

Are Questions More Powerful Than Answers? : Dynamic Questions for Mentoring, Coaching and Consulting Situations

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If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes. – Albert Einstein

Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves [...]. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer. -- Rainer Maria Rilke

Introduction

Questions are more transforming than answers. They have the potential to make a lasting, positive impact on the quality and direction of a person's thinking. At times, questions can be a little challenging or even unsettling but they can also spark reflection and creative thinking that lead to clarity, deeper understanding and innovation.

According to an article in the Harvard Business Review¹, “questions and thoughtful answers foster smoother and more-effective interactions, they strengthen rapport and trust, and lead groups toward discovery.” The authors conclude that “sustained personal engagement and motivation—in our lives as well as our work—require that we are always mindful of the transformative joy of asking and answering questions.”

How to formulate powerful questions

Powerful questions have the following characteristics:

- Open-ended
- Mentee/Client-focused: seek to help the mentee
- Non-manipulative
- Create space for discovery and learning
- Often focus on the why², how and what of the situation
- Keep the mentor/coach/consultant focused on learning as opposed to judging.

Creating space for truth

Abba Felix, a desert father, believed that “to teach is to create a space in which obedience to truth is practiced.”³ For thought-provoking questions to be useful, space, openness and an air of hospitality is required. Mentors need to create space that invites reflection and learning and that

¹ Brooks, A. & John, L. (2018) “The Surprising Power of Questions”, *Harvard Business Review*, [May–June 2018](#) pp.60–67

² Why-questions can be intimidating. Use them with caution until sufficient level of trust is built in the relationship.

³ Palmer, P. J. (1993) *To Know As We Are Known*. p.69

space is often born in silence. However uncomfortable it might be in our noisy and crowded settings, silence is a crucial part of transformative conversations. Palmer cautions us to resist the tendency to clutter up our consciousness and our interactions.⁴

If mentors are to use questions wisely, they need to befriend their fear of not knowing how the conversation will continue and to manage the anxiety that silence might create so as not to fill the learning space with their own words.

Questions help us seek truth, if we wrestle with them in an atmosphere of hospitality. In an unwelcoming ambiance, questions can quickly become means of judgement and competition.

Using questions in cross-cultural situations

In societies where questions are often used to rebuke, interrogate or embarrass, asking even a polite, well-phrased question may come across as intimidating. In such situations, it might be beneficial to turn the question into a gentle command by starting with “Tell me about...”. Sometimes, it also helps to add, “In your opinion, tell me...” By using this technique, mentees will no longer feel like they are being tested or expected to give the right answer. Such simple practices add safety to the mentor-mentee interaction in cross-cultural situations⁵.

Many coaching questions stem from Western cultures and implicitly carry cultural values. At the beginning of a session, mentors/coaches often enquire about how much time is available for the session and what should be accomplished within that time limit. This time-oriented perspective can come across odd or even hurtful to mentees who value the person and the relationship significantly more than time-bound efficiency.

In cultures with a high power distance the mentor is viewed as the person who knows better because of his experience and expertise. Mentees expect their mentor to advise them and to share their knowledge and wisdom⁶. If a mentor only asks questions, mentees from collectivistic cultures might get very frustrated. In such cases, it is necessary to explain the benefits of powerful questions and to balance wisdom-sharing with asking questions. Mentors may start off with sharing their experience and knowledge and as mutual trust and understanding grows in the relationship, they can gradually build up the use of powerful questions.

When mentoring people from collectivistic cultures the importance of community should not be underestimated. Powerful coaching questions are often formulated to focus on the individual, on their goals, strengths and perspectives. However, such an emphasis on the individual can make some mentees feel uncomfortable because the questions do not take into account the influence of the strong web of relationships that one has in the community. In such situations, mentors are encouraged to reframe questions to highlight the importance and influence of the community in the mentee’s life. For example, instead of asking “What are your strengths?” the mentor could ask “What does your community recognise that you do really well?”⁷.

