

Challenge Five

Asking Questions More Open-Endedly and Creatively

“YOUR QUESTIONS ARE THE QUEST YOU’RE ON.” (Sam Keen)

Part 1: Asking questions more “open-endedly.” (Summary repeated from Introduction) In order to coordinate our life and work with the lives and work of other people, we all need to know more of what other people are feeling and thinking, wanting and planning. But our usual “yes/no” questions actually tend to shut people up rather than opening them up. You can encourage your conversation partners to share more of their thoughts and feelings by asking “open-ended” rather than “yes/no” questions.¹⁹ Open-ended questions allow for a wide range of responses. For example, asking “How did you like that food/movie/speech/doctor, etc.?” will evoke a more detailed response than “Did you like it?” (which could be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”).



Consider the difference between two versions of the same question, as each might occur in a conversation between two people in a close relationship:

¹⁹ For more practical information on how to ask questions more fruitfully, see Chapter 5 of Gerald Goodman’s *The Talk Book* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 1988).

“Well, honey, do you want to go ahead and rent that apartment we saw yesterday?”

AND...

“Well, honey, how do you feel about us renting that apartment we saw yesterday?”

The first version suggests a “yes” or “no” answer, favors “yes” and does not invite much discussion. A person hearing such a question may feel pressured to reach a decision, and may not make the best decision.

Both versions imply a suggestion to rent the apartment, but the second question is much more inviting of a wide range of responses. Even if our goal is to persuade, we can’t do a good job of that unless we address our listener’s concerns, and we won’t understand those concerns unless we ask questions that invite discussion.

When you are under time pressure, it is tempting to push people to make “yes-no” decisions. But pressing forward without addressing people’s concerns has played a key role in many on-the-job accidents and catastrophes (such as the Challenger Space Shuttle explosion).

On the next page you will find some examples of open-ended questions that could be helpful in:

- solving problems in a way that meets more of everyone’s needs,
- getting to know and understand the people around you better, and
- simply creating richer and more satisfying conversations.

Part 2: Asking questions more creatively. (Summary repeated from Introduction) What sort of questions are truly worth asking? When we ask questions we are using a powerful language tool to *focus conversational attention* and *guide our interaction with others*. But many of the questions we have learned to ask are totally fruitless and self-defeating (such as, parents to pregnant teen, “Why???! Why have you done this to us???!”). In general it will be more fruitful to ask “how” questions about the future rather than “why” questions about the past, but there are many more creative possibilities as well. Of the billions of questions we might ask, not all are equally fruitful or illuminating; not all are equally helpful in solving problems together. In this section we will explore asking powerfully creative questions (with the help of researchers in many fields).



Please note: Some of the questions discussed below, if asked without any preparation, may be experienced by others as *demanding* or as *invading one’s privacy*. Start by asking these questions of yourself first. And before asking them of others, practice the “introductions to a conversation” described in the Challenge Two chapter.

Question-asking in everyday life. As we wrestle with each new challenge in life, we ask ourselves and others a continuous stream of questions. Question-asking is one of the main ways that we try to get a grip on whatever is going on, but we are usually not very conscious of the quality of questions we ask.

“Why are you always such a jerk?”

or...

“How could we work together to solve this problem?”

As noted above, not all questions are of equal value. Many are a waste of effort but a few can be amazingly helpful. Learning to ask conscious, fruitful questions of others, of oneself, and about one’s situation or task at hand, is an important part of the training of many professionals: psychotherapists,²⁰ engineers, architects,²¹ mathematicians,²² doctors and others. All of these groups ask deeply penetrating questions. They do so in order to apply a body of knowledge to solve problems in a way that respects the unique elements of each new situation, person, piece of land, broken leg, canyon to be bridged, and so on. (A structured kind of self-questioning is also part of the communal life of the Quakers, as I have observed in attending various Quaker meetings, and part of Jesuit religious practice, as a Jesuit friend shared with me.)

“How could I have been so stupid?”

or...

