

"THE STUPIDITY OF PEOPLE COMES FROM HAVING AN ANSWER FOR EVERYTHING. THE WISDOM OF THE NOVEL COMES FROM HAVING A QUESTION FOR EVERYTHING."

– MILAN KUNDERA, CZECH NOVELIST

Creative Questioning: The art of asking dumb questions

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In today's world, the old ways of doing business no longer produce the results nor provide the value they once did. We are constantly faced with having to find new and better ways of operating. Consequently, one of the top challenges we face as leaders is that of enhancing creativity within ourselves and within others.

In taking on this challenge we must first comprehend the intimacy of the relationship between creativity and thinking. Our ability to be creative depends upon our capacity to think, which in turn depends upon our ability to question not only our practices, but also our beliefs and assumptions. We must learn to question the limits of our thinking. It is through this manner of questioning that we are able to rethink our thinking. Thus, the quality of our questions determines the quality of our creativity.

To enhance creativity, we must develop and maintain an attitude of creative questioning. We must become competent in the art of "asking dumb questions," the first of which might be: "What is a dumb question?". While this question may sound naive (after all everyone knows what a dumb question is), the answer to this dumb question, like all answers to dumb questions, is not as straightforward as we might imagine.

Dumb questions, the kind children ask but most adults know better than to ask, are born out of a desire to understand, out of curiosity not expectation. They stem from our imagination and are designed to engage us in thought. Dumb questions are simple questions that probe the obvious and simultaneously challenge and direct our thinking.

Dumb questions are not accusatory or argumentative statements in disguise. Nor are they formulated with preconceived answers in mind. Rather, they are probing yet open. Used effectively, these enquiries lead to a deeper sense of reality, truth, or purpose. They expand our capacity to see more clearly and inspire us to explore possibilities we would otherwise ignore. Above all they are interesting enough to encourage finding an answer.

While personality and leadership styles play an important role in our creative questioning style, our capacity to ask creative questions is neither a natural talent nor an in-born trait. It is a learned competency based on motivation, know-how and experience.

Creative questioning is not an easy discipline to master. As a practice, it requires us to have a sense of adventure, to take risks, and to push into the unknown. Creative questioning necessitates a willingness to think beyond the limits of our assumptions.

SOME EXAMPLES

Given that creative questioning is a dynamic process, there are many ways of asking these questions. Compare the following examples. Calgary consultant, Andy Newson, attributes his ability to question assumptions as key to his success as a geologist. The provocative nature of his questions serves to "separate factual data from the interpretation of data" thus allowing him to challenge the underlying assumptions of previous interpretations. As a result, he is able to identify the exceptions within data patterns and make discoveries others have missed. Morgan Yates, an engineer and strategy advisor with **Shell Canada Limited**, makes use of creative questioning during problem-solving sessions by posing penetrating questions that "encourage people to reframe problems" and see them from new perspectives. Consequently, what first appears as an unsolvable problem becomes solvable.

Others, like Bill Henderson, **Tidal Energy's** vice president of sales, operations, and marketing, sees himself not as an answer man but as a question man. He stimulates creativity by tossing out what he calls "teaser questions"—questions that cause him and others to rethink their thinking. At **Canadian Petroleum**, geophysical consultant Paul Begg asks "what if?" questions that force him and his colleagues to think laterally and proactively, while exploration geologist, Scott Gardiner's "compare and contrast" style questions identify exceptions to patterns that help make what was once strange become familiar.

ASKING CREATIVE QUESTIONS

Because creative questioning is a learned competency, improvement is always possible. The basics of creative questioning are quite simple.



First, get in the habit of carrying a notebook with you at all times. Use this notebook to record your observations, questions, reflections, insights, and musings. **Second**, pay attention to the types of questions you and others ask during meetings, phone calls, or conversations of any kind.

Notice the answers each question generates. Become aware of question and answer patterns. Keep in mind that dumb questions are born out of curiosity, and as such encourage exploration. If you are not travelling uncharted waters, you aren't asking dumb questions. Record the best dumb questions. Listen to the questions children ask, and the answers they give.

Third, start asking questions of yourself and then of others. Ask simple questions, questions that increase your understanding, that challenge the way you think.

Keep your questions non-judgmental, open, and brief. Observe what happens when questions are judgmental, dead-ended, or complex. Ask who, what, where, when, how, and why questions. Ask "what if" or "compare and contrast" questions. Pose option type questions. Be sure to vary the way in which you ask questions. Notice the type of questions you ask and the types you don't. Notice the answers you get and where they take you. Record your observations in your notebook.

SUGGESTED TECHNIQUE

I suggest using the following creative questioning practice when you are facing a difficult decision, struggling with a challenging problem, engaging in a complex task, are curious about a topic, or when you are absolutely sure that you have the answer you're looking for. At the top of a blank page in your notebook, jot down a key word or a short statement that captures the essence of the decision, problem, task or topic under consideration. Next, write out a list of one hundred questions that come to mind as you think about your topic. Write quickly, ignoring spelling, grammar, and repeated questions. Piggyback questions onto each other. Ask questions of your questions. Write all one hundred questions without interruption. Be aware of the temptation during this process to start recording responses to your questions. Avoid this temptation and record questions only. Generally speaking, it is in the

latter half of your list that you will uncover the most interesting and provocative questions, that is, questions which provide unexpected insights and new perspectives.

ONCE YOU HAVE FINISHED YOUR LIST, PUT IT ASIDE FOR AWHILE AND PAY ATTENTION TO THE IDEAS THAT PERCOLATE TO THE SURFACE OF YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS.

Remember, the purpose of this practice is to prime your creative pump, to bring forth unexamined solutions and insights. As new ideas and questions come to mind record them in your notebook. Within the next two to twenty-four hours review your list. Select those questions which are most interesting to you. Use them as a focus point for further exploration of your topic. Contemplate them, discuss them. Use them as starting points for repeating this exercise from new perspectives. Use them as the basis for researching the literature. Keep track of your insights and learnings as well as any new questions which emerge.

In the process of practicing creative questioning, it is quite natural to develop the habit of asking the same kinds of questions over and over. To avoid this problem and to build your repertoire of question types do the hundred question exercise with a partner. Begin as usual with a topic statement and a listing of questions. Once you have written ten questions, switch lists with your partner. Read your partners list and add ten more questions of your own on their list. Exchange lists and read the questions your partner added to your list. Add ten more questions to this list. Continue exchanging lists until you have a hundred questions on each. Discuss the questions with your partner. This activity can also be done with several people by passing the lists from one person to another rather than back and forth with each other. This is an excellent exercise for collaborative exploration of a topic.

If creativity originates with a question, then it is the art of asking dumb questions that leads to enhanced creativity. Experiment with the practice of creative questioning and construct variations of your own until you discover what works best for you.