

OPEN MIC, November 22, 2011 RECAP of “Powerful Questions” Conversation

Synopsis: Today’s topic, “Powerful Questions,” drew the second largest turnout since Open Mic launched on January 9, 2009 (remember those days?). I had to borrow bridge chairs from the neighbors!

I spoke about my interest in what makes for a Powerful Question (or PQ) and invited everyone to write down a PQ they’ve experienced (i.e, either a question they had asked or have been asked) and a summary of its back story. Five people shared their PQs and stories. I then related some of the PQs from a session I conducted at a recent conference. Fascinating discussion ensued: about the state of mind of the person asking the PQ, the relationship between the questioner and recipient, and whether we can learn to ask more powerful questions and become better listeners (the consensus: yes, we sure can).

Recap:

As **background**, I noted that while I’m most associated in people’s minds with appreciative questions, my interest in questions dates back many years. My graduate school research was about the effects of different types of interview questions; for my MBA assistantship, I prepared an interview audit guide (aka: a bunch of questions) for strategic audits of hospitals and hospital systems; while a consultant at KPMG, I developed so many interview guides that I became “the go-to person” for such documents. Then I encountered Appreciative Inquiry (AI), and my question focus turned towards the positive. Most recently, I’ve widened the lens as far as possible, wondering and inquiring about what makes for a Powerful Question; what about the question itself, the context, the relationship, the timing, the specific wording, the person asking the question, etc. makes it powerful? What impacts does a PQ have? What happens as a result?” Gauging from the turnout for the two PQ conversations that I’ve convened to date (including today’s Open Mic), others share my curiosity.

The PQ Exercise: I invited participants to “*Please think about and write down a particularly ‘Powerful Question’ you’ve used or experienced: You might find it ‘powerful’ for any of these reasons:*”

- It’s a “tried-and-true” question for you.
- This question makes you think, and perhaps leads to insights and more.
- It resolved an impasse for you, for you and someone else, or for a group.
- Or any other reason you find it powerful.

Additionally, I asked them to “*briefly describe circumstances in which the question is (was) used; who used it; its impact; and what makes/made it powerful.*”

Sharing our Powerful Qs: Five callers shared their questions and stories. *Note: as you read each one, you might ask yourself “How can I apply or adapt this question to my work and life?”*

Powerful Question #1: “If you had a magic wand, what would you do differently?”

Back story: this caller was part of a consulting team called in to review a failing project that, in his words, “Was in Year 5 of a 3-year project”. During the first day of “awful” interviews, the team’s questions (such as “What has gone well?”, “What has gone poorly?”, “What accounts for the problems?”) worked poorly, and they sensed interviewees’ rage beneath the surface. The team scrapped the protocol and went in the next day with one simple question for a new set of interviewees: “*If you had a magic wand, what would you do differently?*” The effect was indeed magical, cutting through fear (which had stifled imagination) and releasing a torrent of creative suggestions; so much so, that the team went back and used this question with the prior day’s interviewees, with equally powerful results as day two. The question has become one of his go-to questions for project reviews.

PQ#2: “To what extent do you want advice?”

Back story: this counselor/financial planner had (in an earlier job) encountered employees wanting to cash in their retirement plans early (entailing a 10% penalty), and she felt they weren’t considering the longer term financial implications of this decision. To cut through often-lengthy discussions, she began asking “To what extent do you want advice about this?” (Implying “or have you made up your mind?”). This question forced them to ask themselves “Do I want advice, or just the cash?” and led to briefer, clearer, and more satisfying outcomes. This caller has applied what she calls her “TWEDY” stem to other circumstances, such as “**To What Extent Do You** want to make this change in your (fill in the blank)?”

PQ#3: “Paint me a picture of your Ideal Day.”

Back story: this financial life planner typically asks “What is your Ideal Morning?” (Or “Ideal Day,” “Ideal Week,” etc.) as part of the visioning process. With a recent client who described herself as being burned out in her job, the Ideal Day question fell flat, meeting with a blank stare and silence. Recalling the phrasing we had used when she and I recently trained planners in the Kinder Institute approach, she changed the question to “*Paint me a picture of your ideal morning,*” which shifted the client into her visual/spatial thinking mode. “Within one minute, the client was describing her ideal day.” It was such a shift that the planner has now adopted this form of question/request/invitation with other life planning clients.

