

assumptions will be key to creating positive futures. As Einstein said, "The problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them." And in her book *The Art of the Question*, Marilee Goldberg adds, "A paradigm shift occurs when a question is asked inside the current paradigm that can only be answered from outside it." It's this kind of paradigm shift, based on powerful questions, that may be necessary to create truly innovative solutions to our most pressing concerns.

### What Makes a Question Powerful?

In a wonderfully evocative description, Fran Peavey, a pioneer in the use of strategic questions, observes:

"Questions can be like a lever you use to pry open the stuck lid on a paint can. . . . If we have a short lever, we can only just crack open the lid on the can. But if we have a longer lever, or a more dynamic question, we can open that can up much wider and really stir things up. . . . If the right question is applied, and it digs deep enough, then we can stir up all the creative solutions."

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MARILEE GOLDBERG,  
*THE ART OF THE QUESTION*

While you may not immediately know the characteristics of a powerful question, it's actually quite easy to recognize one. For instance, if you were an Olympic judge scoring the power of questions on a scale from one to ten (with ten being the highest), how would you rate the following queries?

1. What time is it?
2. Did you take a shower?
3. What possibilities exist that we haven't thought of yet?
4. What does it mean to be ethical?

We have tested questions such as these in several different cultures. In the process, we've discovered that, despite cultural differences, people quite consistently rate questions one and two as being less powerful, and questions three and four as being more powerful. Clearly, powerful questions are ones that transcend many boundaries.

Not long ago, we hosted a conversation with a group of international colleagues about what makes

a compelling question. Here are some of their reflections:

*Finn Voldtofte* (Denmark): The question has to catch people where they are, to meet them where there is the most energy and relevance for them, and then use that energy to go deeper. Action will flow naturally from that energy.

*Felipe Herzenborn* (Mexico): The question also needs to be simple and clear and penetrating. It's like a laser beam. A good question invites and challenges you to reflect at a deeper level—to find the knowledge or wisdom that's already there beneath the surface.

*Verna Allee* (U.S.): To me, the most energizing questions are those that involve people's values, hopes, and ideals—questions that relate to something that's larger than them, where they can connect and contribute. People don't have a lot of energy around questions that are only about removing pain.

*David Isaacs* (U.S.): Even though it's useful to acknowledge pain, I think it's also important to shift the question away from a problem focus or fix-it focus to a possibility focus. There's always a subtle feeling of disempowerment in a problem, a feeling that all the doors are shut. "We've got a problem . . . oh no! Not another problem!" There's a weariness and stuckness about it. Simply asking, "What's the possibility we see in this situation?" can make a big difference.

*Toke Moller* (Denmark): Here's an example of that approach. I was working with a local school to frame a possibility-oriented question. We asked teachers, students, parents, and administrators, "What could a good school also be?" This way of posing the question helped people to see their school in a different light. It resulted in some amazing new ideas. I'm quite sure they would not have been as innovative if the question had focused only on fixing problems.

*Carlos Mota* (Mexico): It's a real art to find as well as to shape the right question for your situation. Once a friend told me about a time she was being interviewed. The interviewer said, "We're just going to ask you one question: What's the question we

should be asking?" Sometimes the most important thing to do is to help the people themselves shape the questions in the most powerful way, since they know their own situation the best of anyone.

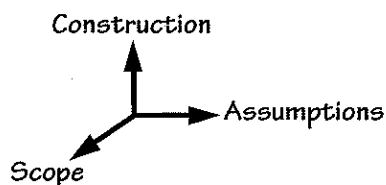
Thus, a powerful question:

- generates curiosity in the listener
- stimulates reflective conversation
- is thought-provoking
- surfaces underlying assumptions
- invites creativity and new possibilities
- generates energy and forward movement
- channels attention and focuses inquiry
- stays with participants
- touches a deep meaning
- evokes more questions

A powerful question also has the capacity to "travel well"—to spread beyond the place where it began into larger networks of conversation throughout an organization or a community. Questions that travel well are often the key to large-scale change. As we'll explore below, how such queries are crafted can make a difference in their capacity to move a system toward innovative futures.

### The Architecture of Powerful Questions

As shown at the start of this volume, powerful questions can dramatically improve the quality of insight, innovation, and action in our organizations, in our communities, and in our lives. Therefore, understanding the basic architecture of formulating powerful questions is a key skill in today's knowledge economy. There are three dimensions to powerful questions: *construction*, *scope*, and *assumptions*. Each contributes to the quality of learning and knowledge creation that emerges as we engage with others in a generative inquiry.



