

The power of the question

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we are going to explore in more detail one of the key skills of an effective conversational process practitioner, the ability to ask powerful and impactful questions. To be able to do this skilfully in a variety of situations we need to understand the nature of questions, and to have some idea of the likely impact of different questions in different situations. This chapter will present some ideas concerning how questions can be distinguished by intent and effect, to help you to shape your questions with skilful thought, tailored to the situation in hand.

NOT LOCKS AND KEYS

The effect of a question (that is, the account produced in response to it) is influenced by factors such as who is asking and in what context. Sometimes people seem to forget this and think that to get a particular answer they have to find the 'right' question, as if questions and answers were a series of keys and locks! To help illuminate the fallacy of this way of thinking, here are some possible answers to the seemingly factually straightforward question 'What is your name?'

'Why, who wants to know?'

'I'm David's sister, Sandra'

'To you, I'm Teacher'

'Granger, Sandra Granger'

'Forgotten again!'

'Ms Granger'

'Bit late to be asking now!'

'Call me Sandy'

'Granger'

'Boss will do!'

'My friends call me Sadie'

'You don't need to know that, what you need to know is...'

'Mrs Granger'

'Well I was christened Simon, but most people call me Sandra these days'

'Sandra Granger'

'The name on the passport is Sandra Blossom'

'My maiden name was Hammond'

'Mummy'

'You remember me, surely?'

'I'm your niece, Sandra, Debbie's daughter'

Which of these answers (or one of many others) is given is a product of, among other things, who asks, in what context to what perceived end. The amount of information contained in the combined question and answer about the relationship between the people involved is huge. A question is no longer to be perceived as a blunt tool that performs the same task pretty much regardless of who is wielding it, or where, or to what end: that is, to produce a pre-determined 'right' answer to the question, like a key fits one lock. Rather, questioning is a resource that, like pigment or clay in skilled hands, can work in an infinite variety of ways to produce an infinite variety of effects, yet is never entirely predictable in its outcome.

Having looked at some of the broad contextual factors relevant to the inquiry process, let's move on to look more specifically at the shape of questions and the effect that can have.

LOOKING AT QUESTIONS

1. Question shape

Questions have different shapes that influence their effect. Almost anyone who has ever received any management development training knows the difference between open and closed questions. Open and closed questions differ in the amount of information they invite in response. So ‘Did you have a good time last night?’ invites a yes or no answer. ‘What did you do last night?’ invites a more expansive answer since yes or no as an answer won’t really fit the question. In this way open questions invite more information. All questions contain a certain amount of assumed information. The greater the assumed information in the question, the less fresh information is invited in the answer. It is this property of questions that allows us to use them for different purposes, ranging from exploring something new to clarifying our understanding, for example, ‘What have you been up to recently?’ works to help us generate new information, while ‘I believe you went to Tunisia last year, is that right?’ works to confirm our existing information. And there are a range of questions in between (Figure 5.1).