PQ#4: A set of five questions for a project review (very applicable to other situations)

This caller had used the following questions in project review interviews:

1. *What is (was) right about it?*
2. *How did it make you feel?*
3. *Paint me a picture of what the Ideal project would look like.*
4. *What wasn’t quite right about the project?*
5. *What resources are needed to move the not-quite-right to the Ideal?*

She explained that question 4 keeps the person focused on what’s right, rather than lapsing into a potential litany of complaints; question 5 is then the clincher, focusing on how to eliminate the gap between almost-right and Ideal. (*Ed-itorial comment: I hadn’t encountered this sequence of five questions before, and I think the one-two punch of the last two questions is brilliant: truly Powerful Questions.*)

PQ#5: “How passionate are you about creating this business... and what about it gives you passion?”

This business and financial coach asks this question of clients who are beginning new ventures. She believes that a high degree of passionate commitment is needed to begin and sustain a new business or other venture; if not, discouragement will inevitably set in and derail the project.

Note: while it’s interesting that four of the five questions that callers shared are appreciative in nature, it’s much more interesting that each of the five has a specific strategic purpose, and appears successful in achieving that purpose. For example, the question about “...do you want advice?” is designed to rapidly assess the client’s wishes and receptivity; the fifth question, about “How passionate are you...?” appears to have two aims: one, to assess the person’s commitment level; and two, to get the client to self-assess their motivations for and commitment to the proposed venture. All five of these PQs are, like it says in the MasterCard™ ad, “Priceless.”

Some particularly Powerful Qs from the Nazrudin meeting:

I shared several of the 18 questions that attendees had offered in a “Powerful Questions” session I convened at the recent Nazrudin conference.

“Tell me about a time when you faced struggles and prevailed.” I love this question. It gets the person (or, in this instance, the couple) to think about instances of succeeding-in-difficult-circumstances. Almost everyone can locate even a minor-sounding example; deft follow-up questioning can result in the person(s) mining the gems of such experiences for (a) encouragement and (b) guidance as to how they might proceed. In short, knowing that we can catch ourselves falling and regain our balance before we hit the ground breeds self-confidence and courage.

“How will you complete this statement in six months ‘This adversity is the best thing that ever happened to me because...’?” A business owner asked this question to a stunned and demoralized staff after the firm’s largest client had left them. Timed carefully, it got everyone to turn their focus from the loss to a possible glowing future and how they might contribute to attaining that future. I love it – and, like so many questions that are Powerful Questions, its power depends on the right timing.

Ensuing Discussion

Several callers noted that today’s PQs led them to become more aware of their own motivation and state of mind when posing questions. I added that, in asking a question, we should understand whether we are *inquiring* (i.e., are curious and interested), *inviting* (e.g., inviting the person to explore and discover for themselves), *investigating* (i.e., seeking to uncover facts leading to a conclusion), or *interrogating* (attempting to coax answers from a withholding and hostile witness or “person of interest”). One caller questioned her own interviewing skills, and asked if people can become better interviewers and listeners. She noted that her timing and pacing of questions is sometimes unskillful, “leading to evaporation of energy.” Several OMers suggested she become mindful of her moment-to-moment experience during client conversations, pausing before asking a question to self-inquire: “Where am I heading with this question? What do I want to accomplish in asking it?” I thought these were insightful suggestions, and added that it can be very helpful during client interviews to do a “stop-action” once or twice, in which the interviewer says, “Let’s pause for a moment here. How is this going for you?” This gives both parties the opportunity to catch their breath and take stock, and allows

the interviewer to make any needed mid-course corrections. The caller expressed appreciation for the discussion and suggestions.

There will be more “Powerful Question” Open Mic conversations in 2012. While we did more than scratch the surface of this powerful topic, we’ve only begun to scratch the itch that many of us feel about this area.

Reminder: Next Open Mic is Tuesday, December 13 at 5:00 pm Eastern time, on “An Appreciative Year-end Review.” **1-951-262-4343, passcode 522594#.**