1 Questions That Work

When it comes to facilitation, questions make things happen; they are the engine that drives healthy and productive group processes.

Facilitators develop questions in response to facilitation challenges. The right question is the one that works best at a particular moment in a particular situation with a particular group of people. Sometimes a question works brilliantly with one group and not at all with another—context is critical.

Questions work when they contribute to the purpose and objectives of a process. In the hands of a skilled facilitator, effective questions are the foundation for such activities as opening a session, building consensus for decision making, enabling action, thinking critically, addressing issues, and closing a session.

A few years ago, a national think tank brought together Canada's "top thirty" corporate chief executive officers to create a national strategy to develop and support up-and-coming young leaders in business. As part of the opening session, we asked participants to introduce themselves by answering the question, "What is an important learning you have had about organizational leadership in your working life? Please answer in the form of a commandment."

Responses to this question were varied, rich, and concise. They energized the group, focused the discussion on what new business leaders need to learn, encouraged risk taking, generated new ideas, and initiated development of a national leadership vision.

Participants said things such as:

- Enable people to mourn the past so that they can change in the future.
- Build on the organization's legacy and traditions.
- Get the organization change-ready.
- Lead *toward* something, not away from something.
- Organizational leadership takes passion and big steps; leadership is not a spectator sport.
- Political and business leadership do not always go in the same direction.

Watching these responses work their magic with that group was a satisfying experience. Questions have not worked as well during other introductions, for a variety of reasons; perhaps they weren't focused enough, or they confronted participants too much or too little. At other times, in writing a final report we have discovered that a session might have been considerably more productive if we had just tweaked a few questions during small group discussions so that they directed participants more clearly toward a specific outcome.

When questions really work, you can almost see them sweating to support the process and enable participants to get where they want to go.

PROCESS FRAMEWORKS

A process framework is a step-by-step conceptual guide to what a facilitator does in a structured group experience.

It is like a map organized around facilitation challenges. It makes the process explicit, furnishes a reference point for keeping a process on track, and supports facilitators in thinking about questions consciously, whether for a single workshop on strategic planning or a long-term, multisession team development initiative.

Although all processes have their own unique history, situation, objectives, and complicating factors, they also share typical facilitation challenges. Five process frameworks (Figure 1.1) for common facilitation challenges are found in Part Two of this book.

Opening a Session	Enabling Action	Thinking Critically	Addressing Issues	Closing a Session
1. Getting to know one another 2. Clarifying expectations 3. Building commitment	1. What? (Observation) 2. So what? (Reflection) 3. Now what? (Action)	1. Making assumptions and perspectives explicit 2. Understanding interests and power relationships 3. Exploring alternative ways of thinking and acting 4. Making ethical choices	1. Understanding the situation 2. Clarifying the issues 3. Generating options for action 4. Testing options for action 5. Making a decision 6. Taking action	1. Looking backward: wrapping up the process 2. Looking forward: considering next steps

Figure 1.1. Five Process Frameworks.

1

> One way of looking at the world as a whole is by means of a map, that is to say, some sort of a plan or outline that shows where various things are to be found—not all things, of course, for that would make the map as big as the world, but the things that are most prominent, most important for orientation—outstanding landmarks, as it were, which you cannot miss, or if you do miss, you will be left in total perplexity.
>
> *—Schumacher, 1977*

Process frameworks offer a concrete approach to a facilitation challenge. Most sessions use a minimum of three frameworks—one to open the process, one to address a specific challenge, and one to close the process. Once you are clear about the framework or combination of frameworks required for a process, the questions you need will become obvious by looking at the key parts of the framework: they enable you to make conscious decisions about what to ask to accomplish your objectives.

For example, if you are facilitating a group to move toward specific action based on recommendations in a report, you can use the process framework for enabling action (Figure 1.2, and Chapter Five) to guide how you think about the questions required.

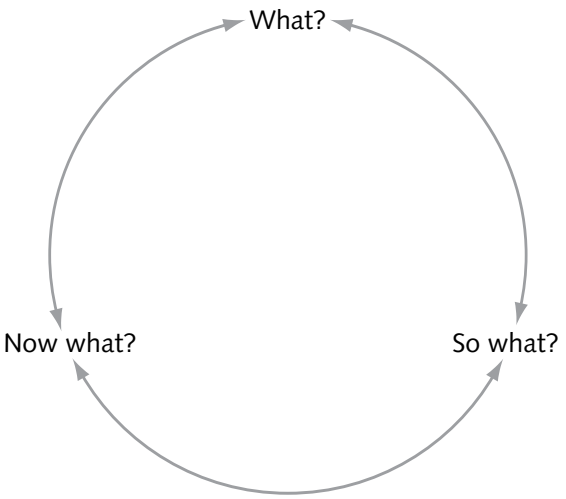

Figure 1.2. Process Framework for Enabling Action.

Learn and lean on your process frameworks; don't leave home without them.

