

The Art of Questioning: Tips for the Quality Professional



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The Global Voice of Quality®

How could these Disasters have been avoided?



The Queen of the Ocean!

Space Shuttle Challenger

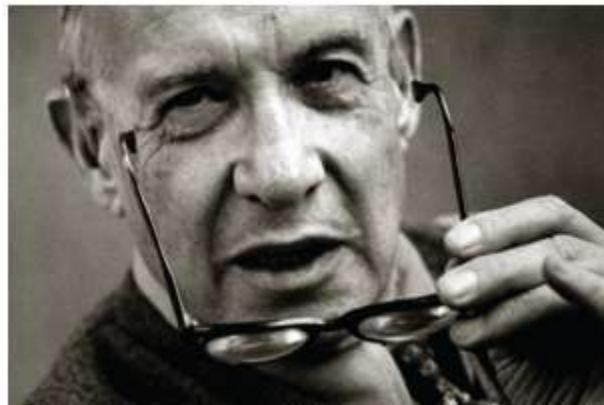
It's not the Answers that Count



Albert Einstein – Smart Dude

“If I only had the right question?”

“The formulation of a problem is often more important than its solution.”



Peter Drucker, Management Guru

“The important and difficult job is never to find the right answers, it is to find the right questions.”

“For there are few things as useless – if not dangerous – as the right answer to the wrong question.”

Learning Objectives

Understand:

- A. What is the value of questions?
- B. Why don't we ask questions?
- C. What “process” will lead to better questions?
- D. What makes a question “great”?
- E. How can we better focus questions on needs?
- F. What tips will improve your questioning skills?



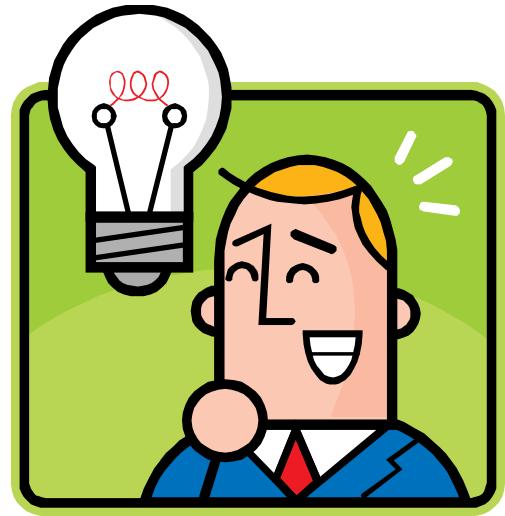
A. What is Value of Questions – to Organization

- Better / faster learning
- Energize – wake up our brains!
- Better decisions
- Better cooperation / teamwork
- Getting to “true” root cause
- Uncover risks / opportunities

