CHAPTER 7

Asking Good Questions?

Excerpt by Sam Killermann & Meg Bolger

Co-Creators of *The Safe Zone Project*

Unlocking *the* MAGIC *of* Facilitation

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11 Key Concepts You Didn't Know You Didn't Know

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Asking Good Questions?

"Draw a monster. Why is it a monster?"

- Janice Lee

It is through good questions that facilitation shines. And the shiniest facilitators around have the ability to identify a good question, ask it in a non-judgmental, non-shaming way, and then use the response given to further catalyze learning.

We define a good question as one that intentionally leads to learning, whether that's an expected direction or not. Good questions are productive questions. Good questions facilitate further exploration and curiosity.

Good questions don't necessarily have to be answered aloud; sometimes a question itself, without an answer, will prompt introspective learning. Good questions also don't have to follow a particular format; every type of question can lead to learning, and every type of question can stint learning. Let's start by exploring that.

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Most people, in learning to become facilitators (or, you know, during life), are taught two types of questions: open-ended questions (that don't have a "yes" or "no" answer, which we're told are good) and closed-ended questions (yes" or "no" answer, which we're told are bad). That's a start, but a great facilitator has far more than two types of questions in their back pocket, and knows all types of questions can lead to learning, depending on how you use them. Here are a bunch of different types of questions we rely on in every facilitation:

Challenging questions: a way to suggest an alternative idea, or a different way of thinking about something, that grants agency to the person who had the idea you are challenging. *Example: "Is it possible that the alternative [to what you just said] might be true for some people? How so?"*

Clarifying questions: often a rephrasing of another's point or question, these are used to ensure that what was communicated (from the other person to you) was heard. *Example: "What did you mean when you said [...]?"*

Gauging questions: to get a sense of where someone, or

a group, is at, mentally, emotionally, or physically. The responses can be used to determine what activities or discussion is needed next. *Example: we often use "how would you define gender identity" as a gauging question, and based on the complexity of their explanation (e.g., "gender exists as a spectrum" vs. "GENDER IS PENISES OR VAGINAS!"), we know how to move forward.*

Leading questions: often used when you have an answer to in your mind (e.g., a particular learning outcome) and you use to help participants get there (mostly) on their own. *Example: "How might [...] be a factor in creating [...]?"*

Probing questions: follow-ups to a broader question, probing is pinpointing a specific part of someone's answer (or a sentiment expressed in a group) and asking questions to highlight, expose, or better understand where it's coming from. *Example: "Can you speak more to that idea? Why is it important?"*

Reflective questions: prompts for the participants to think about themselves, what they've learned, who they are, or what they are engaged in currently, with the hope of bringing that understanding to the greater group as an opportunity for learning. *Example: "Have you ever experienced [...]? What did it feel like?" (We dig more into this second question in the chapter on Learning from Emotions.)*

THREE MAIN CATEGORIES OF QUESTIONS, INTO WHICH ALL THE ABOVE TYPES MAY FALL

So you may have noticed that we didn't include open-ended vs. closed-ended questions in the list above. And you might be thinking, "*Um. Dudes. What trickery is this?*" No trickery! We don't think of these as *types* of questions, but as overarching categories, into which all of the types of questions we have above (and others) can fit.

With that said, following are three categories of questions. Read closely: there is more to closed-ended and open-ended questions than you may think!

Closed-Ended Questions

A closed-ended question is any question to which the response is known by the responder, and is finite. Oftentimes, these come in the form of "yes/no" questions (e.g., "Are you enjoying this activity?"), but they can also come in other forms. Introductions are another common time when a facilitator may use a closed-ended question, like when asking participants to disclose demographic information about themselves (e.g., "What are your jobs?" "Where do you live?").

The two key elements to closed-ended questions are that the responder *knows* the response before you ask them (it's already floating around in their mind—no digging is required), and that the response is *finite* (it has an anticipatable end). With these things in mind, closed-ended questions are great for a variety of circumstances:

- When you are trying to get a lot of input from the group without using much time. *Example: "Are people good to continue for the next 15 minutes or do we need to break now?"*

- When you have a really large group, and you're trying to make what would otherwise be a teaching or lecturing session more interactive. Having participants raise their hands if they identify with a statement is a form of a closed-ended question. *Example: "Can I see a show of hands of anyone who has ever been asked to speak as a representative of their group?"*

- If you don't know the group well, and don't yet have a strong sense of what direction the facilitation should go. *Example: Would folks like to spend more time on the concept of universal design or are we ready to move on?*

Open-Ended Questions

An open-ended question is any question to which the response may or may not be known by the responder, and is infinite. A common open-ended question facilitators use is "How did that activity make you feel?" A common open-ended question you may use every day is "What's new with you?"

