

Powerful questions that get results

To be the best you can be, you need to know how to use the power of questions - second only to the ability to listen – really listen. Well formulated or 'powerful questions' have the effect of opening up new channels of thinking and removing blocks to progress.

According to Socrates, when we ask a question we already have half of the answer. Asking the right question at the right time is a powerful way of pushing people's thinking in the direction you want them to go. In this sense, questions are never neutral and those who know how to use questions can subtly control conversations and outcomes. That's the power of the question.

Questions can serve a number of functions. You can use them to:

- ? direct conversations
- ? gather information
- ? assess and clarify issues
- ? highlight critical material and
- ? facilitate action or change
- ? seek clarity and aid understanding
- ? evaluate progress

Questioning Positions

1st Position Questions – focus on your own experience and desires. **What do I really want?**

To do this you have to be clear about what you see as 'ME' and what is 'NOT ME' thoughts or ideas. Be aware that you must not dismiss the views of others.

2nd Position Questions – focusing on other people's perspectives, feelings and experiences

How do you feel about it? What would you do? How do you see it? This requires you to step into the shoes of others. Be aware that this could damage your self-esteem.

3rd Position Questions – focus on situations and relationships as in independent observer

What is actually happening? Being detached and taking a bigger picture or unemotional helicopter view. Be aware that this might give the impression that you unemotional

Typical coaching questions

Start with the old friends – ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘how’ and ‘where’.

How questions

How did you think/feel/act ?
How often did . . . ?
How did that come about ?
How did you react ?
How did you cope in the past ?
How would you have liked to behave ?

Where questions

Where does it happen ?
Where can we start to make a change ?
Where did it all go wrong ?
Where do you see yourself . . . ?
Where will that get you ?
Where in your body did you feel the anger ?

What questions

What happened ?
What did you think about that ?
What makes you think that ?
What did that mean to you ?
What might you do differently next time ?
What did you learn from that ?

When questions

When did it start ?
When do you have to . . . ?
When did that first occur ?
When did you realise ?
When did you decide ?
When will that happen ?

Try not to use ‘why’ questions as they tend to close down thinking and can generate what Chris Argyris calls ‘defensive routines’ – when they look to defend their identity with what, for them, is the right answer, which cannot then be challenged without evoking a strong emotional reaction.

‘Why’ questions have their place of course, when you are trying to get at the root cause of actions in specific situations, but ‘why’ questions can feel like a judgement call. Such questions can also lead to a never-ending cycle of intellectually competitive banter. This brings us back to the brain’s **AUTOPIETIC** – a ‘me versus not me’ response, and how it can defend itself against ideas which it/we find alien or toxic. It is better to use ‘what’ rather than ‘why’ questions.

For example, instead of asking the question: “Why did you do that?” ask “What were you trying to achieve when you did that?” or “How does asking that question help you ?

Before you ask a question, think about what you are trying to achieve with it.

The way to find powerful questions is to adopt a childlike curiosity and take nothing for granted. This involves focusing on open questions to stimulate the release of deeper personal insights. This is more likely to happen if you have established a good rapport. See Info Notes (6) ‘How to Build Rapport’.

[Open/Curious Questions](#) – seek out information to aid understanding and ways of thinking

[Closed/Leading Questions](#) – carry the questioners beliefs and opinions, and can feel coercive

The ladder of reasoning

The ladder of reasoning is a tool you can use for more creative, productive questioning. This is because it enables you to understand the steps in your reasoning process as you make sense of what is happening before taking action.

Think of the ladder extending from a pool of all there is to know, from which you select the information you are going to pay attention to because it is important to you. This is the information that goes on the first rung of the ladder.

Then you interpret or give meaning to the information you have put on the first rung. You may analyse or synthesise the facts in different ways before coming to a conclusion. The ladder reminds you not to jump to conclusions higher up the ladder because it leaves gaps in your reasoning. Your inferences, beliefs and assumptions must be tested. To change them you need to understand them first.

