



Asking Powerful Questions

Participant Guide

What's the purpose of this exercise?

The purpose of this exercise is to build 1) your questioning skills and 2) your skills in seeking answers to questions about complex problems.

Specifically, you will practice:

- Recognizing characteristics of different types of questions
- Generating questions that can lead to deeper levels of learning
- Developing ideas for how to answer questions you generate

Questioning is an active-learning strategy that promotes comprehensive information gathering and developing a fuller understanding of a situation or problem set. Asking thought-provoking questions – and seeking information from disparate sources in response to those questions – allows us to deepen our understanding of a current situation, consider alternative perspectives, identify trends that may have an impact on how the situation evolves, and make informed decisions about how to shape the future.

Why is this skillset important?

Effective strategic thinking requires digging into the nature of a problem or situation, and developing a thorough, inclusive understanding of it. It is important to ask questions about the information we need; but it is equally important to recognize that deeper understanding is not just about “the facts.” It means asking questions about perspectives (our own and others’), about goals, and about assumptions. It also means asking about what we might be missing and where our blind spots might be.

Tips

You can gain useful information from your questions by:

- ✓ Using open-ended rather than closed-ended questions that ask for more than a simple “yes” or “no” response.
- ✓ Asking a variety of types of questions – not just “what happened” or “what is going on,” but “how,” “why,” “what if,” and “what does this mean for x?”
- ✓ Seeking information that reflects contradictory, unfamiliar, or unpopular points of view.

Each of these strategies can promote learning that allows you to have a fuller understanding of a situation or problem.

As with any skill, practice and reflection will enhance your ability to recognize connections and bring them together into a coherent whole.



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Qualities of insightful questioning

Skilled questioning starts with the ability to ask a variety of types of questions. A basic distinction is between open-ended and closed-ended questions. Closed-ended questions ask for a simple “yes” or “no” response – for example, “Are you busy Tuesday?” Open-ended questions elicit more varied information and typically start with “Who,” “What,” “Where,” “When,” “Why” or “How.” Open-ended questions ask for something beyond a yes or no answer, for example, “What are you doing on Tuesday?”

In addition, insightful questions:

- Inform rather than seek agreement with a particular point of view
- Open the space of inquiry, invite more ideas
- Encourage people to think more broadly and deeply
- Enable people to understand the situation in a holistic way
- Invite deep reflection
- Reveal ambiguity and paradox
- Allow people to understand the assumptions they (and others) hold
- Encourage more questions

Generating and seeking answers to insightful questions can help unveil the real problem, which often turns out to be something bigger, more complicated, or entirely different than what we first thought. One advantage of questioning is that it can take place any time and in any situation, and can be used to understand data, events, attitudes, emotions, assumptions, and behaviors.



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Why is questioning challenging?

It can be challenging to generate insightful questions. For example:

- We often want to identify solutions quickly in order to move to action. Rather than slowing down to think and figure out what we really need to know, we often push to solve the immediate problem, leading to future situations that are suboptimal.
- Another challenge is that we often start with a pre-determined view of the problem, which leads us to look for specific kinds of information. Instead, we should challenge ourselves to open up the space of inquiry and expand how we think about the problem.
- A third challenge is that the questions we pose may be too narrow. Narrow questions may yield answers to only a small portion of the problem. Or they may yield descriptive information but little explanatory information or implication-related information.

A fuller understanding of a situation or problem generated through asking and seeking answers to thought-provoking questions, provides a stronger foundation for considering and shaping potential futures.

Consider the tips embedded in this document to help you overcome these challenges and improve your ability to ask insightful questions and seek information to answer them.

Contents of Participant Guide

This Participant Guide contains a set of questions and prompts for your reference during the skill-building exercise. Your instructor will direct you to the relevant sections during specific points in the exercise.

As you work through the exercise, keep in mind that the questions in this exercise are not intended to be completed like a worksheet where you read a question, write your answer, and go on to the next question. Instead, they are here to prompt your thinking as you work through the exercise activities. Feel free to use the white space to jot notes and ideas as you progress through the exercise.



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Pre-Exercise Reflection

Instructions: Today we are going to work on questioning skills. Before we get to the exercise, take a few minutes to think and reflect on the following questions. After we think about them individually, we will discuss them as a group.

1. In your experience, what makes a useful question?
2. Why is it important to ask questions?
3. Are certain questions better than others? In what ways?
4. Take a moment and think about questions you might ask that are about tactical or operational issues (e.g., “what” or “how” questions). Now think about questions you might ask at a strategic level (e.g., “why,” “what if,” “how might” questions). Write down a few examples of each.
 - How would you describe the differences in the types of questions?
 - What sort of information are they likely to elicit?
 - How are the tactical- and operational-level questions-different from the strategic-level?



USE THE SPACE BELOW TO JOT DOWN YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEAS.



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Question Generation

Instructions: Examine the image you have, and spend 10-15 minutes generating questions about the situation or event represented by the image. Think about:

1. What do you want to know about the image that will help you understand the situation/event that it represents?
2. What questions do we need to ask and answer in order to get the knowledge we need?

The questions you develop should be ones that, when answered, will help you understand the situation presented in the image more fully.

As you develop questions, remember that it is important to develop a variety of types of questions, and questions about a range of topics. Refer to the “Question Type” information below to help you develop a variety of types of questions.

Use the post-it notes to record your questions. Use a separate post-it note for each question.



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Question Generation (cont'd)

Question Types

Questions can yield the following:

1. Description

- Descriptive questions ask for **information** and often begin with “What,” “When,” “Where,” and “Who.”
- Examples: “Where is this scene located?”, “Who are the people in the picture?”, “What are they doing?”