The key thing about open-ended questions is that the response is potentially infinite[1] (it does not have an anticipatable end). With this in mind, open-ended questions are perfect complements to closed-ended questions, and they are

1 If you're struggling with the finite vs. infinite responses concept, consider this example: **"What is your name?" vs. "Why is that your name?"** In the former question, the response is limited at most to the person's full name (and perhaps a nickname, "...but my friends call me 'Lunchbox.'"). The second question is limitless: the responder might tell a story of how their name was chosen, they might talk about the origins of the name, they might do both of those things and something else, or they might even state that they're uncomfortable with the question, or refuse to answer—and what matters here isn't what the responder chooses to say (because whatever they choose will likely have a limit), it's what they were able to choose from. It's the limitless choice they have that makes this question "infinite."

also helpful in many other situations. Consider the following cases:

- When you are trying to better understand an individual participant, and have the time to give them the agency to choose exactly what and how much to disclose. *Example: After asking "Did y'all enjoy that activity?" if someone answers "Yes!" you might ask "What about it did you like?"*
- When you have a small group, and there is the ability to really get to know one another. *Example: "What are you all hoping to gain out of this experience together?"*
- If you know the group well, or have a feeling they'll know where they want the facilitation to go. *Example: "Today, we're hoping to gain a better understanding of [...]. Where do you think we should start?"*

Co-creative Questions

A co-creative question is any question to which the response is likely unknown by the responders (and may not even be known by the asker), and is infinite. Co-creative questions allow the responders to learn about a concept they may not have realized they knew about, through their own responses (and the responses of others).

A common format for a co-creative question is taking two responses someone has given and combining them into a new open-ended question (e.g., "So, earlier you said [...], and you feel [...], how/what/why/who [...]?). One of the simplest co-creative questions is "Why?" Asking a participant "Why [...]?" repeatedly, diving ever deeper into a concept—a tenet of the Socratic Method—can lead to tremendous learning. However, if they spend a lot of time with toddlers, it might also lead to traumatic sobbing. Beware.

There are two wonderful things about co-creative questions: [1] they can simultaneously highlight for a person the knowledge *they've* acquired, and turn it into learning for everyone else; and [2] they often present opportunities for you, as the facilitator, to learn from the group. You might be *leading* the participant in a direction when you ask one, but because they're open-ended, the response might be (and often is) something you've never thought of.

Here are a few scenarios where co-creative questions are ideal:

- When there is a participant (or the group at large) who just doesn't seem to be "getting" or connecting with whatever content you're talking about. *Example: "I am hearing that in your experience, men are always more into sports than women. What would it mean if there were a group of men who didn't like sports? What would that say about them?"*

- If there is pushback, or you are talking about a controversial, polarizing issue. *Example: "What is the worst case scenario you can imagine if [...]? What are things we could do to prevent that from happening?"*

- When you have a lot of time to explore without the promise of gaining any learning from that use of time (co-creative questions are always a risk, and often require several follow-up questions to work). *Example: "I am hearing different thoughts on whether parents should have paid time away from work when their children are born. Why do you think we all have different opinions on this topic?"*

Now that we know the anatomy of good questions, let's talk about how to put them into action in your trainings. *Can we call this the physiology of good questions? Why might it*

annoy you if we keep using more and more taxonomies to define questions? Are we still friends?

PUTTING TYPES AND CATEGORIES OF QUESTIONS TO WORK

Remember, as we said in the beginning of this chapter, the main thing that separates a good question from a bad one is how much learning it evokes. Keep the following things in mind—in addition to all that jazz we said above—when choosing your questions, and you will be able to sit back during a facilitation as your questions do all heavy lifting.

Prep

Asking good questions is not only an improv-like "in-the-moment" skill. Taking time when you're prepping for the workshop to consider what kind of questions you should ask, how you should ask them, and what type of learning and answers you're looking for is essential to asking good questions.

One way to do this is to write up discussion questions beforehand for each activity you're facilitating, and then jot down a few bullet points of learning you hope these questions will lead to. That way, even if those things don't come up from the group, you can plop them on top yourself—little cherries on the facilitation sundae.

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Sequencing

The order in which you ask questions can be as important as the questions themselves. Imagine that in facilitation you are constructing a building with your group members. The answers they provide to your questions, and the learning that takes place, are the bricks; the questions are the scaffolding that allows you to build higher and higher. You have to start at the bottom and work your way up[2].

If you have heard of the debriefing technique known as the "What? So what? Now what?" you already know a little bit about sequencing questions. This technique empowers a group to define the learning that is taking place ("What?"), why it is important in their own lives ("So what?"), and then to consider how they might integrate the learning in their future life and work ("Now what?").

Another model we've really found helpful to keep in mind when sequencing our questions is the experiential learning model[3]. This model has 5 stages: Experience, Share, Process, Generalize, and Apply.

Experience is the actual doing of the activity or having of the discussion. You may need questions in the actual activity as well, but these aren't your processing questions.

