

WITH OUR QUESTIONS WE MAKE THE WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Appreciative inquiry is built upon recognition of the profound power of questions in shaping our worlds; a power invoked by the phrase, “questions are fateful.” We wonder, “What kinds of questions can optimize our inquiry and contribute to catalyzing transformational change?” The goal of this chapter is to provide conceptual and practical answers to this question. We seek to enrich and contribute to the field of appreciative inquiry through expanded ways of thinking about inquiry and the generation of questions. We begin by considering how questions influence how we think, behave, and relate. How do questions affect outcomes? We examine the nature of thinking as intrinsically a question and answer process and highlight the vital role of “QuestionThinking™” for creating new possibilities. We present the Learner-Judger Mindset Model, which provides distinctions for strengthening the spirit of inquiry in constructing questions. Then we examine how appreciative inquiry practitioners can take advantage of the distinctions and practices of QuestionThinking using the Mindset Model. Finally, we provide practical question-centered practices that can lead to positive new futures for ourselves and the individuals and organizations we serve.

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INTRODUCTION

Appreciative inquiry is built upon recognition of the profound power of questions in shaping our worlds; a power invoked by the phrase, “questions are fateful.” In alignment with this realization, appreciative inquiry grows out of a deep-rooted commitment to using the forging power of questions to transform individuals, organizations, and the world. That commitment grows out of the realization that “. . . inquiry and change are a simultaneous moment” (Cooperrider, 2000). So we wonder, “*What kinds of questions can optimize our inquiry and contribute to catalyzing transformational change?*”

The goal of this chapter is to provide conceptual and practical answers to this question. We seek to enrich and contribute to the field of appreciative inquiry through expanded ways of thinking about inquiry and the generation of questions. We begin by considering how questions influence how we think, behave, and relate. How do questions affect outcomes? We examine the nature of thinking as intrinsically a question and answer process and highlight the vital role of “QuestionThinking™” for creating new possibilities. We present the Learner-Judger Mindset Model, which provides distinctions for strengthening the spirit of inquiry in constructing questions. Then we examine how appreciative inquiry practitioners can take advantage of the distinctions and practices of QuestionThinking using the Mindset Model. Finally, we provide practical question-centered practices that can lead to positive new futures for ourselves and the individuals and organizations we serve.

This chapter grew out of the authors’ recognition that the presuppositions, practices, and visions of Appreciative Inquiry and QuestionThinking are highly complementary. Coming from the distinct fields of organizational development and clinical psychology, we discovered a shared love for the world-shaping role of language and questions. We see appreciative questions as potent vehicles for world benefit. Therefore, we set out to explore how integrating our experiences, insights, and commitments might make a meaningful contribution to constructive discourse for building the kind of world we want to inhabit and leave as a legacy to our children.

To fulfill the twin goals of expanding our understanding about inquiry and providing question construction practices, we first offer a brief review of some challenges inherent in these two tasks. Questions are explicit yet ephemeral, ordinary yet mysterious. Questions offer tools to work with and simultaneously the material from which new construction occurs. Questions are intrinsically co-created since they require both asker and listener to construct meaning. Some questions are provocative and initiate introspection; these questions may push us into new territories.

For a variety of reasons, many people, to one degree or another, resist asking or answering questions. This resistance is further exacerbated by the fact that questioning skills are rarely taught and we assume we should already know how to be expert questioners. The end result is that most people develop few explicit questioning skills. Even so, it is important to note that there are numerous practices and mindsets available for developing such skills.

LANGUAGE, REALITY, AND THE POWER OF QUESTIONS

The subject of question asking is primary and universal; it is fundamental to any consideration about the ways we human beings perceive, think, feel, and make meaning. Questions are also at the core of how we listen, behave, and relate – as individuals and in organizations. Virtually everything we think and do is generated by questions. In this sense, questions exert a gravitational pull, compelling engagement, in a manner quite similar to the impulse of wanting to close a gestalt. We crave completion. To extract meaning from our lives, we continuously ask ourselves questions such as: “*What happened?*” “*Why is it happening?*” and “*What is going to happen?*”