#### THE FIRST DIMENSION:

##### *The Construction of a Question*

The linguistic *construction* of a question can make a critical difference in either opening our minds or nar-

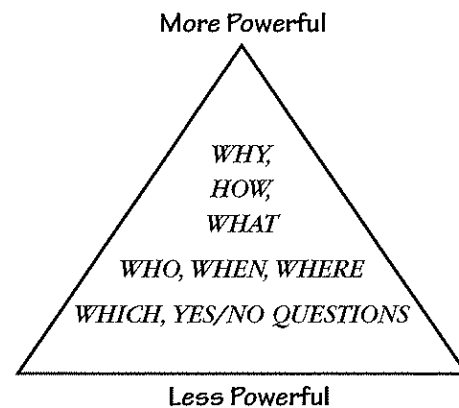
rowing the possibilities we can consider. Is it a yes/no question? Is it an either/or question? Does it begin with an interrogative, such as Who, What, or How?

WHO	WHAT	
WHEN	WHERE	WHICH
WHY	HOW?	

Just for fun, try placing these words in a pyramid of lower to higher power. Don't think too much; use your intuition.



When asked, most people rank these words from more powerful to less powerful as follows:



By using the words toward the top of the pyramid, we can make many of our questions more robust. For example, consider the following sequence:

- Are you satisfied with our working relationship?
- *When* have you been most satisfied with our working relationship?
- *What* is it about our working relationship that you find most satisfying?
- *Why* might it be that that our working relationship has had its ups and downs?

As you move from the simple "yes/no" question at the beginning toward the "why" question at the end, you'll notice that the queries tend to stimulate more reflective thinking and a deeper level of conversation.

That's what we mean by a powerful question—one that provokes thoughtful exploration and evokes creative thinking.

However, a note of caution: Unless a "why" question is carefully crafted, it can easily evoke a defensive response, as people try to justify their answer rather than proceed in a spirit of inquiry. For instance, the questions, "Why can't you ever tell me exactly what you are thinking?" or "Why did you do it *that* way?" can cause someone to defend a given position or rationalize some past decision, rather than open new possibilities. In contrast, when a "why" question stems from genuine curiosity, such as "I wonder why that happened?" then the inquiry has the potential to create useful insights.

Just because a question is situated near the top of the pyramid does not necessarily mean that it is more important or more relevant than its counterparts at the bottom. Depending on your goals, a "yes/no" question can be extremely important (particularly if you are closing a large sale!). Likewise, a question that gets at the facts of who, when, and where can often be crucial, such as in a legal case. However, when you want to open the space for creativity and breakthrough thinking, questions constructed around the words at the top of the pyramid will have more strategic leverage than those that use the words at the bottom.

### THE SECOND DIMENSION:

#### *The Scope of a Question*

It's important not only to be aware of how the words we choose influence the effectiveness of our query, but also to match the *scope* of a question to our needs. Take a look at the following three questions:

- How can we best manage *our work group*?
- How can we best manage *our company*?
- How can we best manage *our supply chain*?

In this example, the questions progressively broaden the domain of inquiry as they consider larger and larger aspects of the system; that is, they

expand in scope. As you work to make your questions powerful, tailor and clarify the scope as precisely as possible to keep them within the realistic boundaries and needs of the situation you are working with. Avoid stretching the scope of your question too far. For example, compare the following question to the ones above:

- How can we best manage *the economy*?

While extremely interesting, this query is clearly outside the scope of most people's capacity to take effective action, at least in the short term. In many situations, this would be a less strategic question than one for which those involved had the capacity to make a more immediate difference.

### THE THIRD DIMENSION:

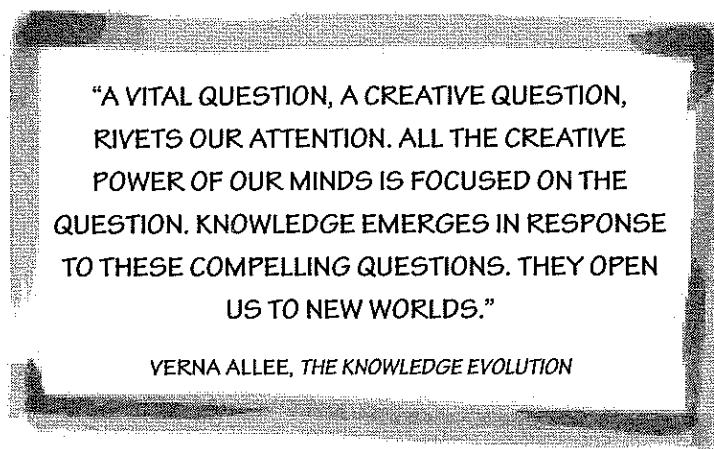
#### *The Assumptions Within Questions*

Because of the nature of language, almost all of the questions we pose have assumptions built into them,