“What could I learn from this experience?”

A tool for everyone. Asking conscious, creative and exploratory questions is not just for professionals; it is for all of us. We are each engaged in the process of trying to build a better life, a better family, a better workplace, a better world, just as if we were trying to build the

²⁰ This is especially true in narrative therapy. For dozens of inspiring examples see Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities*. New York: Norton, 1996. Chap. 5.

²¹ Donald A. Schön describes this as a process of inquiry and reflection-in-action in *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

²² For a list of questions that constitute a method of solving mathematical problems, see George Polya, *How to Solve It: A New Aspect of Mathematical Method*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957, xvi.

world’s tallest building. We can apply in our own lives some of the styles of creative questioning that engineers use to build better bridges, psychotherapists use to help their clients and negotiators use to reach agreements.

How am I going to nail that slob?

or...

What would be best for me in this situation?

The many examples of exploratory questions given by Donald Schön in *The Reflective Practitioner*²³ suggest that we use questions to make a kind of ‘space’ in our minds for things we do not know yet (in the sense of understand), or have not decided yet, or have not invented yet, or have not discovered yet. “Hmmm,” an architect might think, “how could we arrange this building so that it follows the contour of the land?”

The answer will involve a complex mix of discovering, inventing, understanding, and deciding, all pulled together partly by the creative power of the question. This thinking process is easier to imagine when we use visual examples, such as designing a house to blend into a hillside (but not cause a landslide!). But these same elements are present in all our cooperative problem-solving activities. Asking questions can allow us to start thinking about the unknown, because questions focus our attention, and provide a theme for continued exploration. Questions are like the mountain climber’s hook-on-the-end-of-a-rope: we throw the hook into the unknown, and we pull ourselves into the future. But we need to learn how and where to throw, so that we pull ourselves into a better future.

How can I do this without anybody finding out?

or...

If I do what I am thinking about doing, what kind of person will that help to make me?

As far as I know, there is no straight-forward set of rules about how to ask questions that are more helpful or more tuned to the needs of a particular situation, but there are many wonderful examples, from which we can draw inspiration and intuitive insight. The exercise that follows will give you a chance to try out some of the best questions ever asked.

Questions of power. In many situations you may not have the emotional, social or political power to ask creative questions. Political power often works to narrow the range of permissible questions and narrow the range of who is allowed to ask them. For example, it is difficult to get US decision-makers to consider the question “Now that the Cold War is over, why is the United States spending more money than ever on nuclear weapons?” Totalitarian governments, modern advertising agencies and abusive families all want us to obey in unthinking silence rather than to question and explore possibilities. Learning to ask creative questions, in a compassionate and conciliatory way, can be a large step forward in reclaiming your lost power as a person, a family member, a citizen and a problem-solver.

²³ Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*

Exercise 5-3: Expanding your tool kit of creative questions.

The list of questions presented below contains the most intense and creative questions I have been able to find, drawn from the works of many deep question-askers. Next to each question in the table below I have given the field in which I have encountered that question. Take each question on the list and imagine a situation in your life in which you might ask that question. This is a demanding exercise. You may want to break it up into several sessions. (In real life, as discussed in Chapter 2, it works better if you let people know what kind of conversation you want to have, before you start a conversation that includes challenging questions or intimate inquiries.)

| Question | Source fields | When and where you could ask these questions in your own life. |
|--|---|--|
| 1. How does this feel to me? 2. What (am I / are you) experiencing right now? | Gestalt therapy and general psychotherapy. | |
| 3. How could I have done that differently? How could you have done that differently? 4. What could (I / you) learn from this... (situation, mistake, painful experience)? | General psychotherapy. | |
| 5. What kind of explanations do I give myself when bad events happen? 6. How easy would it be for me to view this difficult situation as temporary, specific to one location and partly the result of chance? | Martin Seligman’s research on learned helplessness, optimism and explanatory style. ²⁴ <i>Note: Seligman found that over-generalizing plays a key role in making people feel depressed. When bad things happen, pessimists are more likely to say to themselves “That’s how it will always be, everywhere.” and “It’s totally and completely my fault.”</i> | |

²⁴Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism*. New York: Knopf, 1991.