Because questions are fundamentally related to action and reflection, they spark and direct attention, energy, and effort. They are at the heart of the evolving forms our lives assume. Author Neil Postman instructs us that, “. . . all the answers we ever get are responses to questions. The questions may not be evident to us, especially in everyday affairs, but they are there nonetheless, doing their work. *Their work, of course, is to design the form that our knowledge will take and therefore to determine the direction of our actions*” (Postman, 1976, p. 144; italics added). We might say then, that the shape of our lives at any moment represents the cumulative answers to all the foreground and background questions we’ve ever asked ourselves and others.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger noted that “Language [is] the house of Being . . .” In this context, we consider questions as the primary means from which doing, accomplishing, and creating change are catalyzed to action. Moreover, if language informs the structures of reality, then questions inform the structure of language. Therefore, we think of questions as the fundamental linguistic tools with which we construct our worlds. Answers to questions such as, “*What’s wrong?*” or “*Who’s to blame?*” lead to a world quite distinct from that which emerges from questions such as, “*What’s right?*” and “*How can we build on these strengths?*”

Questions arise from our relationships with ourselves, others, and the world around us. In fact, interpersonal questions are world-shaping precisely because

they are, in essence, co-constructed. Externalized questions presuppose both a question *asker* and *receiver* (the listener). It is through listening and receiving that the interrogative sentence actually becomes a question. Professor [Chris Argyris and Schon \(1978\)](#) has defined communication as “a double loop of shared understanding.” He highlights the role of the sender (asker) and receiver (listener) in all forms of meaning making.

Furthermore, we listen to ourselves, others, and the world around us through internal questions that are usually implicit. Depending on whether I listen to you through the question “*What is valuable about what she’s saying?*” or “*Why is she wasting my time?*” I will hear very different messages. This perception about listening underscores the sense that questions are always co-constructed. Both the questions the listener forms in her mind, and the questions the speaker asks, are fateful. This imbedded, dynamic relationship can be likened to a linguistic dance in which we build our worlds together.

Recognizing the structure and components of this dance is fundamental to our ability to choreograph it. Just as no dance is separate from the dancer, there is no question separate from the asker or the mindset from which the question has emerged. The recognition that we might be listening, either to ourselves or others, through limiting questions, gives us the distinctions and the impetus to search for new and hopefully more effective questions to guide our listening. We would then design these new questions with underlying assumptions that are more life giving, generous, and expansive. Our goal would be to create an expanded repertoire of possible interactions and outcomes.

Every new product, process, service, and relationship was catalyzed by a new question. The theory of relativity stemmed from a question Albert Einstein asked himself as an adolescent when he wondered, “*What would the universe look like if I were riding on the end of a beam of light at the speed of light?*” An unanticipated future can only occur in response to new, unexpected questions. That future begins in our thinking, represented by the questions we ask ourselves. In asking himself a genuinely novel question, and being willing to receive surprising answers, Einstein expanded humanity’s understanding of the universe, which allowed us to think in completely new ways.

Since we build our worlds through the questions we ask, opening new worlds requires asking new questions. We mean questions that are qualitatively and profoundly different, ones that leap over old boundaries of thinking and land us in new paradigms. Paradigm shifts are catalyzed *when questions asked inside the current paradigm can only be answered from outside of it* ([Goldberg, 1998](#)). A truly expansive, transformational, paradigm-altering question is one to which the answer is not yet known. The poet, Rumi, pointed to the possibility of landing

in a new paradigm outside of polarized, oppositional right/wrong thinking when he wrote:

Out beyond ideas of wrong doing and right doing, there is a field.
I'll meet you there.

QUESTIONTHINKING: THINKING AS A QUESTION AND ANSWER PROCESS

It is natural to assume that question asking refers only to interpersonal questions, that is, the ones we ask each other. However, we assert this assumption masks the origin of interpersonal questions found in our internal queries, the ones we ask ourselves. Looking deeper, we find that our thoughts can take the form of *both* statements *and* questions. In this sense, we believe that while most people assume that thoughts are internal statements, those statements are, in actuality, answers to preceding implicit or explicit questions. This assumption is embedded in some of the seminal work of cognitive psychology (Beck, 1979).