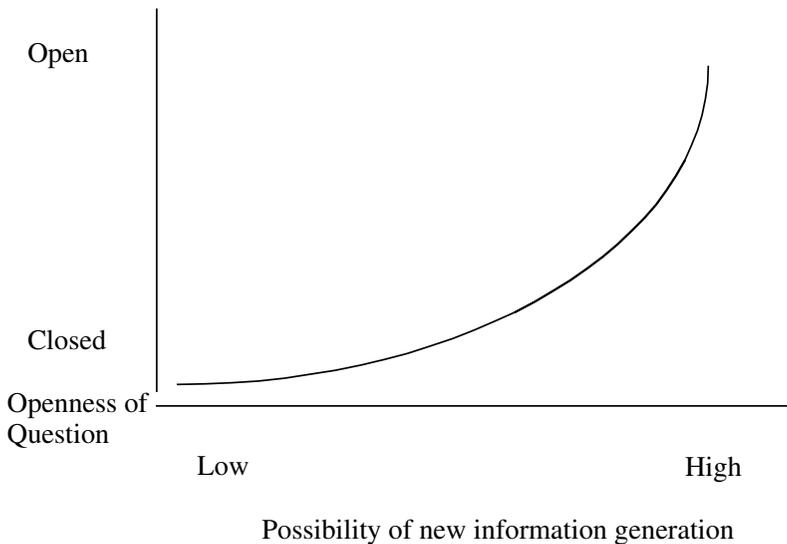


Figure 5.1 Effect of question shape on information generation

Sometimes, after a basic introduction to the property of openness and closedness in questions, people are left with the idea that open equals good and closed equals bad. This dualistic classification discounts the idea that the usefulness of your question shape depends upon your purpose. Closed questions that carry a lot of information can be crucial to developing shared understanding, developing relationships and assisting us in going on meaningfully together. The ability to achieve moments of shared accounting is as important as the ability to create different accounts, and the usefulness of closed questions in doing this should not be overlooked.

2. Beginning the question

Questions have other shape properties, for instance how they start. Apocryphally, all journalists are taught as part of basic training that there are six fundamental questions in any situation they are investigating to which they must seek an answer; these are how, what, who, when, where and why. Obtaining answers to these questions, it is asserted, will allow them to create a full and compelling news story. This is interesting to us as we are also interested in being able to create full and compelling stories. Being able to call forth accounts or stories of organizational life is a skill central to all the practices and methodologies presented in this book. We examine the whole idea of stories in organizational life in more depth in Chapter 7. Within Appreciative Inquiry specifically, the process acts to produce rich descriptions of past events (the discovery stage), future possibilities (the dreaming stage), transition (the design stage) and intent (the destiny stage). These accounts can be characterized as stories of organizational life.

When asking questions we need to be constantly mindful that the way we shape the question affects the probability of different types of response, and so directly affects the development of the relationship and the potential for future communication. It is within these factors that the potential for organizational change lies. As skilled practitioners we need to move from asking questions 'instinctively', that is, just as they occur to us in the form they occur, to asking questions thoughtfully. To apply thought is to be mindful of the possible impact of question shape and content on what happens next. We move now to considering different forms of 'thoughtful' questions.

3. *Appreciative questions*

A major category of thoughtful questions we are likely to use within Appreciative Inquiry is going to be appreciative questions. Of course we can also use them in other conversational processes. Appreciative questions are those that seek to elicit answers about what gives life to the system – about the good, the real and the beautiful in organizational life. They also ask about the aesthetics and wisdom of the organization. The basic premise underpinning the living-human-system approach is that if a system exists, then something is working, something is giving, preserving, nurturing and encouraging the life of the system. So the potential exists for evolving into other states and forms. By focusing on what is giving life, we can create greater potential for healthy and adaptive growth and for the evolution of the system.

To be able to inquire appreciatively into an aspect of organizational life we have first to generate our appreciative inquiry topic, as discussed in Chapter 4. Once that has been agreed, we then move to the discovery stage of the process. Here we want to elicit accounts of positive experiences. Paradoxically our ‘inquiry’ may at this stage have the form of an instruction. This directive mode encourages people to engage with the task. This distinction is important at this stage. To ask directly ‘Can you think of a time when...?’ is inadvertently to suggest an evaluative process ‘Can I?’, to which the answer might be ‘No’. Whereas the direct instruction ‘Think of...’ contains in it the assumption that such a time, state or event exists and so encourages search activity instead, and invariably such an account can be generated. Here, then, are some examples of what an opening to a discovery appreciative interview might look like, with the particular Appreciative Inquiry topic in italics:

Think of a time when you really felt part of a team working here, a particular episode or incident. (*team-working*)

Think a time you’ve worked with someone from another discipline and it worked really well, when you knew that your working together really made a difference to the quality of care and service a client received. (*multidisciplinary working*)

However, appreciative interviews can be formed to suit a variety of situations with almost no content focus:

Describe an episode when you felt absolutely at your best working here.

Think of a time when you were using all your resources, were fully engaged, were at your best in this organization.