either explicit or implicit. These assumptions may or may not be shared by the group involved in the exploration; for instance the question, "How should we create a bilingual educational system in California?" assumes that those involved in the exploration have agreed that being bilingual is an important capacity for

the state's students. However, some powerful questions challenge everyone's existing assumptions. For example, ask yourself what assumptions the following question might challenge: "How might we eliminate the border between the U.S. and Mexico?"

To formulate powerful questions, it's important to become aware of assumptions and use them appropriately. So, contrast the question, "What did we do wrong and who is responsible?" with "What can we learn from what's happened and what possibilities do we now see?" The first question assumes error and blame; it is a safe bet that whoever is responding will feel defensive. The second question encourages reflection and is much more likely than the first query to stimulate learning and collaboration among those involved.



It's often helpful to examine a question for any unconscious beliefs it may introduce to the situation. You can do so by simply asking your team, "What assumptions or beliefs are we holding that are key to the conversation we are having here?" and "How would we come at this if we held an entirely different belief system than the one we have?" Each of these questions invites an exploration into both conscious and unconscious assumptions and opens up the space for new possibilities to reveal themselves.

By surfacing or altering assumptions, we can shift the context of a strategic inquiry and create new opportunities for innovation. Compare the following two questions:

- How can we *compete* with the Chinese?
- How can we *collaborate* with the Chinese?

The second question changes the context by challenging our traditional business paradigm and the assumptions that underlie it. As a result, it opens up a new line of exploration and set of subsequent questions. The art of reframing questions in this way has important implications for not only shifting our assumptions, but also creating new possibilities for constructive action.

By understanding and consciously considering the three dimensions of powerful questions, we can increase the power of the questions we ask and, as a result, increase our ability to generate insights that help shape the future. As with any new skill, the best teacher is experience, and the best coach is a thoughtful listener. We encourage you to experiment with increasing the power of your questions and see what impact you have.

For example, in advance of an important meeting or conversation, spend a few minutes with a colleague and write down several questions that are relevant to the topic. Rate them in terms of their power. Referring to the three dimensions outlined above, see if you can spot why certain questions are more compelling than others. Experiment with changing the construction and scope, to get a feel for how doing so changes the direction of the inquiry. Be sure to examine the assumptions that are embedded in your questions and check to see if they will help or hinder your

exploration. Just a few practice sessions will greatly enhance your ability to engage in productive conversations stimulated by dynamic questions.

## Using Powerful Questions in Organizations

There are more and more examples of how the disciplined use of compelling questions is making a difference in organizational life. These changes often happen in surprising ways, opening new avenues that people never considered before.

**HP "for the World."** Sometimes something as simple as changing a preposition in a sentence can have a dramatic impact on how an organization conceives of its mission and role.

Consider how a small shift in the construction of a question led to major changes in the scope and context of strategic inquiry at Hewlett-Packard, resulting in effective innovation and targeted action. The director of HP Labs wondered why the organization was not considered the best industrial research laboratory in the world. As he thought about it, he realized that he did not know what that designation really meant. He charged Barbara Waugh, a key staff member, with coordinating the effort to respond to the question, "What does being the best industrial research lab in the world mean?" Instead of looking for answers outside the company, Barbara encouraged the director to share his core question with all HP Lab employees around the world.

To that end, Waugh initiated a global network of conversations around that question, using the company's technology infrastructure along with face-to-face gatherings to support the dialogues. Just by exploring the practical implications of the question in a disciplined way, the Lab began to see productivity gains. But one day, an HP Lab engineer came into Barbara's office and said, "That question is okay, but what would really energize me and get me up in the morning would be asking, 'How can we be the best industrial research lab *for the world*?'"

That one small shift changed the entire game by scaling up the meaning of and shifting the assumptions embedded in the original question. It profound-

