

Curious and Creative: Asking Great Questions



USING GREAT QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE AND DEVELOP CREATIVE IDEAS AND SOLUTIONS

We think of curiosity and questions in combination - the curiosity that drives us to ask "Why?" and "How?"

Formulating and choosing fantastic questions gives us a means of understanding more about the world we are living in, the issues we face, the possibilities that lie ahead of us and the innovations we can bring about. So here are some thoughts about questions and some examples you can test out!

Why emphasise questions?

Young children are walking question marks. They intuitively understand (and may drive adults to distraction) with the question "Why...yes... but why?" By the time they move into formal education and particularly adolescence, many young people lose the willingness to ask, perhaps because they want to avoid the perception they have asked a stupid question. Yet questions drive learning. They are a key tool in developing the thinking skills that support lifelong learning and employment success. Without the skill of asking questions we would be less likely to challenge assumptions, solve complex problems, innovate, empathise and achieve the satisfaction of finding out for ourselves.

Asking important questions is a skill that can be practiced and developed.

THE FIVE "WHYS"

Drill down to achieve a deeper level of understanding about an issue or problem by asking "Why?" five times in sequence. For example:

"This machine isn't working properly."

"Why isn't it working properly?"

"There's a broken part that hasn't been replaced"

"Why hasn't the part been replaced?"

"Because no-one knows how to do it properly"

"Why does no-one know how to do it?"

"Because we haven't had training from the manufacturer or an engineer"

"Why haven't you had training?"

" I don't know. Maybe because there hasn't been time since they put the machines in. Or maybe because the boss thinks we know what we are doing."

Why would the boss think that?"

"Because we haven't told him we need training. I'll go and do that now".

QUESTIONS TO PROVOKE NEW THINKING

Open, challenging questions can be the start point for sparking creative insights. Rather than asking the 'Why?' questions that seek to establish a deeper level of understanding as part of a process of analysis and evaluation, creative thinking can be encouraged by a different type of questioning.

Here are some examples of questions that promote creative responses.

"What would happen if we did?" and "What would happen if we didn't?"

"If you had no resource limitations or constraints, what would you do?"

(For youngsters.... "What would Superman do?")

"How would a three-year old go about solving this?"

"Where else in the world has a problem similar to this been solved? What could we learn from that?"

"What would a successful outcome look like?"

"How could we do this in a way we've never even considered before?"

"What's the worst thing that could happen?"

"How could we change, adapt, re-organise or combine things we already do?"

"Are there any parallels in the natural world? What could we learn from these?"

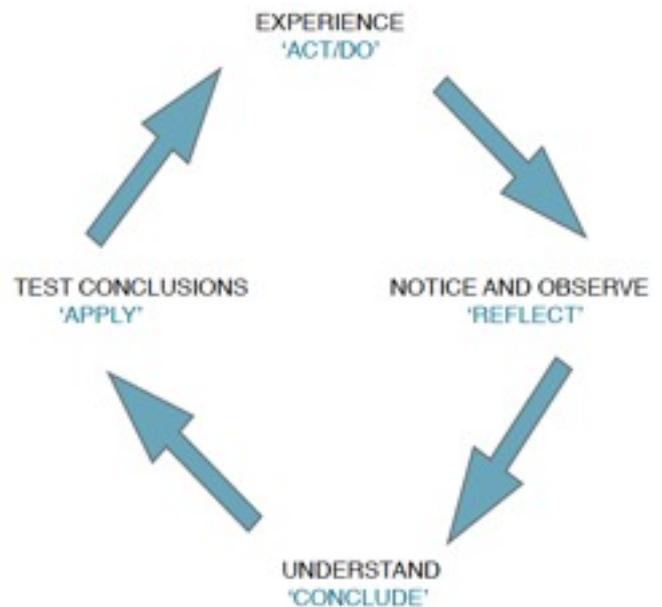


QUESTIONS TO SUPPORT EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The experiential learning cycle involves four stages: experience, reflection, conceptualisation and application. The words may differ but the learning process remains the same. In practical terms, this means having an experience, noticing what happens and thinking about it, making some personal sense and meaning from it and then using that new understanding to try out or test the learning in a new context. The cycle then repeats!

It is easy focus too much on the provision of the experience and not enough on the next three steps. The process of de-briefing is vital in ensuring that the cycle is completed and the learning is translated into practical actions or behavioural changes that can be integrated into future experience.

The questions that follow are all designed to raise the quality of the de-brief or review.



The Reflection Stage of the review

All of these questions are designed to focus on pure observation and recall. They ask for neutral, evidence based description of things that may be significant at a later stage.

- *What happened?*
- *What did you observe during the activity?*
- *What did you notice about what you did?*
- *What did you notice other people doing?*
- *Did you notice anything that changed during the activity?*
- *How did the decision get made to?*
- *What, exactly, did you (or someone else) say or do at that point?*
- *What was the effect of that behaviour?*
- *When X happened did you notice anything else that also happened at the same time?*
- *Were you aware of any pattern in the behaviours demonstrated eg. "Anna asked a lot of questions?" If not, can you think of any patterns now as you reflect?*

The Conceptualisation Stage of the review

Questions at this stage of the cycle are designed to focus on interpretation, understanding and the creation of personal meaning. Whilst they should be context specific, here are examples of the type of probing questions that can be used.