Share is talking directly about the experience, reflecting on the experience of doing. *"What was it like to do that*

2 Or you could build a really high scaffolding and just start dropping bricks of knowledge on people from the sky. While it sounds like the facilitator edition of Angry Birds, we don't recommend it.

3 A handy handout on this model can be found at this link: http://bit.ly/UTMlm

activity? Did you have any thoughts or feelings you didn't expect? How did it feel to be asked to share with a partner? How did it feel to have to step into the circle?"

Process is the next layer in, when we are starting to get at the heart of the learning goals of the activity. *"What did you learn during the course of that activity you hadn't considered? What kind of insight did you learn about yourself during this activity? Why do you think I had you step into the circle rather than stepping out? What might that represent?"*

Generalize is when we start to bring the processing outside of the activity. We do this by asking questions that allow participants to start seeing the bigger picture importance of the learning they were just processing. *"Where else in your life do you think that type of experience may occur? In what other areas of life could the things we were just talking about be important?"*

Apply is when we get to a place where participants integrate what they are learning to specific situations, to their jobs, to their relationships, or their life. The questions you ask here will hopefully bring what is learned in the training out into the world. *"How do you think this kind of insight could be incorporated into your job or into a group you're involved with? If you had to teach someone about something you learned in this activity, how would you do it? What did you learn from this activity that will change how you interact or engage in the future?"*

Execution

The *way* we ask the question matters too. As facilitators, much of *how* we do matters more than *what* we do, and this

is true here as well. Here are some elements to keep in mind that can impact the outcome of your questions:

Tone. Tone is huge for creating those shame-free learning spaces. We want to answer questions when someone is genuinely curious about the answer, so it is important as facilitators that we clearly communicate with our tone our curiosity about the respondent's answer.

Answering first. As a facilitator, when you let folks know what you think first, some may internalize this as the "right" answer, and be less willing to share their thoughts. On the other hand, it may lower the risk and invite more people to share. This is a tricky balance. If you want your participants to be vulnerable, it helps if they know you're willing to be vulnerable as well (and modeling this can break the ice); but reserving your opinion until the group has responded will help prevent you from swaying their thoughts too much.

The "awkward" silence. Silence is important ingredient in facilitation. It affords time for folks to internally process the question, to build up the courage to talk, and it can be a welcome and needed pause in the flow of the workshop—a breath of fresh air. If you're asking complex questions, reflective questions, then folks are going to need time to think through them. All of this creates moments of silence in the room. That's okay! Silence feels different for different people, but it is almost always necessary for good questions to grow into great questions. If you, as the facilitator, are uncomfortable with silence, it will likely feel awkward for everyone in the room. If you embrace the silence, you're opening the door for others

to do so as well.

ASKING FOR FORGIVENESS AND PERMISSION

What we've laid out above is meant to serve as a road map. Questions are (without question) the most important vehicle in which you can facilitate a group from point A to point B. And like all road maps, sometimes they can get you exactly where you need to go, and sometimes you read them wrong and they get you lost. This couldn't be more true than with asking questions.

There will be times when a question you ask takes a group from point A to being even more stubbornly at point A; or when you ask a question hoping for B and you end up lost in X, Y, and Z; or—the thing many of us dread the most—when you get a group to point B (*Yay! Go you! You're awesome!*) then ask a question that undermines what the group learned, and you all find yourselves back at A (*Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.*).

Questions are risky. Facilitation is risky. As we discussed before, the temptation to lecture comes from wanting to have full control. With more control there is less risk.

There's this phrase that amuses Sam[4]: "It's better to ask for forgiveness later than permission now," meaning do what you want (even if you might have not gotten a "Thumbs up!"), then apologize after. By choosing to facilitate learning, instead of lecturing or teaching, we are, in a way, asking our

4 It's a miserable model for consent. The expression says "I know you'd say no if I asked, so I'm not going to ask, and trust that you'll be cool with this afterward." It's emblematic of facilitation, because 100% informed consent isn't possible in an uncharted journey that could end up in a place you never expected it going.

group for permission now to ask for forgiveness later. We're asking their permission to involve them in the learning every time we ask them a question; then, when things don't go exactly as we had in mind (as they never will—not *exactly*), we ask for forgiveness as we redirect. And this continues throughout the experience.

Facilitation is inviting the participants to contribute to the learning with every question we ask, while accepting responsibility for the learning (so we can build on it) and lack of learning (so we can refocus) that's already happened. It's going in knowing that we're going to fail, but hoping that we can fail forward together.

And with great risk comes great reward. The reward of asking good questions is seeing a light go on in a person's eyes, and the feeling in your gut that they get something important that comes with it. It's a brighter light than you've ever seen when you taught someone something, because through asking the perfect question, we've enabled them to teach it to themselves. It's learning we know will stick, and that they will carry with them into their life. Our goal was to get them from point A to point B, and the best questions will leave them walking eagerly on their own through B toward point C.

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