INQUIRY

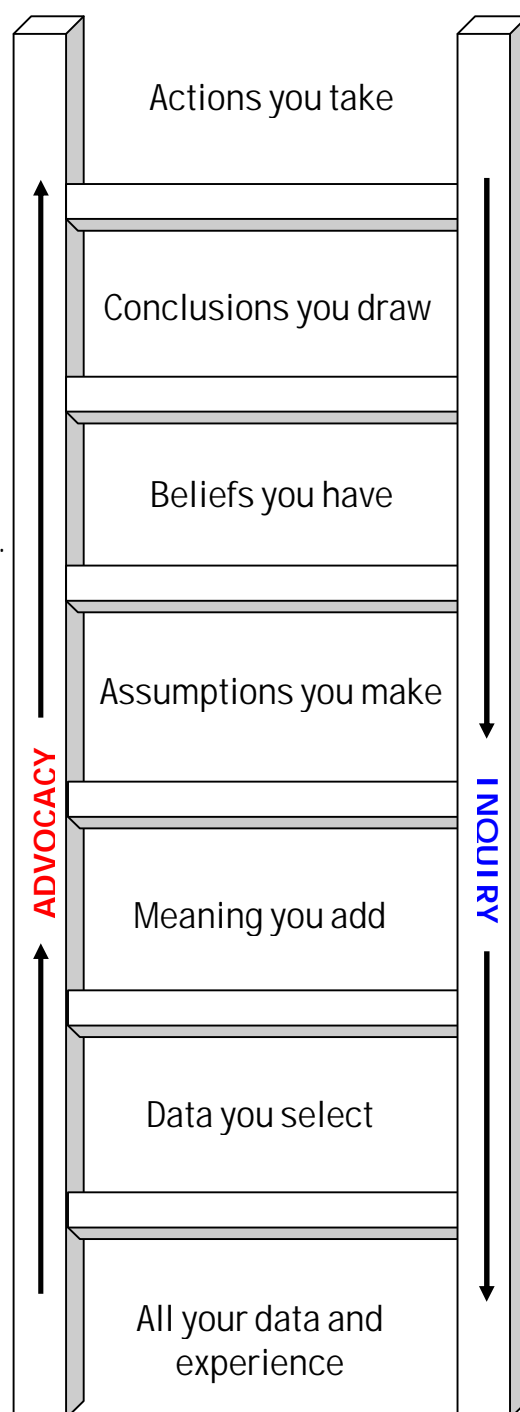
Working your way DOWN the ladder helps to surface and test assumptions or penetrate illusions. It can identify the stereotypes and prejudices people have of each other and see the weaknesses in their reasoning.

- ? What led you to want to do/say that ?
- ? Can you explain your reasoning for me ?
- ? Can you give me an example of what you mean ?

ADVOCACY

Working your way UP the ladder encourages creative and productive reasoning. It can help to build agreement and a shared view on an issue.

- ? What data do we agree on here ?
- ? What meaning does that have for you ?
- ? What assumptions are we making ?
- ? What conclusions can we draw ?



Being decisive in the decision process

- ? What are the key steps that you, or your team will have to take, so that the decision makers would feel comfortable and able to make a decision ?
- ? What will they do or decide in each step of the process ?
- ? What is the timing of each step in the decision process ?
- ? Who needs to be involved in each step ?
- ? What information does each person need to see or hear that will allow them to feel comfortable in making a decision?
- ? What criteria will each person apply in making a decision ?

These are some of the powerful questions that many managers find difficult to answer. Outlined below is framework that I have used to great effect when organising a team to deliver a project, such as implementing a strategy, organizing an event, delivering a process change, etc.

STEPS	DECISIONS	WHEN	WHO	HOW

1. STEPS – what key things need to be done to achieve our objective ?

By asking about the steps first you take some of the emotional baggage out of the situation. What are all the steps you/we will have to take to make a decision that is the best for the service ? Make sure you test the list so there are not too many surprises or disappointments when you hit a snag.