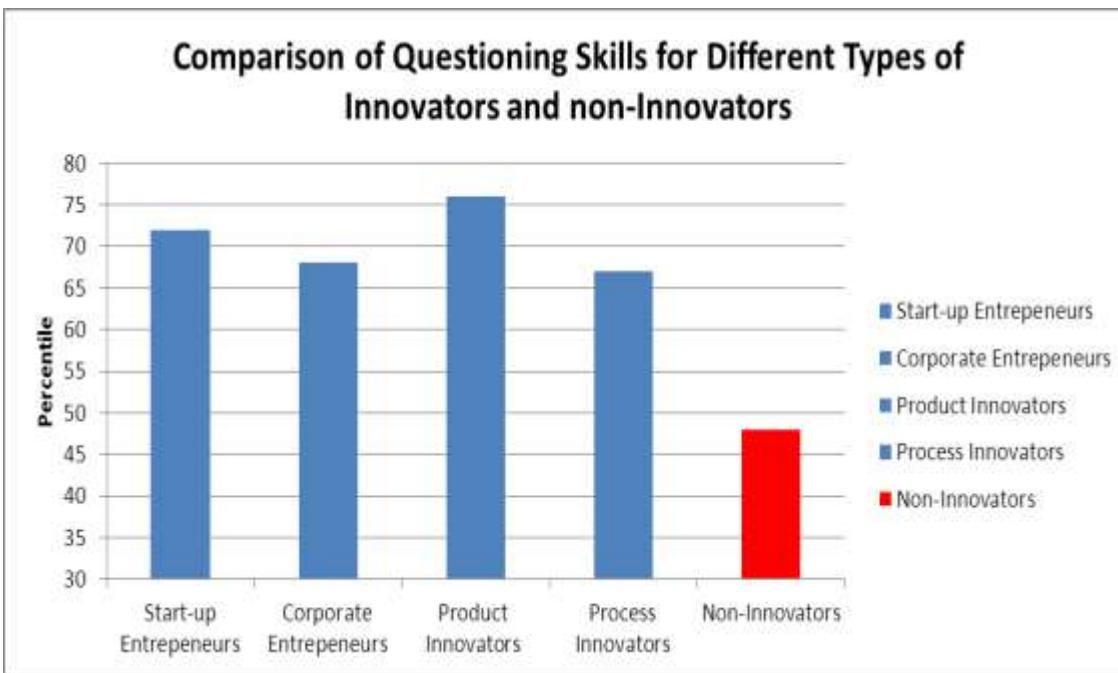


A. What is Value of Questions – to You

- Learn different perspectives
- Understand the larger system
- Be valued as a good sounding board
- Invited to most impactful meetings
- Recognized for “Great question!”



A. What is Value of Questions - for Innovation



Source: The Innovator's DNA
by Dyer, Gregersen and Christensen

***From 90% market share
in cameras and film to
bankruptcy***



$$\begin{aligned} Q \text{ (Questioning)} + A \text{ (Action)} &= I \text{ (Innovation)} \\ Q \text{ (Questioning)} - A \text{ (Action)} &= P \text{ (Philosophy)} \end{aligned}$$

Source: A More Beautiful Question by Berger

B. Why don't we ask questions?

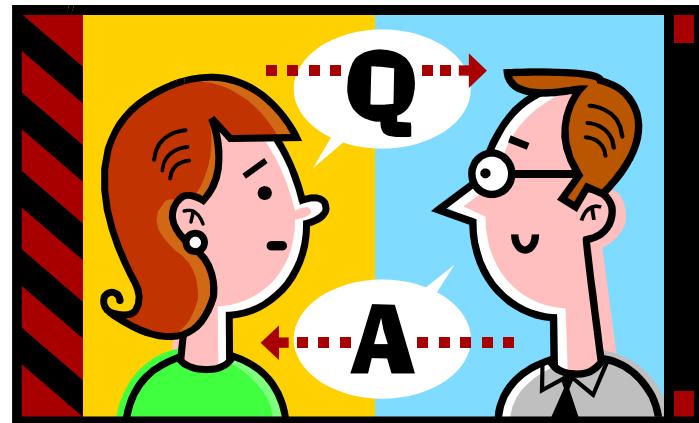
- To protect ourselves (don't want to look stupid)
- Don't have time
- Lack skills
- Culture discourages questions
- Fear of being labeled as uncooperative or disagreeable



C. What process will lead to better questions?

Six Steps in the Questioning Process:

- 1) Prepare yourself
- 2) Set the stage
- 3) Ensure receptivity
- 4) Plan / ask questions
- 5) Listen to understand and learn
- 6) Ask follow-up questions



Model Source: Adapted from [Leading with Questions](#) by Michael Marquardt

C. What process will lead to better questions?

1) Prepare yourself:

- Clear your mind of distractions
- Plan to talk no more than 20 to 25%
- Don't assume you know what the other person will say
- Put down, ignore or turn off mobile devices and computers

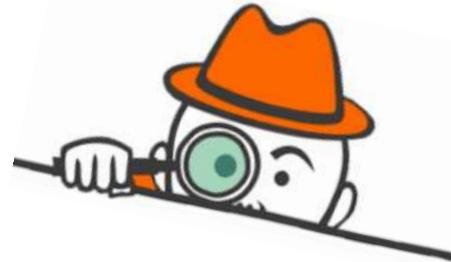


C. What process will lead to better questions?

2) Set the Stage

What is the “Quest” in your “Questions?”

- Clarify purpose of conversation
- Determine exactly what you are looking for from them:
 - Problem identification
 - Opinions
 - Satisfaction level
 - Confirmation of facts
- Establish context and background



C. What process will lead to better questions?

3) Ensure Receptivity

- **If receptivity is low** – ask questions (about readiness) & provide benefits (What's in it for them)
- **If receptivity is high** – proceed!
(ready to discuss data, facts and perspectives)
- **If the person has an interfering emotion**, let them vent.
“You seem very upset by this” vs.
“Why are you so angry?”