On the basis of this process framework, at some point in the session you will be paying close attention to questions in the "now what" section that help drive the process toward decision making. These questions may be developed ahead of time, or you might make them up on the spot. Either way, it is the process framework that helps you consciously shape the questions required to enable the group to move forward.

Process frameworks are flexible. Just as a map is not the territory, so a framework is not the process. However, it is a strong reference point and suggests a basic structure, which is what makes it useful (Korzybski, 1933). Instead of a facilitator feeling stuck in a session and wondering what she should ask next, she leans on the process framework for the kind of question she needs, thinking, "We've spent enough time discussing what stands out in this report; they probably need to move on to the reflection part of the framework." In this way, a process framework is a reference point for questions that fit a specific situation. For example, if you want to encourage critical reflection (see Figure 1.3), lean on the process framework in Chapter Six to guide how you develop and use questions.

If you notice that people need more time to make their assumptions and perspectives explicit than what you have allotted on the agenda, you might decide to spend an additional twenty or thirty minutes using questions that you create on the spot to clarify perspectives further.

You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions.

—Naguib Mahfouz, 1988

A process framework both requires and enables facilitators to take a participant-observer stance. In this stance, the facilitator functions in a dual role, attending to both content and process, noticing how questions are working and also making decisions about what to ask next (see Chapter Two).

Just as it takes a lot of experience to become a skilled navigator in the wilderness, it also takes a lot of facilitation experience to become a skilled participant-observer in a group. This involves using a process framework to guide a session, tracking group process, noting stages of group development, and intervening when appropriate to achieve objectives.

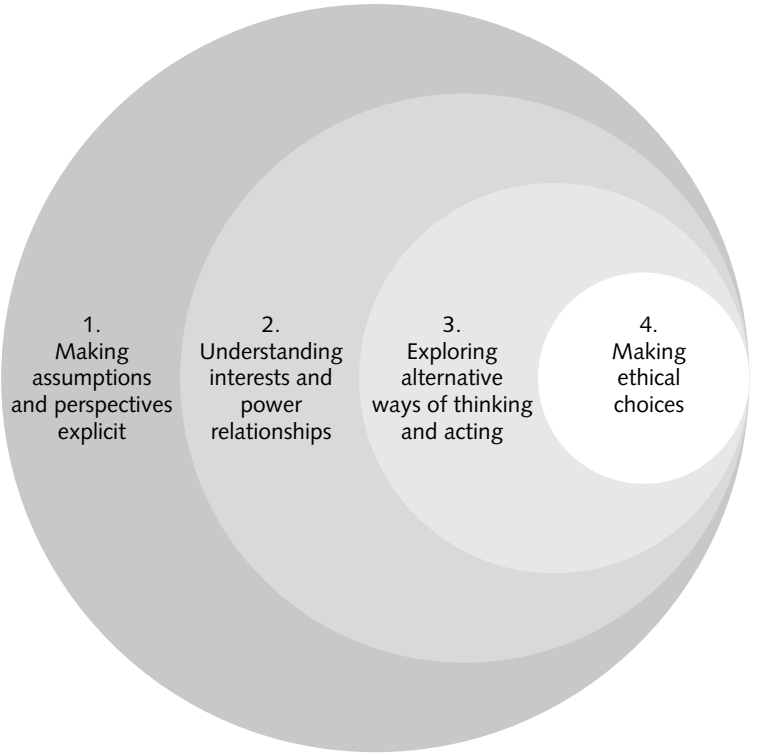

Figure 1.3. Process Framework for Thinking Critically.

CONSCIOUS QUESTIONING

Questions that work have intention; they enable a group to get where it wants to go. They are created deliberately to support achievement of the purpose and objectives of a process and are situated within a process framework that guides participants toward expected outcomes.

To create effective questions that have meaning in a specific context and process, facilitators need to know:

- The purpose and objectives of the process
- The situation and related facilitation challenges
- The people involved
- The process frameworks required to address the facilitation challenges
- Themselves

Conscious questioning is based on clear intention and comprehensive preparation. It includes time spent learning about your client, the organization, the situation, and the participants. It can also involve reviewing background documents, interviewing people, summarizing main issues, and researching recent publications. The final challenge—knowing yourself as a facilitator—is grounded in how you understand and apply your core values, as described in Chapter Two.

Framing Questions

There are many ways to frame questions. For example, *Bloom's taxonomy* is based on six categories: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, 1956). The *focused conversation* approach has four levels of questions: objective, reflective, interpretive, and decisional (Stanfield, 2000a). The *critical thinking community* talks about three types: those with a right answer, those with better or worse answers, and those with as many answers as there are human preferences (Paul and Elder, 1996).

Other ways to classify questions use a variety of labels: hypothetical, lower-and-higher-level, factual, abstract, convergent, divergent, focused, conceptual, philosophical, dichotomous, analytical, strategic, operational, and so on.