2. DECISIONS – what decision(s) will have to be taken in each step ?

Getting agreement on what the decision is before thinking about who should make it keeps the discussion open and focused on the needs of the task and getting a result

3. WHEN – the deadline by which specific decisions must to be taken

Each step should have at least a tentative date. This is the date by which you would expect to see the step completed. These are the milestones for checking progress and if things are going according to plan. You can't hold people accountable for a decision if they not committed to the same timeline. If you don't nail it down you will regret it.

4. WHO – the person/group responsible who will make the decision at the time

Clearly this depends on who is actively involved, so make sure you identify who needs to be involved in each step and their decision-making role. Ask them directly to find out how they see thngs.

5. HOW – the criteria that will be applied to the decision will be made

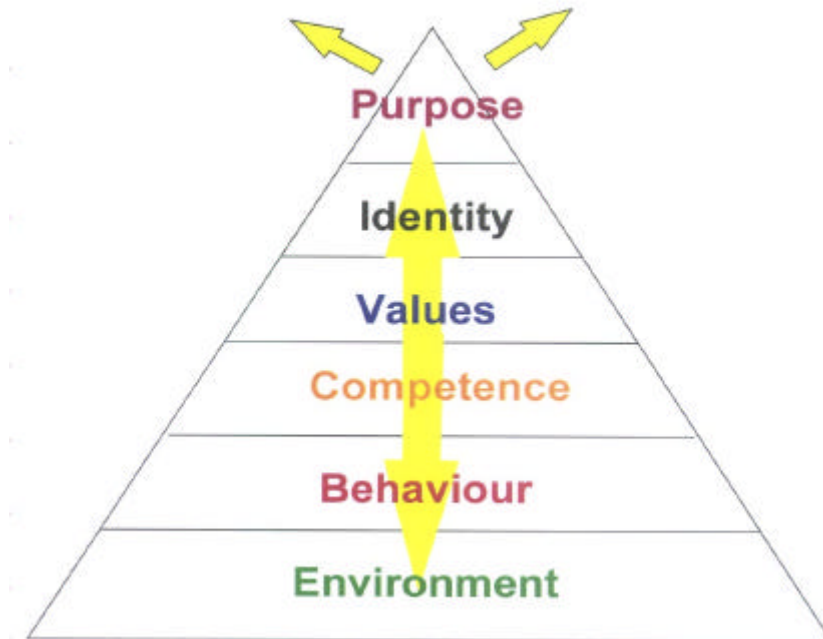
Don't try and guess. Find out what is important to the key stakeholders by talking with them. Get to know the issues from their different perspectives. Be careful to different what they 'could' do from what they 'want' to do. What would convince them ?

Be sure to understand who stands to win or lose from the decisions you make BEFORE you make them

Using Logical Questions

Using questions to challenge people to consider a higher purpose – whether work-based, family, social or spiritual to make a contribution outside or above what they do at the moment. You can use these questions to collect information and decide on the most effective place for an intervention to achieve change.

Robert Dilts created the Neurological Levels Model as a framework. See below.



Logical Level	Question
Environmental	Where you work – the physical, social and emotional environment ?
Behaviour	What you do and how you behave ?
Competence	What can you do ? What are your skills and how are they used ?
Beliefs & Values	What do you believe in ? What's important to you ?
Identity	Who are you – the roles /relationships you play out in this context ?
Higher Purpose	Why you are who you are ? How can you be fulfilled ?

Take each level in turn and ask yourself . . .

1. What does this mean for me ?
2. What benefits do I get from being this way ?
3. How could I be even better ?

People who are clear about their purpose will be more proactive in the way they address what issues lead to success when considering other levels. Awareness leads to and prompts choices that might not otherwise have even been considered.

Taking action

To ask powerful questions you need to induce a state of curiosity. It is a desire to listen, read, watch, respect and learn from others as well as yourself.

1. Think of something you would like to be better at.
2. Think of 6 related questions you would like answered that would help you
3. Think of the actions you will take to get at the answers
4. Decide on the actions you will take as a result of what you have learned

I would like to be better at:		
POWERFUL QUESTIONS	ACTIONS TAKEN TO FIND THE ANSWERS	CHANGES MADE
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

NOTE: To find the answers you may need to talk to experts, read a book, browse the internet, search your own experience, etc.