- *What do you think the intention behind that behaviour was? What were you (or someone else) trying to achieve?*
- *Why do you think the effect was, or was not, what the person intended?*
- *Why do you think Person A was able to influence the group so well?*
- *How successfully do you think the group worked together to achieve X?*
- *What might you do differently if you were to do this activity again?*
- *What is important to you about the experience you've just had?*
- *Is there anything that we've talked about that is particularly relevant or useful to you? What is that and how might you start to use that new insight?*

The Application stage of the review

Questions here are intended to help the learner to make the transition back into their own working or community environments and to think about how they can use their learning to improve performance or personal effectiveness and satisfaction. Examples are:

- *What will you stop, start or continue as a result of this experience?*
- *Is there anything you will try that will be a big change for you? How do you feel about that?*
- *What support might you need from others?*
- *In what situations would it be useful to apply this new learning? Where, when, with whom?*
- *How will you know if you are being successful – what measures can you use to check?*
- *What do you see as the benefits of applying this learning? What is "in it for you"?*
- *How will you continue to learn from the new experiences you will undoubtedly have as you implement these changes?*

QUESTIONS TO SUPPORT COACHING CONVERSATIONS

Many trainers are familiar with a simple coaching model such as the GROW model. This is a series of steps that help an individual to identify a goal and then work towards achieving it. The GROW acronym stands for Goal, Reality, Options and Will (or, in some versions, Wrap-up) and the coach works through these in sequence, using questions to stimulate thinking and choice. There are a wide range of different coaching models but most will have within them these four elements:

- An identification of what the learner wants to achieve, crafted into a specific goal or set of goals
- An understanding of what the current situation is, what has gone on in the past and how the learner is feeling at this point in time
- An exploration of a range of possible ways forward: ideas, options and choices to broaden the learner's perspective and encourage movement from the current reality
- An evaluation of the available options and the first steps in a development plan based upon the learner's own preferences and choices about how to progress

A good coach uses a variety of questions to focus on different aspects of the learner's experience. However, very often the questions are framed according to the coach's own preferences and thinking patterns. For example, a coach who has very well developed, logical, analytical thinking and who tends to develop ideas in a structured, sequential way, is likely to frame questions that reflect this. If the person being coached thinks in the same way this can a) be very helpful and build trust and easy dialogue or b) reinforce existing patterns of thinking, maintain the mindset of the learner and make it harder to break open new ideas and possibilities. If the person being coached thinks in a very different way, the questions may prove too challenging at first, making it harder to exploit the benefits of the diversity of thinking that will accrue later.



QUESTIONS TO SUPPORT COACHING CONVERSATIONS

Ned Herrmann's work on 'Whole Brain Thinking' (see <http://hbdi.com>) offers some insights into the different aspects of thinking that we all use, every day of our lives. These can be summarized as:

1. Logical, analytical, critical and evaluative thinking that we use when making rational decisions and solving technical problems
2. Creative, big picture, holistic, imaginative thinking we use when exploring new ideas and future possibilities
3. Emotional, values-based, empathetic thinking that we use when building and exploring relationships, beliefs and the more spiritual and ethical aspects of our lives
4. Practical, pragmatic, operational and administrative thinking that we use to keep control of our lives, manage time and resources and create rules and structures.

In the question set below, there is one example question from each of these 'types of thinking' to illustrate how a coach may use different language and a different question type at each stage in the coaching process. By offering the same basic question, framed in different ways, the coach can improve the chances of the question resonating with the learner and eliciting a better understood response. The questions are listed in the same order (1-4) as the thinking type descriptions above.

Step 1: Establishing a goal

1. *Why do you want to work on this goal right now and what are the benefits of doing so?*
2. *What do you want to achieve in the future and how is this goal connected to other things that are also important to you? What would success look like?*
3. *How do you want to feel and what do you want to be saying at the end of this process?*
4. *Can you describe, specifically, what it is that you want to achieve and by when and at what cost?*

Step 2: Exploring current reality

1. *What is your understanding of the problem, issue or opportunity that you are currently facing?*
2. *What range of options have you already thought about, or experimented with, in trying to solve this problem for yourself?*
3. *How are you feeling about this situation now, as we talk about it? What do you feel most strongly about?*
4. *What are the genuine barriers or constraints to making progress? What boundaries must you work within?*

Step 3: Creating options and generating ideas

1. *What criteria will you use to choose the solution that you will implement?*
2. *If you had absolutely free choice in this, and no limitations, what would you do?*
3. *Is there anyone else who could be involved with you or whose opinion you would value? What would they ask you to think about if they were here right now?*
4. *Can you write down 3 different ideas about how this might be solved, to ensure you don't forget them?*

Step 4: Deciding what to do and planning the first steps

1. *Do you really understand the rationale for choosing this particular course of action? Does it make sense to you?*
2. *What will you do to celebrate when you reach this milestone? How you will reward yourself?*
3. *Are you comfortable with the choice you have made? Does it feel right and does it 'feel like you'?*
4. *What, exactly, are you going to do first? Where and when are you going to do it?*

These are only suggested questions. Study the type of thinking they represent and have fun adding your own ideas to the list! Best wishes, RSVP Design Ltd.