A list of powerful questions for mentoring and consulting situations

⁴ Palmer, P. J. (1993) *To Know As We Are Known*. p.71

⁵ Giezendanner, J. (2015) *What to Do When Questions Are Not Safe?*
<https://www.globallearningpartners.com/blog/what-to-do-when-questions-are-not-safe/>

⁶ Hong, S. (2012) “Cross-Cultural Mentoring: A Brief Comparison of Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures”, *William Carey International Development Journal*, Vol 1, Issue 3. p.3

⁷ Stoltzfus-Horst, T. (2017) *Dancing Between Cultures: Culturally Intelligent Coaching For Missions and Ministry*.

Getting mentees to think about powerful questions is one of the most important and effective tools of a good mentor. Powerful questions can also prove to be helpful in consulting since the consultant often has to switch between different roles during the consulting process such as: teacher, expert, quality-controller, advisor, mentor, coach, pastor, friend⁸ etc. while allowing the mentees to influence the process by using their creativity and experience. With time and progress, the mentees' influence should increase as they gain experience in their field and the mentor's role shifts more and more to that of an enabling and supportive sounding board.

The following list of questions is presented here to inspire and support those involved in consulting and mentoring. Beginner mentors might profit from memorising a few of the questions so that they can easily apply and modify them as needed in their contexts.

1. Starting a session

- What would you like to focus on today?
- What questions have you brought with you today?
- What would you like to accomplish in our session today?
- What would be the best use of our time right now?
- Do you want to make a decision, explore options, vent, hear yourself think, get feedback...? Anything else?

2. Exploring current realities

- What is happening? ... Tell me more.
- What are the factors you need to consider?
- How important is this to you?
- What will you think about this in 5 years from now?
- How committed are you to this project?
- How urgent is this situation?
- What are your personal values and standards that impact this situation?
- What are the underlying issues here?
- How would you describe the tensions you are experiencing?
- How is this situation affecting you, others and your work?
- What are the unintended results of present attitudes and behaviours?
- What will happen, if you do nothing?
- How will it feel to have this situation handled?
- Do we need anyone else's participation in this conversation?
- Who else shares your concerns, dilemma, need to find a solution?
- How will your success or failure at addressing this affect you / others / your organisation / your community?

3. Discovering opportunities

- What could happen? ... What else?
- What other angles can you think of?

⁸ Varghese, M. (2019) "Redefine or Rechristen? A Fresh Look at the Role and Responsibilities of a Consultant", *Bible Translation Conference*, Dallas
Ring, A. J. (2019) "Pastoral Translation Consulting", *Bible Translation Conference*, Dallas

- What are your other options?
- What have you tried before to handle this situation?
- Has there been any progress, no matter how small?
- If we were to take a radically different approach to this, what would it be?
- If this matter was not as black and white as you are thinking, what would be some of the 'gray' options you could consider?
- What opportunities are we missing?
- What solutions would benefit the most people?
- What are others suggesting you do?
- If money and time weren't an issue, what would you do?
- If you had free choice in the matter, what would you do?
- What would motivate you to change?
- What possibilities are you most excited about?
- Who else might be supportive of your efforts?

4. Planning

- Out of all the options, which one will work best?
- What steps are necessary to move this forward?
- What is the part that is not yet clear for you?
- Is there anything you need to do as a result of this conversation?
- What would the next steps look like?
- What should be done first?
- Are you ready to take action? / When will you be ready to begin?
- What will you do and by when?
- What resources do you need?
- As you look at your plan, how does it make you feel?
- Is there anything missing from your plan?
- How will you know that you have made progress?
- How will you know that you have succeeded?
- Who needs to know the outcome of this meeting? How will you inform them?

5. Facing obstacles

- What is the opportunity underlying this challenge?
- How would you reframe this problem as a goal?
- Are there factors that might get in the way of your plan?
- Who might support and oppose your plan?
- What will you need to change to make this possible?
- Where are the gaps in skills, attitudes or behaviours that may get in the way?
- Do you have all the resources you need?
- How do you suppose you can find out more about this?
- What do you have to do less of in order to achieve more?
- What's holding you back right now?
- What are your personal strengths that will help with this situation? How can you maximise them?
- What's your uncertainty about, and how could you turn that into readiness?