Appreciative questions can be used in any conversational processes. The common theme is that they focus attention on what is working, or what is positive in a particular experience or possible future. They make reference to positive emotional states or positive anticipations of future states. Typically, appreciative questions incorporate pinnacle adjectives, 'the most' or 'the best' for instance, and include life-giving words. Life-giving words are those that describe strong positive emotions, such as 'passionate', 'excited', 'joyful', 'courageous' and so on. People are sometimes nervous of using such language in organizations because it is outside the normal restrained organizational lexicon. Be bold, everyone has emotions, everyone is alive, everyone can respond to these words.

What is most attractive to you about the dream you have created?
 What are you most looking forward to about starting to move towards the future?
 At this point, what do you feel most passionately about, have the most energy to do something about?
 Out of all the things we've identified that we could do that would move us towards a better future, which is the one you are most excited about?

4. Questions to elicit rich descriptions

Rich descriptions work best when the person telling the story gets to tell it from inside the experience, rather than as an outside observer. This is a very important distinction as the body reacts differently to the two relating perspectives. When someone is telling the experience from inside, parts of the brain are activated which set off a neuronal pattern of firing that is similar to the original experience and so the original emotions, state of arousal, and muscle tone are re-created and re-experienced in the body: the telling is an 'embodied' experience. When we tell the same story but from the outside of the experience, as an observer watching the episode on a screen, we are much less likely to experience that embodiment and re-creation of the emotions of the original experience.

Some people are more easily able to relive past experiences than others. One very effective way to assist people in this is to get them to describe what was happening at the time, and how they felt, in as

much detail as possible, drawing on all five senses. Example descriptor questions might be:

Who else was present?

Who else was aware something extraordinary was happening?

How did you know they knew?

Then what happened?

Where did this take place, describe the room to me?

What sticks most vividly in your mind about that episode?

Which feelings were you most aware of at that point?

When did you first become aware that something special was happening?

All of these questions ask the respondent to attend to their memory of that episode and to expand their recall of it. You'll notice that all of these questions have an appreciative focus on the good and positive in the situation.

5. Oracle questions

Some people are more able to tell a good story, in rich detail, than others. The experience of interviewers frequently is that once they have asked for the story to be articulated, they never have to ask another question as it all comes flooding out. However, some people are less able to tell their story with fluency and may speak with brevity or dry up, and then the interviewer needs to work harder to get a story told. One way you can encourage the development and extension of the story is to use oracle questioning. To act as an oracle means to find your next question by picking up a phrase mentioned by the storyteller, echoing it, and inquiring further into it. As a technique it allows them to go further into their story while reducing the risk of you introducing your content. They might say '... and I realized everyone was listening then...' You might then say 'Tell me more about what it was like when everyone was listening' or 'What was the feeling like in the room when everyone was listening?' To do this effectively you need to use their exact phraseology and not be tempted to paraphrase or 'improve' their articulation. In an appreciative context you are listening particularly for words and phrases that sound as if they express or describe an aspect of the experience that can be affirmed and appreciated. In another situation you might be particularly listening for aspects of this story that you haven't previously heard in other accounts of this episode.

Oracle questioning is a useful technique in many interviewing or conversational situations. By shifting the focus from the central narrative to parts of the experience at the margin of recall and awareness, and bringing them to centre stage, it works to increase the richness of the story or to create different variations of the story. It can be particularly useful if you feel you are getting a 'rehearsed' story where nothing new is actually being said. By redirecting attention to a minor detail of the recital, you stand a chance of getting the person to articulate something they hadn't before, and so to move from a rehearsed to a generative account.

6. Circular and linear questioning

Linear questions focus on establishing simple cause and effect relationships. We are more likely to be familiar with this form of questioning than with circular questioning. Circular questions are focused on revealing recursive patterns of behaviour and interaction. Both have their place in our conversational process. Let's examine the difference in more detail. In 1987 Tomm, a systemic family therapist, put forward a model to help us understand the relationship between question form (circular or linear) and question intent (orientation or influence). He then documented the likely effects, for both the interviewer and the family (or organization), of questions asked from the four 'questioning spaces' his model created.