> We are in the age of "search-culture," in which Google and other search engines are leading us into a future rich with an abundance of correct answers along with an accompanying naïve sense of certainty. In the future, we will be able to answer the question, but will we be bright enough to ask it?
>
> *—Brockman, 2005*

Rather than depending on any single question taxonomy for all situations, facilitators base their questioning on the type of process framework required to achieve a group's objectives. Once you have decided

on a process framework, you develop questions on the basis of key points in the framework, your intentions, the purpose of the session, expected outcomes, and how much time you want to spend.

If you are opening an in-house, half-day workshop for six people who have been working together for a year and are going to start a new project, then refer to the process framework in Chapter Four to create a new question for this situation. Two useful ones might be, "What is one thing you have learned as a result of being a member of this team?" and "What is one thing you would like to learn by working on this new initiative?"

Planned Questioning

Whether facilitating an in-house meeting, a national workshop, a regional think tank, or a global issues forum, facilitators usually prepare some of their questions well in advance as part of a workshop design or script. They also create some questions on the spot in response to what is going on in a session.

Given the evolving nature of process, sometimes questions that are planned in advance may end up tweaked, dropped, or moved to another place according to the facilitator's assessment of the situation. Questions in a more formal agenda are less likely to be changed on the spot.

It is the process framework that guides the facilitator in making planned, conscious decisions—both before and during a process—about which questions to use and when. If you find that a question isn't working particularly well, you can lean on your process framework to consider what other options might be more appropriate.

Closed and Open Questions

Facilitators use two general question types: closed and open. Each produces its own type of answer and has specific benefits and drawbacks in terms of group process.

Closed Questions

Closed questions require simple, specific answers and are most appropriate in a situation where one answer is preferred over another (yes or no, right or wrong, more or less). Closed questions also elicit unequivocal and often quantitative

responses. For example, "How many people are on this team?" "When was this policy initially drafted?" "Whom do you call if you need support?" "How many people are needed on this committee to ensure that it is effective and efficient?"

You can also use closed questions to get specific information from a participant, or as a part of issues analysis, problem solving, or enabling action: "If you decide to take this route, what is the first step, from a legal perspective?"

Closed questions are helpful when you want detailed feedback about a situation ("Who supports this policy?") or when you want participants to edit something written, such as a mission statement or a list of values. Closed questions also work when group members are prioritizing a list, as in selecting key directions in strategic planning.

Closed questions have disadvantages in certain situations (Gazda and others, 1984). If you are trying to encourage group members to open up or give a detailed response, closed questions that elicit a brief factual response may discourage candor and shut down conversation.

Facilitators often want to motivate participants to ask their own questions, both of themselves and of one another. Too many closed questions can discourage participants from reflecting on the situation or developing a solution in collaboration with other group members.

Closed questions may also encourage participants to become dependent on a facilitator for asking leading questions that steer participants to a supposed right answer. In this situation, group members start to expect more from the facilitator and less from themselves; the facilitator has then abdicated her primarily content-neutral position (see discussion of integrity in Chapter Two) and has become a problem solver or content expert.

Similarly, a facilitator may ask questions in such a way that the group "discovers" a conclusion already held by the facilitator. This Socratic approach, though appropriate in some learning situations, is inappropriate for a content-neutral facilitator.

Situations are not always black and white. We often facilitate in areas where, because of our experience in a particular field, we know as much about the content as participants do. In such a situation, it is important to ask questions and offer content in a way that encourages participants to think and decide for themselves. Dependency inhibits group maturation because members do not develop confidence in their ability to solve their own problems.

Open Questions

Open questions can't be answered simply. They require some thought, often include choices, and result in a developed answer. Two examples: "What factors contributed to your success this year?" "Where do you see the current reorganization taking the company?"

Open questions work well when you are trying to stimulate discussion and encourage critical reflection ("What approaches have you taken in the past year? How did they work out?") or want a group to engage in discussion leading to consensus ("What are the supports and barriers in this situation? What are the production implications of these supports and barriers?").

Open questions invite people to explore their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives on a subject:

How do you feel when you can't get to see your boss?

How do you think we can get employees to take more responsibility for getting things done?

How do you think we should address this problem?

What would you do if . . . ?

You can also use open questions effectively when you think a group has reached a decision prematurely and needs to explore additional dimensions of an issue ("I'm wondering if this decision might be a little premature. Are there other issues mentioned in the research report that need consideration?"). On the other hand, if you are coming to the end of a decision-making process and there seems to be implicit agreement on a conclusion, an open question can cause participants to needlessly reexamine an existing but unstated consensus. Check your inference about a possible agreement and if you are correct, move on.

There are disadvantages to using open questions. If you have a limited amount of time for introductions, asking an open question extends your timeline and frustrates participants who are anxious to get into content. Participants may grow uneasy if you ask an open question that encourages discussion but you have only five minutes left to wrap up a session. They may find it frustrating to be invited to participate in a stimulating interchange that requires them to abandon their agenda timeline.