A list of creative, exploratory questions (continued).

| Question | Source fields | When and where you could ask these questions in your own life. |
|---|--|--|
| <p>7. What is the most important thing that I want in this situation?</p> <p>8. What solutions might bring everyone more of what they want?</p> <p>9. What is my best alternative to a negotiated agreement?</p> <p>10. What kind of self-fulfilling prophecy to I want to set in motion in this situation?</p> | <p>Conflict resolution, negotiation, management, especially <i>Getting to Yes</i>.²⁵</p> <p><i>(Note: A self-fulfilling prophecy is a stance that generates its own validation. For example, a person walking down a crowded street screaming “You will not like me!” at passersby is making their statement come true.)</i></p> | |
| <p>11. What possibilities would be suggested if I were to look at this situation as if it were an airplane... a car... a circus... a movie... a Broadway musical..., etc.?</p> <p>12. What does this situation remind me of?</p> | <p>Creative problem-solving in the arts, architecture, engineering and management.²⁶</p> | |
| <p>13. If I do what I am thinking about doing, what kind of person will that help to make me?</p> | <p>Social constructionist communication theory.</p> <p><i>(Note: In the social constructionist view of being a person, a sense of self is the overarching story that persons tell to make sense out of their actions and the events of their lives. Each of <u>our</u> actions supports the development of some stories and inhibits the development of others.)</i></p> | |

²⁵Fisher, Ury and Patton, *Getting to Yes*.

²⁶Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*.

A list of creative, exploratory questions (continued).

| Question | Source fields | When and where you could ask these questions in your own life. |
|--|--|--|
| <p>14. What were the times like when we all got along together just fine, when we didn't have this problem? How did that work and what did that feel like?</p> <p>15. (focusing on success) Looking back on this accomplishment, what seem to be the turning points that made this possible?</p> <p>16. What were all the details of that moment of success?</p> <p>17. Reviewing all these moments of success up to now, what kind of future could be possible?</p> | <p>Narrative therapy.²⁷ (These are typical questions from narrative therapy that I have translated into a first person inquiry.)</p> <p><i>Note: The central concern of narrative therapy is that the stories we tell ourselves to make sense of our lives and our life difficulties <u>tend to leave out</u> the kinds of events in our lives that might support a more energizing story. Narrative therapy tries to bring these "sparkling moments" into the foreground of attention, and to use them as a basis for creating a story that emphasizes strength and resourcefulness rather than illness, dysfunction and disability.</i></p> | |

Your notes on asking questions more creatively:

²⁷Freedman and Combs, *Narrative Therapy*.

**Reading 5-1:
Radical Questions for Critical Times
By Sam Keen, PhD**

Rumor has it that on leaving the Garden of Eden, Adam said to Eve: "My dear, we are living in an age of transition." Ordinarily, life proceeds ordinarily. We dwell securely within the garden of the protective myths, values, and paradigms of our society; our questions are about making a living, purchasing the things we have been taught to desire, raising our children, and keeping up with the neighbors. But times of crisis challenge our comfortable assumptions about who we are and force us to ask more radical questions. Carl Jung reached such a point at midlife when he realized that he didn't know what myth he had been living.

Since permanent change is here to stay and crises and transitions are an inevitable part of the human condition, a wise person will hone some of the skills necessary for thriving in troubled times. Think of the crises every Adam and Eve must negotiate as composed of three interlocking circles: identity crises, love crises, social crises. It follows that the radical questions we most need to ask in times of transition (when our world is burning) are those addressed to the solitary self, those concerning the intimate relationship between I and thou, and those that have to do with the commonwealth within which we live and move and have our being.