As you can see in the model in Figure 5.2, the questioning space is located across two axes: linear–circular, orienting–influencing. The linear–circular axis reflects the questioner's perspective on change and the achievement of change. So some questioners might assume a straightforward linear pattern of cause and effect, while others might assume a more circular, systemic pattern of cause and effect. The conversational process approach generally assumes a more systemic pattern of cause and effect. The orienting–influencing axis reflects the questioner's intent, either to orient themselves to the system or to have an influence on the system. Again the conversational approach recognizes these as two concurrent aspects of engagement, being aware that are both happening at the same time. However, at any particular point our intention can be more towards one than the other. Let's first consider the difference in a linear or circular question approach when initially orienting ourselves towards the organization.

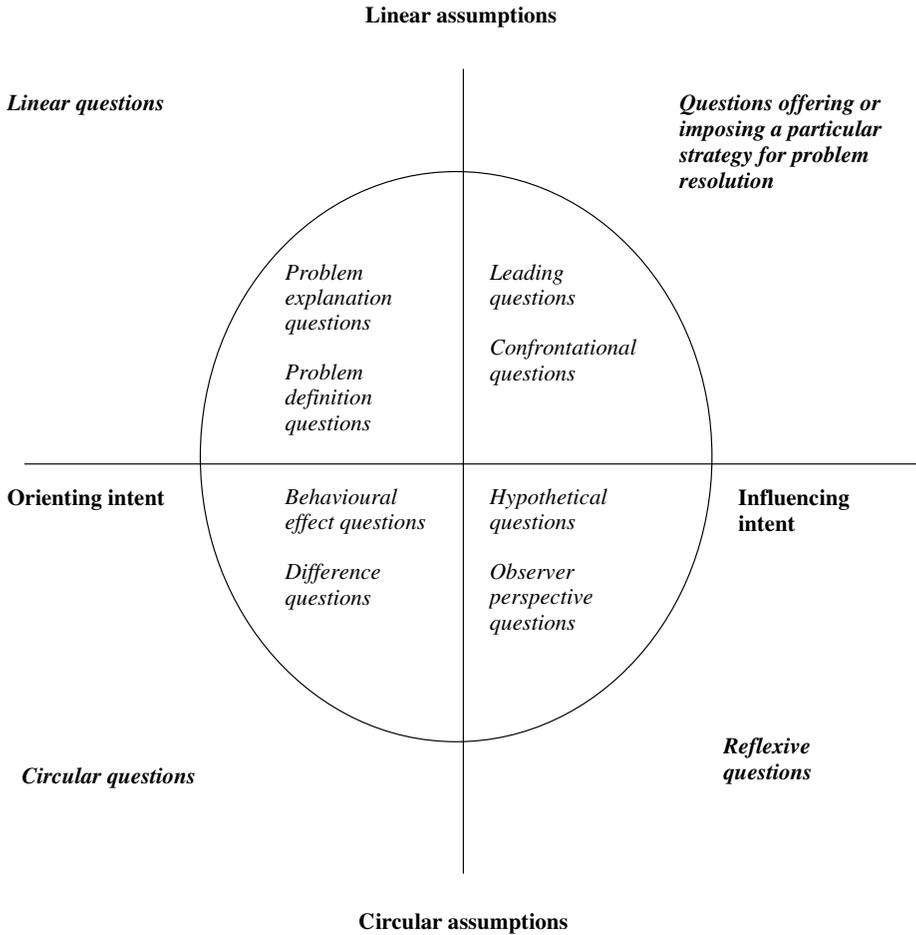


Figure 5.2 Linear and circular questions

Source: from Tomm (1987)

Orienting towards the organization

Tomm suggests that in the early stages of our intervention with an organization we may be more concerned to orient ourselves towards the organization. This means we are interested in asking questions the answers to which we hope will allow us to gain an understanding of the organization. These orienting questions can be of a linear or circular nature, and the asking of each is likely (but by no means guaranteed) to have particular and different effects. These effects have important implications for the possibility of achieving organizational change.