SKILLS FOR CONSCIOUS QUESTIONING

Eight guiding principles and related skills support facilitators in creating and asking questions that work hard for a group (Figure 1.4).

Customize for Context

There is no best way to facilitate, no standardized model or approach that works in all (or even most) situations. Each group is unique and requires a customized approach for addressing specific challenges. This uniqueness creates an intriguing and complex dynamic for facilitators.

Context is the situation and the circumstances that weave together to frame a group's experience. Context comprises a variety of factors, among them the purpose and objectives of a process; the literacy level of participants; the resources available for next steps; and the nature, length, and commitment of the sponsoring organization. Context also includes the history of the group, how members have worked together in the past, and their interpersonal dynamics, motives, personalities, learning styles, body language, decision-making preferences, power bases, political orientation, cultural heritage, academic background, and familial

Guiding Principles
1. Customize for context.
2. Create inviting questions.
3. Clarify assumptions.
4. Ask with sensitivity.
5. Pay attention to risk and anxiety.
6. Maintain a participant-observer stance.
7. Consider "why?" carefully.
8. If in doubt, check it out.

Figure 1.4. Guiding Principles.

> Questions can be like coins tinkling in our pockets. They have their own currency and we can never be quite sure how far our money will get us. Some are needed for purchasing immediate clarity; others are more suited for long-term investment; a few should be buried in the ground and dug up only on rainy days.
>
> *—Moclair, 2002*

history. It also involves participants' work and life experiences. Add to these dynamics the facilitator's own style, approach, background, body language, and experience, and you have a complex mix!

Questions that work well in one context may be completely inappropriate in another. You can successfully ask a group of senior managers what leadership skills they think are required to function well in their industry, but the same question is not likely to be as effective with inexperienced managers. A group of recreation leaders are more likely to respond well to an introductory question that has a "fun" orientation than are a group of stressed-out, time-pressed lawyers focused on task and efficiency.

Pay attention to nuance in questions. A slight or subtle variation in use of words can fine-tune a question so that it delivers exactly what is needed to support group members in achieving outcomes; by changing one word (as in replacing *why* with *what* or *how*) you can completely alter the tone of a question.

Use this checklist to think about nuance in your questions:

- What is the context for this group?
- What are the objectives and expected outcomes for this process? How do they fit with the organization's mission, values, and strategic directions?
- What makes this group unique (experience, cultural diversity, gender)?

  Prompt: How can the uniqueness of this group be embedded in the questions we ask? (See Chapter Three for information on prompts.)

- Given the experience and expertise of group members, what are they likely to be most comfortable discussing? least comfortable?

  Tip: Be sure to check out inferences like this one (about comfort level) with group members.

- Is this question appropriate to how long the group has been working together and their stage of development?

Create Inviting Questions

Not all questions invite a response. Some may discourage a response, as through the use of inappropriate humor, sarcasm, or a condescending put-down. Ending a question with "Don't you agree?" or "Haven't you experienced this?" conveys too much authority to tempt a timid respondent to reply with anything but a positive response. Similarly, a question that begins with "You mean you haven't heard of . . . ?" does not invite disclosure.

There is a price for asking questions poorly. Participants who feel uncomfortable or alienated by the questions you ask are likely to become disengaged and lose ownership for the process. Here are tips on how to create inviting questions that encourage participants to respond.

- Ensure that questions are *relevant (*related to your overall purpose and specific objectives), *challenging* (stimulating people to think), and *honest* (not involving a trick or deception).
- Don't ask leading questions. The answer to a question should not be in the question; it should be in the participant.
- If you already know, don't ask the question; just offer the answer. Facilitation is not teaching. Good discussion seeks a way for people to explore ideas. Adults participating in a group discussion or decision-making process do not usually need to be tested on facts. Sometimes, if participants seem hesitant about responding to a question, I say, "When I ask a question I'm not looking for a 'right' or predetermined answer. I want to know what you think. This is not a test; it's a discussion."
- Avoid "asking down." Sometimes a facilitator needs to define or explain a word or phrase in a question, but if done incorrectly it can be perceived as condescending. Here is a question that talks down to participants: "How do you feel about your income tax—that is, the amount you have to pay the government on the money you take in during the year?" By inverting the term and the explanation, the question is much less condescending: "How do you feel about the amount

you have to pay the government on the money you take in during the year—that is, your income tax?" (Payne, 1951, p. 116). Giving the explanation first and the definition second is a more conversational approach and avoids asking down.

• Choose words carefully. Use words that all the respondents will understand, avoiding special terminology, acronyms, and words with more than one meaning (*any* may mean "every," "some," or "only one"; *see* may mean "observe" or "visit a doctor or lawyer" (Payne, quoted in Sudman and Bradburn, 1982, p. 49).

