

Questions to Explore Problems

Dale Emery

dale@dhemery.com

<http://dhemery.com>

ASKING GREAT QUESTIONS

One of the most powerful things you can do to help someone solve a problem is to ask great questions. Below are dozens of questions that I've found essential in my work as a coach.

Questions for information. Ask you scan the list, you'll notice that each question is designed to elicit information. This may sound obvious—after all, isn't that what questions are for? Not all questions have that purpose. Some questions are designed primarily to deliver a secret payload of embedded advice—questions such as *Have you considered reassigning the work to someone else?* Though there are situations in which such leading questions are helpful, and though all questions advise to some extent, I'm focusing here on questions designed to raise information.

The power of great questions. Often, a key reason people are stuck, unable to solve the problem, is that they are not applying all of the relevant information stashed away in the unlit corners of their minds. Over and over, as I ask questions to try to understand a problem a client is trying to solve, the client will have a sudden *AHA!* and solve the problem right in front of me. Of course, this doesn't happen every time, but the process of asking and answering great questions always shifts our thinking in useful ways.

Permission, empathy, sensitivity, and safety. Some of the questions are quite personal. Being asked these questions can leave a person feeling vulnerable. Ask these questions only with curiosity, sensitivity, and empathy, and only in the context of an agreement that gives explicit permission for you to adopt this questioning role. Ask them in a safe environment, which usually means in private. And always make clear that when the person wants to stop, you will stop.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PROBLEM

Describe the problem in a few words. This isn't technically a question, but it is a request. And it's a great place to start.

What would you like to have happen? This makes the desired state explicit.

What is happening instead? This makes the perceived state explicit.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DESIRED STATE

If you had that, what would that do for you? This seeks the deeper need behind the stated desire, which makes the significance of the problem clearer. I call this question *The Value Question*.

If you had *that*, what would that do for you? When you get an answer to The Value Question, you may want to ask it again, to elicit yet deeper goals. Emphasizing “that” makes it clear that you’re referring to the answer you just heard.

If you had that, what would that do for *you*? Use this phrasing when the person states a goal or desire that seems impersonal, external, or indirect. Emphasizing “you” asks for a desire or goal that matters in a more personal, direct way.

What else would you like to have happen? The word “else” is very useful when exploring problems. You can use it in many of these questions whenever you want to expand the range of ideas you’re talking about.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PERCEIVED STATE

What makes that a problem for you? This question asks about the significance of the situation, about how the situation relates to the person’s goals and needs.

What makes *that* a problem for you? As with The Value Question, this question is one you can ask several times in a row. But be careful: This question asks the person to explore the pain of the situation. Be sensitive to what the person is feeling, and don’t push this (or any other question).

What makes that a *problem* for you? Ask this if you aren’t sure what makes the situation a problem.

What makes that a problem for *you*? Use this phrasing when the person states a problem that seems impersonal or indirect. Emphasizing *you* asks how the problem affects the person directly. Again, this is a very personal question. Ask gently, if at all.

What do you want to make sure *doesn’t* change? In any problems, there are elements that the person wants to change, and elements the person wants to preserve.

What have you not noticed about this problem? This question invites the person to assess how they are thinking about the problem, and the limits they had placed on their thinking up until now. It’s something of a trick question, so it often elicits only a puzzled look. But when it works, it can jiggle the person’s thinking loose in a powerful way.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE

What concerns you about this? Elicits concerns, expectations, values, and goals that may not have been mentioned before.

How does the problem affect you personally? This question asks about personal concerns and goals, rather than e.g. organizational ones.

What makes this problem important to you? This question asks about the deeper values and goals at stake.

How do you feel about the problem? Strong emotions can help or hinder in finding solutions. It's useful to at least acknowledge their presence, and possibly their effects.

What leads you to feel that way? This question seeks information about the underlying needs, concerns, interpretations, and perceptions that give rise to the feelings.

What other factors contribute to the problem? Elicits additional factors that may not have been mentioned.

How hopeful are you that this can be resolved? Hope is information. Hopelessness is information.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

Do you mean _____ ? (Fill in the blank with your best guess as to the intended meaning.) Ask this when you are not certain that you understand the meaning or significance of some new information.

What did you see or hear that led you to that conclusion? Ask this question when the person is offering conclusions and abstractions. The question invites the person to recall the specific, sensory details.