By acknowledging the operation and ensuing results of internal questions and their relationship to internal statements, we discover important openings for new thinking, new action, and fundamentally new possibilities. We label this understanding of thinking as a question and answer process, "QuestionThinking," thus distinguishing it from the usual presumption that thoughts are only statements (Adams, 2004). We might view QuestionThinking as reframing Descartes' famous saying, "I think, therefore I am" into, "I question, therefore I am."

An assumption of QuestionThinking is that questions operate at the interface of thinking and behavior. In other words, we answer our internal questions with behavior as well as in language. Of the four speech acts (Flores, 1997), (requests, declarations, assertions, and promises), it is requests (or questions) that are constant catalysts for action. In this sense, external behaviors, as well as internal statements, can be understood as representing answers to background questions, i.e. those prior queries that are usually assumptive, implicit, and silent.

Here is an ordinary example demonstrating how behavior responds to internal questions. In making the everyday decision about getting dressed, we ask ourselves a series of questions such as: "*Where am I going today? What's the weather? What's appropriate?*" and even "*What's clean?*" Our answers represent our choices, they are *behavioral answers*. Someone got dressed. We might even say they are wearing their answers. If we ask so many questions about something as simple as getting dressed, imagine how many more questions we ask

ourselves about major life events such as what career to pursue, where to live, or whom to marry!

Organizational culture and norms also represent behavioral answers to the tacit questions that shaped them. The same assertions we've made about the impact of questions in guiding individual behavior, we also believe to be descriptive of the ways that implicit and explicit questions lead to organizational behavior and outcomes. By articulating organizational behavior as driven by guiding questions (usually unconsciously), we gain a useful lens for seeing the norms that guide behavior. For example, asking, "How can we optimize our railroad business?" in contrast to, "How can we optimize our transportation business?" would yield quite different responses. In a larger frame, we might recognize that when nomadic societies roamed the earth, their behavior could be understood as answering the question, "*How can we get ourselves to water?*" Both their behavior and history shifted in response to a new implicit question, "*How can we get the water to come to us?*"

We conclude, therefore, that we first make the world we inhabit in the questions we ask ourselves, that is, in our QuestionThinking. This means that strategic thinking, problem solving, and decision-making can all be seen as internal question and answer processes. We consider these internal queries as being, by far, the most creative, generative, and world-altering aspect of both internal and interpersonal language. Because the operations and outcomes of questions and statements are profoundly distinct, this never-ending dance of questions and answers provides a widening lens on mental processes and on our perceptions of what is possible. It also deepens our appreciation for the Buddha who, in his boundless wisdom, is reputed to have said, "With our thoughts we make the world."

THE LEARNER-JUDGER MINDSET MODEL

Our mindsets frame the way we perceive, experience, and interact with the world. These frames of mind simultaneously "program" what we believe to be our personal limitations as well as possibilities. They define the parameters of our actions and interactions. As a consequence, our mindsets implicitly and explicitly affect what happens in our lives. Hundreds of studies on the placebo and Pygmalion effects demonstrate the impact of belief and attribution on self-image, behavior, and outcomes.

A practical way to think about mindsets is to imagine them as defined by particular kinds of internal questions. The questions we ask ourselves instruct us about where to put our attention, what to expect, how to behave, and how to relate. Our internal questions and the mindsets from which they are asked are

intermingled. In this sense, the questions we ask ourselves and others are *literally* fateful; they lead to the texture and form of our experiences, possibilities, and results in life.

The distinctions elaborated by the Learner-Judger Mindset Model and Learner and Judger questions provide a practical way to observe, categorize, and understand thinking, feeling, and ensuing behavior. The model illustrates that each of us continuously operates from these distinct mindsets. At any given moment



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Fig. 1. Learner-Judger Mindset Model.

one of these mindsets is activated in the foreground while the other waits in the background. In this respect, we are each a dynamic, interactive, and complex combination of two distinct ways of being that lead to very different ways of thinking, acting, and relating (Fig. 1).

We consider each of these mindsets as an archetype within which particular characteristics, ways of being, and verbal and non-verbal expressions are clustered. The characteristics of each column are (loosely) internally consistent and self-referring. The utility of the model requires that we recognize that these are just *mindsets*, not fixed roles or permanent attributions. Nobody is purely Judger or Learner.