• Clear questions invite answers; questions with more than one interpretation usually invite anxiety. If you ask, "Have you ever used simultaneous translation?" participants may be reluctant to respond because they may not know whether you are talking about whisper translators or the entire technology of live translation with microphones on tables and participant receivers for various languages. If you ask, "Have you used individual receivers and microphones on tables for simultaneous translation?" participants understand exactly what you mean; they hear the explanation first and the terminology second and are more likely to respond confidently.

• Take time to think through each question before asking it. Rephrasing a question several times confuses the listener and discourages a response.

• Keep questions simple. This doesn't mean easy or simplistic. "Envision a situation three years from now when our production problems have been addressed, people are happy at work, customers are satisfied, and market share is up. What do we need to do first to make this a reality?" This question is unfocused, long, and confusing. Instead, begin with a simple, single part of the question: "Imagine that it is three years from today and our production problems have been addressed. What do you see going on that is different from today?" If the group is large enough, split the question into four sections and have one quarter of the group answer one part of the question while other quarters are doing other parts.

• No one likes to appear foolish or ignorant. Avoid asking questions that cause people to lose face in a group. To reduce the threat in a challenging question, use an opening phrase such as, "Has anyone come across . . . ?" or "Have you ever run into . . . ?" or "Does anyone recall . . . ?" or "Has anyone had any experience with . . . ?"

• Not all questions need to be answered publicly. Sometimes a "to think about" question at the end of the day is designed to encourage critical reflection not meant

for sharing with anyone. You may ask a question to launch an important discussion that results in dialogue over lunch and stays within the confines of three or four people's experience: "Take some time over lunch to reflect on how much energy you want to commit to this initiative, given your personal situation. Your conclusions will be helpful in preparing you to discuss the extent to which you want to be engaged in the next steps." Questions like this one are designed to support interaction and shared perspectives; the responses don't always need to be reported back in plenary.

- Read and respond to the nonverbal messages or "vibes" in a group while you are asking a question. You may want to comment on what you are noticing. People can make it obvious through their body language that they think a question is inappropriate; you can then respond, "Looks like this question may be problematic. Can you help me understand what's not working here?"

Clarify Assumptions

Most questions have assumptions in them that influence their meaning, impact, and effectiveness.

The question "How can we improve our sales record over the next six months?" makes several assumptions: that "we" have the power and commitment to improve, that the sales record needs to be improved, that a significant change can happen in six months, that the record is not up to par. If you check assumptions before asking a question of this sort, you can save a lot of time discussing options for action that cannot be implemented.

Prior to using a key question that does not seem right, consult with others who have a stake in the outcome to get their opinion on the question and clarify possible assumptions. Probing for assumptions sends the message, "We need to listen to each other carefully in order to identify and understand what each of us is assuming. Misunderstandings can lead to poor outcomes for all of us."

Facilitators need to check on assumptions in both the questions they ask and those asked by others:

Am I correct in thinking that there is an assumption about . . . in your question?

Do you think this assumption is true for our competitors?

Does this question stand on its own, or do we need to ask other questions first?

How long has that assumption been around?

How many here agree with this assumption?

I was assuming that . . . and it sounds as if you are making a slightly different assumption. Is this correct?

Is this assumption likely to be valid six months from now?

Our approach to this problem depends on the assumption that. . . . Is this assumption true for everyone here?

Your question sounds like a statement to me. Are you assuming that . . . ?

This is what I'm assuming: . . . Is that what you were assuming?

What assumption is this based on?

Would . . . (a person or group with another perspective) make a different assumption from the one in this question?

An additional benefit of checking assumptions may be to discover that the initial question was really several smaller ones that are part of getting to a discussion about what needs to happen next. Thus examining the question closely for assumptions contributes to better understanding of the overall process.

Ask with Sensitivity

Because a question can evoke a strong emotional reaction, it is important to be sensitive to how and when you ask it (tone, voice level, timing, speed of delivery, facial expression, bodily stance, eye contact). You may pose questions on an emotional spectrum that ranges from distant (even hostile) formality to warm geniality. "What do you think?" can communicate many meanings, depending on the questioner's inflection, emphasis, and demeanor (Christensen, Gavin, and Sweet, 1991).

Here are some suggestions for enhancing your sensitivity in asking questions.

• Be aware of your body language in asking questions. Are your physical posture, eye contact, and tone of voice supportive and engaging? Or, by contrast, (1) are you physically towering over a group of people who are feeling intimidated? (2) Do you cross your arms over your chest when you think a question is going to be resisted? (3) Do you ask questions while writing on a flipchart with your back to the group? (4) Whom do you have eye contact with when you ask a question of an entire group? (5) Does your tone of voice sound as if you are commanding rather than inquiring?

• Use a bridge or linking sentence to introduce a sensitive question. For example, "Everyone in this room has been rejected on a promising cold call. Think about the last time this happened to you. What was your initial reaction when you realized you were going to be turned down?"

• Ask permission to pose a question that is particularly sensitive: "May I ask how you decided to do it this way?" or "May I ask you a couple of questions about the situation in your office?"