What meaning do you make of that? Interpretations give information about the frame of reference from which the person perceives the problem and responds to it. See my blog post "[Frames of Reference](#)" for more about this topic.

What other meanings could you make of that? Invites the person to explore other meanings and other possible frames of reference.

Can you tell me more about that? Elicits additional information. It's surprising how often this simple question yields crucial information that had not been mentioned before.

Is there anything else you'd like to say about the problem? Similar to the previous question, but this one elicits information about the overall problem, rather than about a specific element of the problem.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PAST

How did the problem come about? Seeks information about the events, actions, and reasons that led to the current situation.

How did you become aware of the situation? The person may have anticipated the problem, or seen signs of it early on. Or the problem may have seemed to appear out of the blue. This may be important information about the person, the problem, and the environment in which the problem began and grew.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PRESENT

What keeps the problem from resolving itself? There may be forces—personal, interpersonal, social, organizational, technical, or other—that actively sustain the situation, and even intentionally sustain it.

What makes this a problem to solve now, rather than a month ago, or a month from now? This can yield information about changes in the situation, changes in the person’s perception of the situation, or changes in the person’s needs and concerns.

What are you willing to do? This asks about the person’s abilities and priorities for solving the problem.

What are you not willing to do? Seeks information about competing concerns, goals, and commitments, and about personal and organizational boundaries.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE (IMAGINED) FUTURE

What will happen if this continues? The answer may or may not give reliable information about what will happen. More reliably, it gives information about the person’s expectations.

What will you do if this continues? Checks for possible alternative courses of action, and the conditions under which the person might choose those.

What’s the worst that could happen? You can ask this question either about the continuing problem, or about a course of action that the person is considering. The question helps to make the person’s vague fears concrete. This is a surprisingly powerful question, one that people often have not considered. In many cases, the “worst thing that could happen” is far more palatable than whatever vague, amorphous fears the person was harboring.

What’s the best that could happen? This question allows for the possibility that the worst thing that could happen isn’t the only thing that could happen.

What’s most likely to happen? It’s best to ask this question after asking the previous two. Having considered the best and worst possible outcomes, people are often able to assess the most likely outcome reasonably well.

QUESTIONS ABOUT SOLVING

What have you tried so far? Seeks information about the person’s actions and thinking. I find this question extremely useful in coaching.

How did you decide to do that? Asks about the criteria that the person weighed possible solutions.

What happened? Asks for concrete details about the results of prior attempts to solve the problem.

What ideas have you considered and rejected? This question can yield important information about factors that have not yet been discussed.

What led you to reject that idea? Again, asks about the criteria the person has used so far in weighing possible actions.

What ideas have you considered, but not yet tried? Further elicits information about how the problem has been managed so far.

How did you decide not to do that yet? Seeks further information about decision criteria.

What haven't you thought of yet? This question asks people to test and reconsider the constraints they've placed on their thinking.

I know you can't think of any other ideas, but if you *could* think of another idea, what would it be? This paradoxical question works seldom, but when it does, the new idea can be powerful. At the very least the question usually gets a laugh, which then leads to more flexible thinking.

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR EXPLORATION

What just happened for you? I sometimes ask this question when I notice a sudden shift in the person's body posture, tone of voice, or facial expression. Such shifts often indicate sudden, significant changes in the person's thinking or feelings. I'm not able to "read" body language; I never know the details of what internal shift just occurred. But it's likely that something important happened. So I ask. This is a delicate question. Ask it gently.

What else should I be asking you? This question asks about topics that might be relevant, but which you haven't yet explored.

What else would you like to tell me? Another expansive question that gives a chance to notice important concerns that haven't yet been discussed.

What question do want me *not* to ask? This is another paradoxical question, which directly asks people to talk about things they don't want to talk about. Whether people answer it outwardly or not, they answer it inwardly to themselves. And surprisingly often, they proceed to talk about the topic anyway. As with many of the other questions in these lists, this one is very personal, and must be used with greatest empathy, curiosity, and sensitivity to surroundings.

Which of my questions seem most helpful? Which least helpful? You can ask this question at any time. The answer gives information for both of you, which can lead to further questions.

Is there anything you want to ask me? You may be asking a lot of personal questions here. Your willingness to answer questions can help to create safety in the conversation.