C. What process will lead to better questions?

4) Plan / Ask Questions

- Have a **plan of attack!**
(Good flow – strong beginning, middle and end)



- Use a **variety** of question (probe) types



- Create a **list of questions** by stage of discussion



- Have **benefits** ready – WIIFT – “What’s in it for them?”



C. What process will lead to better questions?

4) Plan / Ask your Questions

Include variety of question types: based on conversation dynamics

Hard to get responses	Keeping conversation going	Expand on responses
Open-ended How, what, why, tell me about	Neutral phrases “Tell me more” “Please elaborate”	Open-ended How, what, why, tell me about
Pauses Silence for 5 to 10 seconds	Brief Assertions of Interest “I see” “Keep going” / “That’s interesting.”	Timely closed-ended “Which option do you prefer? Option A or B?”
Reflective Statements “You seem very concerned about...”	Non-verbal Encouragement Good eye contact, nod of head, lean forward, positive facial expression	Summary Statements “What I am hearing is that these three features are the most critical.”
Summary Statements “Here is what I heard you say.”	Manage Perception Words 7%, Tone 38%, Look 55%	



Source: Adapted from Leadership Through People Skills
by R.E. Lefton, V.R. Buzzotta 2003



C. What process will lead to better questions?

5) Listen to understand and learn



**Listen
with intent to
understand**

Truly understanding what the other person is trying to say from their point of view:

- Words
- Meaning
- Concepts
- Point(s) trying to make



**Listen
with intent to
respond**

Listening until you have heard enough information to formulate a response

OH, I'M SORRY
DID THE MIDDLE OF MY
SENTENCE INTERRUPT THE
BEGINNING OF YOURS?



People speak about **150 words per minute**.
Our brains operate at **750 words per minute**.
How are you utilizing the "**Elusive 600?**" – Joseph McCormick, *Brief*

C. What process will lead to better questions?

6) Ask follow-up questions...

- Build on the previous answer to ask next question
- Acknowledge what you heard by summarizing and then ask deeper questions:



while managing your reactions:

- Avoid “No” or “I don’t agree” as first reaction
- Control your emotional hot-buttons – stay neutral
- Combine their answers with broader solutions
(Yes...and vs. Yes...but)



C. What process will lead to better questions?

Summary - Six Steps in the Questioning Process:

1) Prepare yourself

Mentally, physically, emotionally

2) Set the stage

Define “quest” for your questions

3) Ensure receptivity

Is other person ready to discuss?

4) Plan / ask questions

Be prepared with variety of questions

5) Listen to understand and learn

“Are you really listening?”

6) Ask follow-up questions

With follow-up questions and positive reactions



D. What makes a question great?

Differences between Questions A and B?

Questions A

- Why are you behind schedule?
- What's the problem with this project?
- Who messed this up?
- Don't you know better than that?
- Why can't you get this right?

Questions B

- How do you feel about our progress?
- What are you most pleased with?
- Which objectives will be easiest to accomplish?
- What key things need to happen to achieve the objective?
- What kind of support do you need to ensure success?



D. What makes a question great?

Start with characteristics of *good* questions

- Clear purpose
- Brief
- Plain language
- Simple sentence structure
- Appropriate for the situation & person
- You are prepared to respond to the answer



Remember the 3 Be's:

1. Be bright!
2. Be brief!
3. Be gone!



Source: Adapted from *The Art of Asking Questions*
by Terry Fadem

D. What makes a question great?

Enhance with characteristics of *great* questions

- With intent to learn vs. judge
- Asked with humility
- Causes other person to stretch / reflect
- Breaks down complexity
- Challenges assumptions
- Leads others to self-discovery (sell vs. tell)



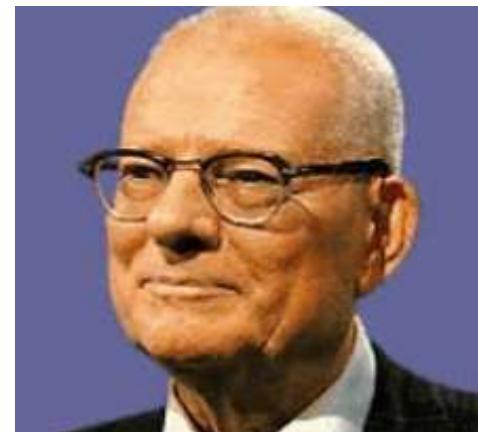
E. How can we better focus questions on needs?