• When a question is too intrusive participants could feel taken by surprise and be unable to respond. Not everyone has the presence of mind to say, "I find that question intrusive and am not prepared to respond right now." By reviewing your questions and approach with your client or planning committee, you can explore what question types or topics might be considered too intrusive for group members.

• Use self-disclosure to express sensitivity. For example, "One of the things I've learned over the past two years as president of this board is the importance of sticking to policy decisions and staying out of operations. Where do you think this particular agenda item belongs: in policy or operations?"

• Use humor carefully. Generally speaking, if people laugh at the expense of others then the humor is not appropriate. Be particularly careful about sensitive topics and issues in politically correct areas—for instance, "-isms" such as racism and sexism.

Accommodate Risk and Anxiety

Questions vary as to the risk and anxiety they convey in a specific situation. Sometimes questions need to be low in risk, easygoing, and relatively free of tension. At other times—for example, when a group needs to explore difficult issues—questions will carry a higher level of risk and anxiety.

Generally speaking, the level of risk or anxiety goes up when group members feel that a question is very difficult, or there is a lot at stake in the answer, or there is a right answer and they don't know what it is, or the potential level of confrontation or disclosure in a response makes participants feel uncomfortable.

Here are some suggestions that help facilitators attend to the risk factor in questioning.

• Normalize difficult questions and responses. If a regional manager is facilitating planning with a group of account managers who have not met quota, the question, "What prevented you from reaching quota this quarter?" can be risky, particularly if the regional manager is part of the discussion. Normalizing the challenges that account managers have faced can help reduce the risk in responding. For example, the regional manager (in a facilitating role) could say, "Every one of us has felt the impact of company policy changes in our accounts this quarter, but we haven't given up, and that's a good thing. We can learn a lot about what we've been through and how we might act in a similar situation by sharing our perspectives on this. So let's open up and talk candidly: What prevented us from reaching quota this quarter? I'll start off with something I think I could have managed better." Understanding and paying attention to the context for a process helps determine the level of risk in a question. In this example, the context makes it clear that the question is best asked by the regional manager, who is also a participant in the group.

> When facilitating social change initiatives, strategic questions can be used to get ideas and potential solutions to emerge from the people affected; create a neutral and common ground for collaborative effort; create respect and value for the experience of others; listen to people's pain; ask the "unaskable"; create options; dig deeper; support empowerment.
>
> *—Peavey, 1994 (adapted)*

• Before asking questions, be clear with group members about what is confidential (see the discussion of clarifying confidentiality in Chapter Two) and who will be informed about what was said or decided.

• Start with low-risk questions that involve minimal challenge and require little self-disclosure before moving to higher-risk questions. Similarly, begin with questions that people are no doubt able to answer (recounting an event, or a personal opinion on background materials) so that you can build on their success before moving on to more difficult questions related to personal views on a controversial topic.

• Prepare participants for "big questions." They go by a number of names: strategic, audacious, powerful, great, meaningful. They are also usually focused on facilitating some form of significant change: personal, team, organizational, social, ecological, political, governmental. As such, there is usually a fairly high level of risk and anxiety involved.

• Give participants a few minutes to review their background materials before answering: "Review the premeeting paper and then jot down all the ideas that come to mind to describe your options for action." Then ask them to share their ideas with a partner and develop a list of three or four priorities. These two tasks help people bridge into an answer.

• When appropriate, create an opportunity for people to respond anonymously to questions (through card sorting, multivoting, sealed envelopes, interviews, or the Internet). Big questions require courage, determination, and a fairly high level of comfort with risk, both to ask and to answer. They must also be asked by a facilitator who knows himself, the group, and the situation well in order to be successful.

The 2005 Edge Question has generated many eye-opening responses from a "who's who" of third culture scientists and science-minded thinkers: "Great minds can sometimes guess the truth before they have either the evidence or arguments for it. What do you believe is true even though you cannot prove it?"

—Brockman, 2005

A general rule of thumb for big questions is that there should be no surprises. If you know you have a tough question coming up, offer some preparation time so that group members can think about what they want to say. Here are some options for preparing participants for big questions.

• Make questions available in the premeeting package—for example, "During the first part of the session we will be asking you to respond to three questions. Please come prepared with a brief response to each one. (1) When you think about our Employee Assistance Programs in terms of the next two years, what do you think our biggest challenge or problem is going to be? (2) What are we doing now with respect to our human resources challenge that is *not* going to be helpful in the future? (3) What are we doing now with respect to our human resources challenge that is going to be helpful in the future?"

• Plan the introduction of a big question such that people have time to consider it before answering. Consider an example from a one-day planning session. Before the morning break, we stated: "After the break we will be listening to a presentation by Dr. Doestoomuch. He will speak for an hour before lunch, and then there will be a question-and-answer period after lunch. While you are listening to him, please take notes on how to do more with less—a question that we will be discussing after lunch." Before lunch, the group was again reminded of the question: "As I mentioned earlier, we will be discussing the question of how to do more with less after lunch. You may want to keep this in the back of your mind over lunch—or even discuss it while you are enjoying the flaming baked Alaska."