7. *Linear questions*

Linear questions are based on a simple cause and effect model of organizational actions. In trying to establish the linear sequence of events that led to the current situation, they might ask such questions as, 'What is the problem? Who caused it? Why did they do that?' or they might focus on defining the problem, 'What exactly is the issue here?' Many people habitually think in terms of simple cause and effect and so have often already considered these questions. When asked these types of questions they readily give their, possibly much repeated, answer. In this way these forms of question have a tendency to call forth existing stories about the issue.

People tell their stories about the world in the hope that doing so will change something. In other words, we create and give accounts of life for a purpose, usually to make sense of what is happening and/or to change what is happening. In difficult or stuck situations this account may well include stories of fault and blame. In an organizational context, encouraging people to articulate and repeat these accounts or explanations contains two possible dangers. The first is that, purely by the act of being heard, they experience their account as being endorsed or validated and so it becomes even more entrenched in their mind as 'the truth'. The second is that it is the nature of such explanatory stories of what went wrong or who is to blame, to invite judgement. The innocent inquirer may inadvertently find themselves being strongly invited to form a judgement as to the rights and wrongs of individual people's behaviour. Such an invitation can be hard to resist, especially in the face of powerful and persuasive stories of accountability, blame and exoneration.

8. *Circular questions*

However, it is possible to use circular questions at this orienting stage. Circular questions are focused on revealing the patterns of behaviour in the organization; they are used to call forth the patterns of connection within the system. There are many forms of circular question, some of which we will look at in a moment. The main point is that with effective circular questioning the system isn't directly confronted and so doesn't feel the need to defend individual actions and beliefs against our judgement; rather, as we gently inquire into the system using effective circular questions, 'the warp will pass through the weft, until the design will be clearly seen in the fabric, without the necessity of posing the most feared and defended against question' (Cecchin, 1987). For us,

this analogy brilliantly illuminates how the hidden stories and beliefs that underpin the patterns of behaviour slowly come to everyone's awareness, and are changed in the telling.

Circular questions about relationship

Circular questions explore relationship. For example, a question might ask one person to comment on another person, in their presence, as in 'What do you think Mike believes to be the most valuable asset you bring to the organization?' A number of things happen here. First, Mike is likely to be interested in this interaction, even though he is not taking part; secondly, he might learn something about how someone else understands him; and thirdly, the person to whom the question is addressed may be articulating a story that she hasn't considered, let alone told before. This is likely to shift their relationship in some slight or profound way; that is, something will change.

Circular questions across time

Circular questions also explore relationships across time, so you might ask something like 'When was the last time this problem didn't exist? What was different then to now?' and of course questions about the future. These are particularly relevant to Appreciative Inquiry with its emphasis on dreaming and the future. Penn (1985) notes that future questions 'rehearse change'. By focusing on possible futures, the system increases its view of its own evolving potential. Exploring possibilities for the future leads to the creation of new maps of how the system can be, of possible relationships within the system. Dreams about the future offer a source of learning to the system. Future questions, she suggests, illuminate the present conditions of the organization as, not immutable, but as context bound; and that since concepts of the future and change are married, all future questions suggest that change is possible. Future questions cut into ideas of pre-determination; they address questions of how you would like to be, as opposed to how you are because of the past.

Future questions

The basic Appreciative Inquiry future question is 'How would life be if more of these good things were happening more of the time?' However, future questions can be used in a more focused way, often by using 'if', as in 'If in two years' time your team was working brilliantly together, what stories do you think you would be telling about the difficulties

you are experiencing now?’ You can also use ‘just imagine’, as in ‘Just imagine that this project is a fantastic success. What will people be saying about this team?’ You can also ask the miracle question, ‘Suppose a miracle were to happen overnight and things became much improved. What would be the first little thing that you would notice was different?’, and pursuing the circular vein you might ask ‘Who else would notice? And how would you know they had noticed?’ These questions imply patterns not facts and ask how if the pattern were different, things would be different. In this way they are based on a living-human-system understanding of the organization rather than the more traditional organization-as-machine. The moment a question offers alternatives to the current belief system, it creates opportunities for new stories and so the potential for change.