What type of Needs are you trying to address?

Your questioning approach, strategy and questions should vary based on **type of need**.

A few quality-related need areas:

- Strategic Analysis**
- Problem-solving**
- Process Understanding**
- Innovation**



"If you do not know how to ask the right question, you discover nothing."

W. Edwards
Deming, Quality
Guru

E. Questions – Focused on Strategic Analysis

1. Current State

- What are your objectives / goals?
- What is the most important thing you need to accomplish / change?
- What problem keeps you up at night?
- What issue / problem do customers call most about?
- What problems / issues cause associates the most pain?

2. Future State

- What challenges do you see over the next six months?
- What are the biggest risks to future growth?
- What long-term trends have you observed?
- What is your vision of how things should work?



3. Change

- What should we keep doing?
- What should we stop doing?
- What do you want to change?

Baldrige Criteria
also provides an
excellent set of
strategic questions



See Bibliography
in Appendix for
link to PDF

Source: Adapted from Leading with Questions by Michael Marquardt

E. Questions – Focused on Problem Solving

1. Problem Articulation and Framing (Define, Measure)

- What is your perspective of the problem?
- What role does your group play in this process/ problem?
- How is the customer impacted?
- What changes occurred around the time your problem started?
- How frequently does this problem occur?
- How do you know? How is it measured?
- What are some examples?

2. Problem Analysis Stage (Analyze)

- What factors contribute to the problem?
- Why do you think this problem occurs?
- Why (5 times)?

3. Hypothesis Generation (Improve)

- What ideas have you thought of?
- What has been tried already? Results?
- What options do you have?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of each option?
- What if you did nothing at all?

4. Action Stage (Implement, Control)

- What are the big pieces of work to plan?
- What is best way to move forward?
- What should be worked on first?
- What is the critical path?
- What is the fallback solution (Plan B)?
- How will ongoing success be ensured?

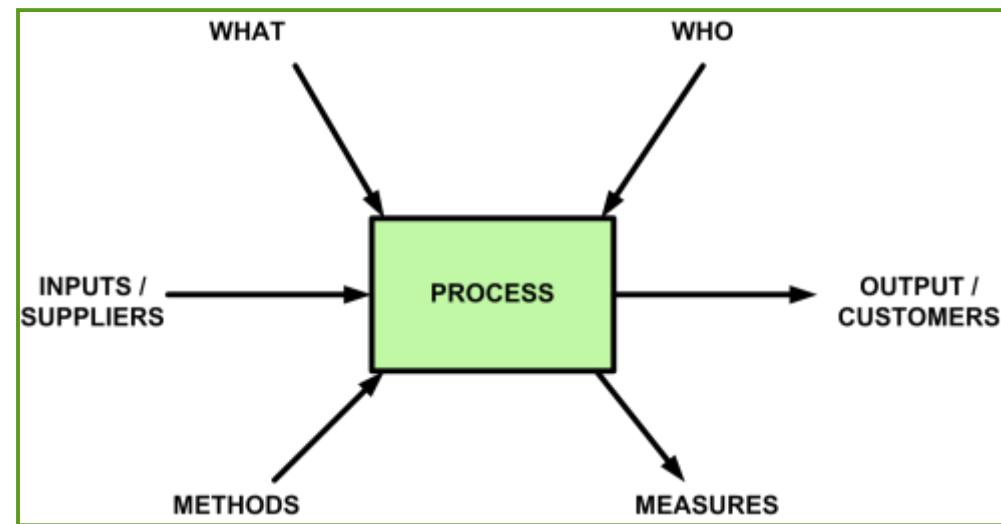


Source: Adapted from *Leading with Questions* by Michael Marquardt
Questions also align to Six-Sigma DMAIC!

E. Questions – Focused on Process Understanding

Ask questions as you follow the process!

- From whom do you receive work? (Interview them next)
- What do you receive? (Take copies, if appropriate)
- What steps do you take to complete your process? (Ask to watch them work)
- What output do you produce? (Take copies, if appropriate)
- Who receives your output? (Interview them next)
- How is your work measured? (Ask leader for metrics)



ISO 9001 Turtle Diagram
Six Sigma (SIPOC)

Source: Russ Hopkins, Strategy and Business Engineer for Ford Supplier Technical Assistance (STA) presented at ISO/TS 16949:2002 rollout sessions in 2002.