2. Explanation

- Explanatory questions ask for **reasoning** or **interpretation** and often begin with “Why” and “How.”
- Examples: “Why are the people running?”, “Why are there no women in the scene?”, “How are they going to get off the bridge?”

3. Exploration

- Exploratory questions ask for **inference** and **considering implications** and often begin with “What if?”, “What might?”, and “How could?”
- Examples: “What might this scene look like at night?”, “What might people be yelling about?”, “What might these actions lead to?”, “How might this activity affect relationships between those two tribes?”

4. Test/Challenge

- Testing or challenging questions ask **justification of assumptions** and often begin with “Why would?”, “Why couldn’t?”
- Examples: “Why would we think the people in the image are X?”, “Why couldn't this event be located somewhere other than Y?”

Insightful questions can (and should) also address various **system elements** or aspects of the operational environment and the **interactions** among them. For example:

- Culture differences, ethnicity, social structures (tribal, family) nationality, religion.
- Economics, politics, military forces.
- Infrastructure, physical environment, terrain, weather.
- Technology, information systems, and other resources.



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Mid-Exercise Reflection

Instructions: After generating your initial set of questions about the image, take 5-10 minutes to consider the following questions. Your responses to the following questions can help you self-assess how you are doing in this activity so far, and where you have opportunities to improve. Jot down some notes in response to each question.

1. Think about what seems particularly challenging about developing questions, and what seems easy?
2. Consider how much variety there is in your questions. Do you seem to have a lot of one type of question? If you do, what accounts for that?
3. Was it harder to come up with some types of questions than others?
4. Looking over all your questions, think about whether some of them seem “better” than others—more useful, more interesting, or more likely to help you understand the situation?
5. Pick your three best questions and put a check mark on those three. How are they different from the other questions you came up with and what makes them stand out as useful or better than others?



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Question Review

Instructions: Read through the questions below. Then, review the collection of questions posted on the wall while you consider them. Then, we'll have a group discussion. Feel free to get up and look at the collection on the wall while we're having this discussion.

1. Considered as a group, do the questions reflect a variety of types (e.g., "what/where/who," "how/why," "what if," "how might"?) Do they address a variety of topics/factors, or just a few?
2. What are some of the most common questions? Why do these same questions come up repeatedly?
3. Are there questions that only one or a few people asked? Do these less-common questions suggest a different way of thinking about the situation represented by the image?
4. Across the entire set, which questions:
 - ✓ Are future-orientated or consider future implications, if any?
 - ✓ Consider relationships or interactions?
 - ✓ Expose assumptions?
 - ✓ Point out paradoxes?
 - ✓ Consider hypotheticals?
 - ✓ Seek an explanation of what contributed to the current set of circumstances?
5. Which questions surprised you, and why?
6. Are there questions that didn't occur to you, but once you saw it you thought, "that is a GREAT question"? What is it about that question that makes it great?
7. Do you wonder about the purpose of any question (e.g., "Why would he want to know about X")? How so?
8. Which questions do you think are the most useful/critical for understanding the problem? Why?
9. Are there gaps? Questions that are missing, that seem important? (If so, add them.)
10. Did some of your questions help you think of other questions to ask? Which ones?



USE THE SPACE BELOW ON THE NEXT PAGE TO JOT DOWN YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEAS.



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Reflection and Debrief

Instructions: We are going to spend time thinking about the exercise we just conducted. Take a few minutes to think about each of these questions individually, and then discuss them as a group.

1. Think about what you learned from this activity. What are your big “take-aways?”
2. How has this activity helped you identify questions you would not have otherwise asked?
3. Think about the questions you identified earlier as your ‘three best/most useful’ questions. Do you still see them that way? Why/why not?
4. What have you learned about how to ask questions that will help you gain a deeper understanding of the problem meaning?
5. How can you use what you learned so far in your work?



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Planning for Information Gathering

Instructions: Now that you have been assigned a few categories of questions, please work individually to review the individual questions contained in each of your assigned categories.

As you review the questions, spend 10-15 minutes thinking about how and where you would seek answers to those questions. Please refer to the questions below to conduct this activity.

1. Where would you look? Why?
2. What could you read? Why?
3. Who would you talk to? Why?
4. What communities of practice would you consult with? Why?
5. Where might an anthropologist look to answer these questions? An economist? A politician? A scientist? How might the approach of these other professionals differ from your own?



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Small Group Discussion

Instructions: Once everybody in your group has had a chance to offer his/her ideas, please take a look at the topics below, and discuss your ideas and responses as a group.

1. What ideas for seeking information are similar among group members?
2. What ideas are different? How so?
3. Which ideas do you think might be particularly fruitful? Why?
4. Which ideas might be limited in their usefulness? Why?
5. What do you think the challenges are to gathering information in these ways? How might you work around those challenges?
6. If you had to pick the top three ways to start with your information gathering, what would they be? And why? What strikes you as least useful for gathering information? Why?



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Final Reflection and Debrief

Instructions: We are now going to spend some time thinking about what we have done in this exercise. First, spend 5-10 minutes thinking about the questions posed below. Jot down some notes in response to the question.

After you have considered these questions individually, we will talk about them as a group.

1. What was difficult about coming up with ideas about how to find answers to your questions?
2. What information sources or information-seeking methods did others mention that you had not thought of? Which suggestions gave you new ideas about how you might gather information to answer the questions?
3. Which types of questions are fairly easily addressed, and which are harder to figure out where or how to get information to address them?
4. If we hadn't done what we did in Phase 1, generating all the questions, how might your search for information have been different? What might you have missed?
5. Think for a moment about both phases of this exercise (i.e., generating questions, and developing a plan to answer them). What have you learned? How might you apply what you learned to your current role? Or future roles?



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