking about (your situation)?
- What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about (your 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 discovery 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 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)?

Vogt, E., Brown, J., and Issacs, D. (2003). *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action*.