E. Questions – Focused on Innovation

1. Ask “what is” questions

- What is our best selling product?
- What is product furthest from goal?
- What is our most utilized service?
- What is our strongest capability?
- What is the real pain point?
- What is our largest challenge?

2. Ask “what caused” questions

- What caused us to develop this?
- What caused things to get to this point?
- What caused drop in sales / usage?



3. Ask “why? And why not? Questions

- Why did this occur (5 times)?
- Why is this successful?
- Why has this not taken off?
- Why do we need so many products?

4. Ask “what if” questions.

- What if it didn’t work this way?
- What if we had to deliver in half the time?
- What if we had to operate with half the people?
- What if we stopped doing this tomorrow?

F. What Tips will Improve your Questioning Skills?

1) Exercise: Question Ping-pong

How long can you keep a conversation going by only asking Questions?

- We tend to want to react to everything we hear with an opinion / reaction.
 - Practice responding through questions. This is a skill that you can improve.!
- a. Pair up with a peer. One will be questioner, and one answerer
 - b. Pick a topic for discussion
 - c. Questioner - write down a few starting questions
 - d. Start a timer
 - e. Start conversation
 - f. Questioner asks questions
 - g. Answerer gives answer
 - h. Questioner can give brief reply (without opinions) and follow-up with a question
 - i. Stop the timer when a question is not asked
 - j. Switch sides – repeat



How long did you go without offering your opinion?

Source: Designed by Dave Gorin



F. What Tips will Improve your Questioning Skills?

2) Engage in Question-Storming

Question-Storming is similar to brainstorming, but focuses on generating questions

- a. Identify an organizational problem or challenge.
 - b. Generate one question at a time.
 - c. Have one person document questions so everyone can see and reflect
 - d. Hold questions until the last one is documented
 - e. Do not try to answer questions!
 - f. Aim for 50 questions
 - g. Organize into logical groupings (affinitize)
 - h. Discuss groupings – combine or enhance as a group
 - i. Prioritize the top 1 to 3 questions per grouping
 - j. Answer top questions as a group



Source: *The Innovator's DNA*
by Dyer, Gregersen and Christensen

F. What Tips will Improve your Questioning Skills?

3) Track your Q / A Ratio

- The best questioners ask more questions (Q) than providing answers(A).
- To check your current Q / A ratio, track your questions vs. answers.

- a. In key meetings, create two columns on a piece of paper
- b. Label left side with “Q” and right side with “A”
- c. Every time you speak, place a check mark in appropriate column
- d. At end of the meeting, add up the two columns
- e. Calculate ratio of questions to answers ($Q/(Q+A)$)
- f. What could you have done to be more effective: more / better questions?
- g. Keep a record of Q / A by type of meeting
- h. Evaluate your ratio over time. Is it getting better?

Q	A
III II	III III II

$$7/19 = 37\%$$

Date - Meeting	Questions	Answers	Total	Q Percent
1 – 2 Service Issue	7	12	19	37%
1 – 3 Staffing Update	2	5	7	29%
1 – 4 One-on-One with Joe	8	4	12	75%



Source: *The Innovator's DNA*
by Dyer, Gregersen and Christensen

F. What Tips will Improve your Questioning Skills?

4) Keep a Question-centered Notebook

“To generate an even richer repository of questions, take time to capture your questions regularly.” Richard Branson

Reflect on your questions AND on questions others ask:

- *questioning patterns*
- *questions yielding unexpected insights*
- *questions challenging the status quo*
- *questions generating strong emotional responses*

- a. Document the questions you use in a notebook.
- b. Review the questions periodically
 - how many and what kinds of questions you consistently ask
- c. Document “effective” questions you hear from others.



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G. Conclusion: Questions can make a Difference!

“Changing our questions can change the world.”

No right answer has ever been given without someone first asking the right question.

“You don’t invent the answers, you reveal the answers” by “finding the right question.”

Jonas Salk - discoverer of the polio vaccine



Appendix: Bibliography

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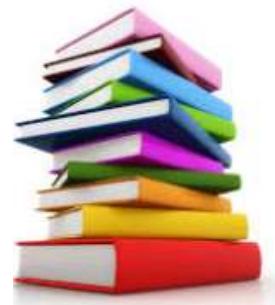
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Questions?

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