Maintain a Participant-Observer Stance

A facilitator who is in a participant-observer stance is present to what group members are working on (content) while also noticing and intervening to support group development (process) and progress toward outcomes (process framework). This dual role with respect to content and process includes noticing how questions are working in the context of a process framework and making decisions related to follow-up queries.

• Enable all perspectives to be heard on an issue. Intervene to ensure that all participants have an opportunity to share ideas and concerns in response to questions ("Are there any perspectives that we haven't heard?" "Who has a different take on this issue?").

Tip: Summarize the perspectives you have heard so far and then ask for any additional views.

• Keep your process framework in mind so that you are clear about where you are, where you have been, and where you want to go next.

• The right questions enable people to talk about what is important to them, thus building ownership and motivation for addressing issues. Monitor the amount of air time (talking time) on an issue and who is doing the talking: the more air time people have, the more likely they are to take ownership for addressing a challenge. Ownership that is well developed during a workshop can extend into knowledge translation (closing the gap between what we know and what we do) and follow-up action long after a workshop is over.

• Leverage the potential power of positive politics (Strachan, Shaw, Kent, and Tomlinson, 1986). Although the word *politics* often conjures up images of frustration, manipulation, and self-interest, "positive politics" involves all the activities that people engage in to gain support for their ideas and includes persuasive discussion, marshalling support, forming coalitions, and other activities. Political processes are a normal and predictable part of both workshops and organizational life and, if carried on in a positive manner, can contribute significantly to the vitality of processes by fostering an opportunity for people to clarify their ideas, engage in constructive discussion, and help determine the path their organization takes. Here are examples of questions to leverage positive politics:

Does anyone think that their case has not been presented comprehensively?

Is there any important information that some people in this discussion might have that others might not have?

Let's make sure that we aren't overstating or understating the challenges in this issue. Do you think we have a balanced perspective here, before we move on?

Sounds like there is a lot of interest in this particular point of view. Who would like to take this discussion further over lunch?

We've said that we want to take an inclusive approach to this challenge. Can you think of any key stakeholder groups who should be involved in this process that we haven't engaged to date?

Consider "Why?" Carefully

Although "Why?" can be used effectively in (or as) an open question, it can also give the impression of an aggressive interrogation ("Why didn't you try the solution we suggested?"). The inference is that the respondent has failed or done something wrong.

You can avoid the potential defensiveness that is likely with *why* by substituting *how, what,* or *when* (for example, "What made you decide to take a different tack on this?").

Don't ask *why* when feelings run high (Tomlinson and Strachan, 1996). When you ask "Why?" in an emotional situation, people often feel accused or blamed, which tends to initiate a defensive reaction. In an emotional situation, it is often difficult for people to state why they did something or justify an action. They may be able to explain how something happened or what they did, but if they feel backed into a corner by a demand for a reason then they may become intimidated and just say the first thing that comes to mind, or make something up to rationalize the situation.

- Asking why may also serve to take the experience away from the individual and transfer it to an authority figure—you, as facilitator. Facilitators who ask for an *explanation* ("How did that happen?" or "What did you think about that?") are more likely to get accurate and truthful responses in a difficult situation than those who ask for a *reason*. In an emotional situation, you can avoid intimidating participants and enable them to give a more thoughtful answer if you "bye the why."
- Five whys: one questioning technique that can be effective for getting to the root cause of a problem is to ask a series of five "Why . . ." questions, each building on the previous response.

Used tactfully and without blame to solve a problem, this technique works well. However, in a tense environment where the answer to these questions could end in potential legal liability, loss of face, a charge of incompetence, or possible job loss, the process could be disastrous and must be handled carefully.

When in Doubt, Check It Out

If you are not sure you have the right question to support a process, consult with others as to whether the question makes sense to them. Trust your feeling of uneasiness about a question: it is likely based on experience.

Here are some questions you can ask others if you are in doubt about the appropriateness of a question. As with other lists in this book, choose the ones that work for your situation; not all questions apply to all situations.

Are there aspects of this question that are unclear? If so, how can we clarify?

Could this question be misinterpreted by various stakeholders? If so, how could we clear that up?

Does the answer to this question depend on other questions that must be answered first? If so, where should we position this question?

Does the question acknowledge the larger context in which it is being asked [regarding interrelated factors, or a systems response]?

Does the question have a clear focus that is directed toward the outcomes of the process?

Does the question have the right amount of tension to entice good thinking?

Does the question help participants make sense of the area under discussion?

Does the question lead participants toward an answer? [If so, delete any unnecessary information and ask the question objectively.]

Does the question relate to what is unique about the topic being discussed?

Does this question have the potential to initiate a breakthrough discussion with respect to projected outcomes?