6. Reflecting critically on a written piece of work⁹

- How do you feel about the work you accomplished?
- What is the purpose of this text/chapter/paragraph?
- What is the question you are writing about?
- What other ways might there be to structure this text?
- How could you strengthen the structure in the text?
- How could you make this idea clearer for the reader?
- What could be a counter-argument?
- What assumptions are made in this text? ... What else?
- What other ways might there be to formulate this? ... What else?
- What questions arose as you worked on this?
- What is missing from the text?
- Which source(s) could be of help here?
- What do you like about this paragraph/text?
- Where is the weakest point of this paragraph/text?
- If this was your friend's paper, what advice would you give him/her?
- How does this text relate to your personal experience?
- If you could write it again, what would you do differently?

7. Exploring the spiritual dimension

- What do you think God is up to in your life these days?
- Where do you sense God is in all of this?
- How are you praying about this?
- What would loving well look like in this situation?
- What gives you life?
- What conditions support your soul's well-being?
- When have you experienced the most closeness to God and to yourself recently?
- When have you felt most disconnected from God and yourself recently?
- What drains life from you?
- Where in your life and work do you feel most divided?
- Where do you sense resistance in you regarding this situation?
- In this situation, what would it look like to steward well the gift God has given you?
- How does this plan align with your calling?
- How could you bring your inner and outer worlds back into harmony?
- How would you approach this differently, if you believed that God would give you what you needed in that moment?
- What is the unspoken truth here?
- What conditions conspire to silence your soul's voices and hungers?
- Who do you need God to be for you at this time?
- If you imagined having a conversation with Jesus about this, what would He say?

⁹ Critical reflection on one's writing is an important professional skill. These questions can be useful to consultants/mentors who seek to help their mentees improve the quality of their written work be it in translation, linguistics, literacy or other domains.

- How can I be praying for you in the coming weeks?

8. Bringing the conversation to a close

- How did you find our conversation today?
- What was meaningful to you in this session?
- What will you take away from our conversation today?
- How can you make sure you will remember what you have learned today?
- What will you do differently as a result of our conversation today?
- For the items that we didn't complete today, when do we need to meet again?
- What are some questions that you still have after our session today?
- Do you need anything else from me at this point?

Conclusion

*“The principal key to asking good questions is actually rooted in listening.”*¹⁰ Formulating powerful questions needs to be accompanied by patient and active listening. Mentors and consultants do well to give mentees enough time to think about their answers and not to jump in with a solution or advice. It is tempting for mentors to “tell” or share a personal experience while waiting for the mentee to answer a thought-provoking question, however those interruptions might hinder the mentee’s fruitful processing and do more harm than help. Research shows that expanding wait time after posing a question results in three times longer answers that are also deeper, more reflected and of better quality. In addition, wait time seems to be in direct correlation with increased motivation in the learner.¹¹

It is important to note that questions are not powerful by themselves, however well-formulated they might be. They are not a script or a formula that will guarantee transformative conversations. Personal authenticity is more important than any methodology offered about the art of asking questions. The effectiveness of powerful questions depends on the context and purpose of the conversation as well as on the dynamics of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee.

To close, I would like to quote Parker Palmer, distinguished educator and writer: *“I do not suggest that questions are the only educative sort of speech. Our facts and theories, our advice and answers need to be spoken as well. But since we as teachers are overschooled to give answers and solutions, and since we give them for reasons as often evasive as educative, we have special need to develop the discipline of asking questions to create space for truth.”*¹²

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¹⁰ Hughes, B. (2003) *Disciplining, Coaching, Mentoring*. p.79

¹¹ Rowe, M. B. (1986) “Wait time: Slowing down may be a way of speeding up”, *Journal of Teacher Education*, 37. pp.43-50

¹² Palmer, P. J. (1993) *To Know As We Are Known*. p.83

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