Herewith, a selection to get you started. (Please send others that trouble, challenge, and inspire you to: Sam Keen, 16331 Norrbom Rd. Sonoma, California 95476)

Cross-Examining the Self

What is happening to me?
What comes next for me?
What is the source and meaning of my
restlessness, dissatisfaction, longing, anxiety?
What do I really desire?
What have I not brought forth that is within me?
What have I contributed to life?
What are my gifts? My vocation?
What ought I to do? Who says?
What does my dream-self know that "I" don't?

What story, myth, values, authorities, institutions
inform my life?

What is my ultimate concern?

How faithful am I to my best vision of myself?

At whose expense has my wealth, security, and
happiness been purchased?

Questions for I and Thou

Whom do I love?

By whom am I loved?

Am I more loved or loving?

How intimate are we?

How close is close enough?

What are we doing together?

Do we help each other broaden and deepen the
reach of our caring, to become more
compassionate?

What clandestine emotions fear, anger,
resentment, guilt, shame, sorrow, desire for
revenge - keep us from being authentic with
each other?

When do our vows and promises become a prison
from which I and thou must escape to
preserve the integrity of our separate beings?

How can we renew our passion for and
commitment to one another?

When is it time to say goodbye?

Probing the Commonwealth

Who is included within the "we," the community,
the polls that encompasses and defines my
being?

Who is my neighbor?

For whom, beyond the circle of my family, do I
care?

Who are my enemies?

To what extremes would I go to defend my
country?

Can I be just, loving, merciful, and be loyal to my
profession, my corporation, my country?

If we were to measure our success by Gross
National Happiness (the national standard of
Bhutan) how would our economic, political,
educational, and religious institutions
change?

What would have to happen to convince sovereign
nations to wage peace rather than expending

their wealth and creativity in producing more deadly and genocidal weapons?

If you doubt that asking a new question is a royal road to revolution, transformation, and renewal, consider what happened when Descartes asked, "Of what may I be certain?" or when Newton asked, "How is a falling apple like a rising moon?" or when Marx asked, "Why were men born free but are everywhere in chains?" or when Freud asked, "What is the meaning of dreams?"

Your question is the quest you're on. No questions — no journey. Timid questions — timid trips. Radical questions — an expedition to the root of your being. Bon voyage.

Sam Keen, philosopher, teacher and author, has written many books about being human, including *Apology for Wonder*, *Fire in the Belly*, *To Love and Be Loved*, and *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination*. The above article is reprinted here with the author's permission. (*The Cooperative Communication Skills extended community thanks Dr. Keen for contributing this exercise to the Workbook and the Communication-Skills.NET online library. For information on Sam Keen's latest workshops, books and projects visit www.samkeen.com.*)

Suggested additional readings on the topic of questioning more creatively (include hyperlinks to the Communication-Skills.NET BookFind pages).

[The 7 Powers of Questions: Secrets to Successful Communication in Life and at Work](#)

by Dorothy Leeds

This unique book reveals the seven powers of questions -- and shows how to use them most effectively. Learn how questions can improve relationships, help determine what people really want, uncover opportunities, persuade others, and get more out of every business or personal encounter. (To buy this book please visit <https://bookfind.info/1002/> .)

[Questions That Work: How to Ask Questions That Will Help You Succeed in Any Business Situation](#) by Andrew Finlayson

Written by a seasoned business reporter and TV news manager, this provocative "questioning manifesto" and practical "how-to" book gives people the insights and tools to ask effective questions that get results in every realm of their professional lives. It is also a powerful tool that will help business leaders create a progressive environment where questions flow freely and creatively-boosting knowledge and performance increase at all levels of the organization.

[Change Your Questions, Change Your Life: 7 Powerful Tools for Life and Work](#)

by Marilee G. Adams, Ph.D.

Written as an engaging fable, *Change Your Questions* inspires readers to take charge of their thinking in order to accomplish goals, improve relationships, advance careers, investigate new territories, and in general gain greater life satisfaction. This book explains how to "be your own coach," outlines the author's Question Thinking Model, and lists the top 12 questions for change.