

The Power of a Good Question: Organizations are Shaped By the Questions They Ask

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It is often said, "There is nothing so powerful as a good question." A question is to participative leadership what a match is to fire. It is the start. The spark. The thing that gets it all going.

In participative and conversational leadership, your question can have significant impact on whether a conversation takes off or not. Whether it ignites a group into energetic sharing or just smolders and dampens the group's learning.

There are really dozens of ways to improve questions. A few of those are below to stir your thinking.

Is the question meaningful?

Of course, right. Meaningful to the particular people that are participating. Meaningful to the project that you are supporting. Does it help feed energy into the primary purpose of your work? Does it help invoke additional needed clarity? Notice that you do not need to provide the meaning. It is more about asking a question that helps people discover what is meaningful. For example, "Why is this project important to you?" "Why does it matter?" "What difference do you think it will make?"



Does the question invite curiosity and reflective thinking?

To be curious with one another is to contribute to an overall commitment to learning together. Sometimes we need to engage one another with the simplicity of yes or no answers. But not all the time. Maybe even, infrequently. More likely, we need nuance. We need to see through the kaleidoscope that is multiple perspectives from multiple people. For example, "What is really going on here?" "What are the most fruitful ways that we could think about this issue?" and "If we were to suspend certainty for a moment, what else would we see here?"

Does the question challenge assumptions?

Have you ever been in one of those conversations where one assumption seems to block everything? For example, "We don't have budget so there is nothing that we can do." Sometimes the best questions we can ask of each other are ones that cut through an assumption, even temporarily. "What if budget were not the issue?" "If resourceful creativity is what we need, even without budget, what other resources can we utilize?" Questions that challenge assumptions invite us to nibble, or even feast, on the very roots of our thinking.

Does the question lead to other questions?

This can be frustrating for some. After all, what is the good of creating a messy pile of questions that paralyze action? It is important, of course, to move to action. Yet, many of us live in an “answer culture.” We are taught to be certain (or fake it) because good leaders are certain, right.

Part of the broader shift that we can create in participative leadership is for communities to practice inquiry together. To become defined by the questions we are asking each other, and by the very fact that we are able to ask questions with each other. For most of us, questions enliven. They invite people to think out loud about the truths that they are exploring. For example, “What is different about the opportunities and challenges we face now?” “What is the same?” “What does this have to do with our larger mission?”



Is the question simple?

The best questions, the ones that people really jump into, are often the most simple questions. These questions are short and get to the heart of it. “Why does this matter to you?” tends to be a better question than a longer run-on question that has the same essence. “In the broader context of a church that is reinventing itself, with a desire for increased participation, as a commitment to God and community that is underserved, what matters most to us now?” The former is a question that people can hold. It is one that can anchor many thoughts and many other questions. The latter is a good question with good context. Yet that question is just more difficult for people to get their brains around.

It is fine to nuance your questions. All of the context that goes into a good simple question matters. You can say these things out loud to your group. But the one that you write on the flip chart paper or on the white board ought to be the simple version.

Does the question lead to possibility?

Amidst all of the attention that we give to problems, it is a needed skill and discipline to shift attention to what is possible. Questions that point to possibility are questions that tend to invoke creativity and imagination. They help all of us wake up to what has energy.

For example, “What could this also be?” The “also be” part of this is important. It doesn’t deny that there already is effort and attention. Yet, the question challenges most of us into thinking at a next level of relevance, a next layer in the evolution of our work and projects.

Does the question welcome a quality of caring together?

As corollary to the opening statement of this article, that “There is nothing as useful as a good question.” there are several questions that point to the kind of caring that most of us want with and from one another. For example, “Who is this for, really?” Or, “If we were to act from compassion, what would we now feel was essential?” There are ways to focus on love. “What is it that you love about this congregation?” Or, “What do you love about what you are learning now?” If the need is for participants’ contribution, ask, “What are the next levels of possibility here for you to contribute to?” Or, “What contribution would satisfy your deep longings of the heart?”

Does the question look for more than yes or no as a response?

Yes or no questions can be fun as games, but if your point is to create a deeper kind of interaction, ask for more than one word responses. For example, instead of, “Do you like the way things are going?” ask, “What is important to you in how things are going?” Or, stepping back even further, “What do you see happening here?” There are times when data and knowledge are needed. These times tend to point more to questions that ask for responses of “right” or “wrong.” More often, you can serve the group better by using questions that invite experience. For example, “When have you experienced good listening?”

Is the question appropriately sequenced?

If you are in a situation when you will ask several questions in different parts, sequence them thoughtfully. Don't start with a question that asks for conclusions. Save that for the end. Begin with something that brings people into a shared response together. If the quality that you want more of is, for example, hospitality, a great first round question is, “When have you experienced hospitality?” It doesn't matter if the people respond with church stories or not.

A second round of questions can link the conversation back to your specific circumstances. For example, “What hospitality do you hope for here?” This brings people's attention back to working on their particular needs. A third question invites application. “What hospitality are you inspired to experiment with here?” The question is an invitation.

Tips

** Remember that asking questions is not only the ability to put words into meaningful syntax. Asking good questions is a disposition and attitude. It is about living a life defined by genuine curiosity and the possibility that the group can help surface together what can't be surfaced alone.*

** Resist the need to neatly tuck everything in too quickly. Some questions are not meant to be answered in twenty minutes or in an hour. Some are meant to last longer. It's okay to take on a question for a limited period of time, but be transparent with how you are doing that. It's far better than having people feel that you've collectively pretended to solve something in a ridiculously short time.*

** Notice that there is an important choice of wording in questions -- whether asked as “we” or as “you” questions. Often, at the start, asking for the group “we” can be paralyzing. Start by asking “you” questions to first draw out personal experience. For example, “What is it that you see is possible here?” This is different than asking people what “we” see is possible. By having all people speak personally, a sense of the whole emerges and becomes discernible, and then ripe for “we” questions.*

** On the one hand, the question that you ask is of great importance. Prepare your questions with full attention. On the other hand, know that most important questions are interrelated. Even if you don't ask the perfect question, know that the question will likely create an entry point into other important questions.*