Will the response to this question make a difference in terms of our objectives?

How much difficulty will people have in answering this question?

In what ways might people answer this question in this group? (*Variation:* Substitute "interpret" for *answer.*)

Will participants feel comfortable saying "I don't know" in response to this question?

Is the question at the right level for the group you are working with?

Is the question simple?

Tip: Simple doesn't mean easy or simplistic.

Is there anything about this question that could disrupt the flow of our agenda?

Is there more than one query in the question? If so, separate each one into its own question.

We have a number of . . . in this group. Would they interpret this question differently than other participants, such as . . . ?

What are the assumptions in this question?

Prompt: Do they fit the content and context of our group?

Why should we ask this question?

Will this question help people help themselves with respect to the issue being discussed?

REMINDERS

Asking questions is a skill acquired over time and with experience. While we are acquiring experience, we often pick up habits, not all of which are helpful. Table 1.1 presents some tips as basic reminders for facilitators (Hunsaker and Alessandra, 1980; Strachan, 1988).

Instead of Asking . . .	Try Asking . . .	So That . . .
Do you understand the question? (or) Do you understand the task? (or) Who doesn't understand this?	Did I explain the task clearly?	The responsibility for making the question or the task clear remains with the facilitator, not with the participant.
Who is responsible for supplying the flip charts?	Where can we get more flip chart paper?	The focus is on correcting the problem rather than placing blame.
Why are you feeling so upset?	How did the situation get to this point?	The question invites a response rather than discouraging one.
What are your options for ensuring that you are successful?	Let's brainstorm some options for addressing this problem. Be creative—in brainstorming there are no wrong answers.	The respondent is not made to feel defensive about answering the question; the respondent doesn't feel that she has to come up with all the right possibilities.
We're almost finished, don't you think?	What's your sense of where we are in terms of the whole project?	You are not requesting agreement. The authority implicit in "Don't you think?" implies that any disagreement must be mistaken—hardly a message to stimulate free inquiry (Christensen, Gavin, and Sweet, 1991).

Figure 1.5. Reminders. *(continued)*

Instead of Asking . . .	Try Asking . . .	So That . . .
Why did you stop there instead of finishing the task?	What was happening for you when you stopped there?	The respondent does not feel pressured to develop a reason; instead she can simply describe what is happening for her.
What sort of data do you have to back up your opinion?	Tell me more. Has anyone researched this?	You are not putting the respondent in a defensive, weaker position.
Are things still pretty awful with your new supervisor?	How are things going now with your new supervisor?	You avoid assuming a negative response; you offer the opportunity for a constructive response.
Let me be the devil's advocate. How can we avoid taking this route to solve this problem?	What other ways can you think of to solve this problem? (or) What about the point of view that . . . ? (or) What are all our options here?	An opposing view is not perceived to be negative (as in belonging to the devil); group members don't lose sight of who believes what and what has already been said.
Why did your team get such a bad review on that project?	What were the key factors that influenced how that project turned out?	You invite an honest, reflective response rather than a defensive rationalization.
Define the word *strategic* for the purposes of this discussion.	How are you using the word *strategic* in this discussion?	The respondent feels less pressure to respond with a supposed right answer; asking for a description instead of a definition gives more permission to extend an individual perspective.

Figure 1.5. Reminders. *(continued)*

Instead of Asking . . .	Try Asking . . .	So That . . .
Do you agree or disagree?	What does that sound like to you? (or) Does this seem like a sensible approach? (or) How important is this issue to you? (or) Would you use this approach in your department?	You avoid forcing the respondent into an either-or answer; you can find out where respondents stand on a topic.
Do you think that having lobbyists in your planning session will taint the agreement-building process?	Who has had experience facilitating lobbyists? How did the decision-making process go? (Prompt: Did their involvement affect how decisions were made?)	You encourage a variety of opinions; you avoid asking questions that lead participants to a desired answer.
How might this change in the foreseeable future?	Given your human resources situation, how might this situation change over the next six months?	You are specific when referring to a situation and a time period.
What are the big conflicts we are facing now in our team?	One of the characteristics of a well-functioning team is conflict. Today I want to discuss how we are successful in dealing with conflict among ourselves and where our challenges are. So let's begin. From your perspective, what is one area where we are dealing well with conflict?	You build a bridge or linking sentence when introducing sensitive questions; participants feel support for being candid; you normalize what people are experiencing (they realize that their responses are not unusual).

Figure 1.5. Reminders. *(continued)*

Instead of Asking . . .	Try Asking . . .	So That . . .
Which of these objectives is the most important?	What is one question you want answered by the end of this session?	The focus of the question is clearly on participants' specific learning needs; you acknowledge participants' questions as important.
She did a really good job on that one, don't you think?	Did her work meet your expectations?	You avoid a persuasive tag at the end of the question; a tag can signal a statement disguised as a question.

Figure 1.5. Reminders. *(continued)*