Circular orienting questions are more likely to have a liberating effect upon the organization than linear questions. With linear orienting questioning, existing accounts are reinforced, it is unlikely anyone’s beliefs will change and the sense of being trapped in an impenetrable mess continues. With circular orienting questioning, as the patterns of interaction and relationship are brought into the light and into awareness, different meanings of being together are created. And the interviewer, no longer required to take sides or make judgement, can instead focus on being curious, listening, forging connections around, across and through the system, exploring gently the weft and the warp and accepting the unfolding story.

9. Influencing questions – linear

As the change process proceeds, the interviewer is likely to be concerned to move to a more influencing orientation; he or she wants to influence the system to change. When this intent is expressed from a linear perspective it tends to express itself as a desire to impose particular strategies or solutions upon the organization, usually by asking leading, loaded or confrontational questions, eg ‘Why don’t you...?’ or ‘What would happen if you were to...?’, as the consultant attempts to get their own sense-making and so their own solutions adopted by the organization. This has a constraining effect on the system; its inventiveness is constrained to considering the options inherent in the question. At the same time this mode of intervention has an oppositional effect on the consultant as they try to oppose the logic of the organization and impose an alternative. Frequently these attempts at influencing a system don’t work, and sadly it is not uncommon to

then hear the consultants, in their frustration, blaming their stubborn clients, who either reject outright, or more often politely accept and then ignore, their considered advice. It doesn't necessarily leave clients speaking well of consultants either.

10. Influencing questions – circular

By attempting to have influence through asking circular questions the interviewer is more likely to have a generative effect upon the organization. The questions are reflexive, they encourage the organizational members to articulate the patterns of interaction in which they are bound up and by so doing to extend their understanding of cause and effect from a predominantly linear perspective (He makes me...) to a more interactive, circular or systemic understanding (When I..., then he..., then I). Reflexive questions explore the connections in the system and people's understanding of them. So you might ask 'What do think Mike might need to hear to be able to believe that you welcome feedback?' Or 'If you were to tell Beth how excited you are about the future, what might she feel able to do?' or 'If you could offer one piece of advice to Mike about how to make it more likely that these good futures will happen, what might it be?' Reflexive questions allow the system to talk to itself about itself in new ways and so become more aware of its capacity to behave differently and to be different, to co-evolve to new forms of organizing. Such questions, and the responses and sense making they provoke, serve to open space for the system to see new possibilities and to evolve more freely of its own accord. In this way change is evolutionary, growing from inside the system, rather than imposed from outside the system.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we have considered the power of the question to shape what happens during organizational conversation. Tomm offers a useful reminder that question and answer, as we suggested earlier, is not a linear case of cause and effect: 'Differentiation of questions does not depend on their syntactic structure or their semantic content. It depends on the (consultant's) intentions and assumptions and the ongoing context and sequence of interventions.' In other words, there are no guarantees. He also notes that 'What actually happens when we ask a particular question depends on the uniqueness of the

organization and structure at each moment. The actual effects of a question are always unpredictable' (Tomm, 1987). Awareness of the essential unpredictability of the effect of any particular question on the ongoing systemic interaction has a strangely liberating effect upon the inquirer, leading them to become more creative. If one question 'doesn't work' in terms of eliciting a positive story, or opening space for the system to evolve into, the interviewer searches for a better one, a more effective one, a more useful one to try to open other spaces to release the natural healing capacity of the client system. This stands in contrast to the search for the 'right question' that will unlock the truth. Instead, awareness grows that questions asked aren't right or wrong; they are more or less useful when measured against our intent of enhancing the system's capacity for positive change.