The Mindset Model, with its focus on internal questions as the starting place for our behaviors, interactions, and outcomes holds vital implications for our life orientation, attitudes, skill sets, and behavior. Consciously choosing our frame of mind is a powerful act, as Albert Einstein implied when he said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” In this sense, we can think of questions as leading to answers that are either contracting, expanding, or neutral. Inherently limiting internal questions lead to a limited repertoire of possible answers. Expansionist affirmative questions open the doors of potential.

The Learner-Judger Mindset Model is intended to help build our ability to observe our own thinking and behavior. The power of intentional observation lies in stimulating higher-level cognitive capacities, and strengthening our “emotional intelligence.” We use this awareness and skill to continuously help bring about transformative shifts from the “Judger” position into the “Learner” one where new ways of being, thinking, behaving, and relating become possible. With observation and intention we are empowered to choose which mindset to inhabit and live from – in every moment.

EXPLORING LEARNER-JUDGER MINDSETS

The deeper our understanding of these two mindsets, the more empowered we become to observe ourselves, question our questions (both the internal and interpersonal ones), and make life-affirming question-based choices. When we operate from our Learner mindset, our mood is one of acceptance of self and others. We value “not knowing” and come from a place of genuine curiosity that opens us to be flexible and responsive to life’s circumstances. We are positioned to think strategically, seeking opportunities and possibilities. Our Learner mindset allows us to be empathic. We can see the world from others’ points of view. Our Learner mindset allows us to live at the core of our most elevated human spirit.

Learner relationships are win-win. From this place we focus on connecting, learning, resolving, and creating. Learner mindset questions are typically life giving, appreciative, and energizing. These questions are grounded in optimism, and presuppose new possibilities, sufficient resources, and a future shaped by hope. The title of Martin Buber's classic book, *I and Thou*, points to the empathy, oneness, and sense of connection exemplified in our Learner being.

While Learner mindset fosters connection and expansion, Judger mindset promotes separation and contraction. Judger mindset questions are reactive, automatic, and judgmental. They are based on certainty about "knowing" and being right about one's own opinions. They are generated from assumptions of limited options, scarcity, and potential failure. They focus primarily on past problems rather than on new options. When we allow our Judger mindsets to push to the foreground, we simultaneously and unintentionally impede the creativity and freedom required to move us towards fresh possibilities. Judger thinking cannot lead to genuinely positive new futures because its source lies in adherence to old consciousness. The future available from Judger presumptions and questions is limited to a recycled version of past questions and answers.

Central to understanding the effect of Judger mindset is the recognition that our judgmental attitudes can be focused either internally or externally. If we focus judgment on *ourselves*, the effects include pessimism, loss of energy, low self-confidence, and feelings of depression. That same judgmental attitude, focused on *others*, leads to blame, anger, hostility, and conflict. That's why Judger questions usually result in win-lose, or lose-lose outcomes, unleashing the fight or flight response. We get relegated to operating from an "attack or defend" paradigm since every utterance is framed as either an attack or a defense. Whether the cognitive, operational focus is on ourselves or others, the Judger orientation, to one degree or another, constrains learning, collaborating, resolving conflict, and creating new possibilities.

That said, it is important to hold the Judger mindset as being neither good nor bad, neither positive nor negative. It just is. What we've labeled as "Judger"¹ is simply human nature – for *all* of us. The reason is that the underlying moods of Judger rest in being fearful, protective, and oriented toward survival. It is far too simple to think of Judger mindset as "bad" and Learner mindset as "good." Such dichotomous thinking presupposes an either/or stance while our higher nature as human beings is both/and. We consider our Learner mindset to be the place from which we can construct the most generative, appreciative, life-giving questions.

In addition, it is essential to recognize that without awareness, understanding, and *acceptance* of the Judger aspects of ourselves and others, we lose the freedom to continuously choose to return to Learner thinking, being, relating, and behaving. Embracing the shadow allows us to come to wholeness. By recommending that we

“embrace our core of rot,” author and consultant Charles Seashore is suggesting that we make friends with our shadow self. When Joseph Campbell enjoins us to recognize that “Where you stumble, there your treasure is” he also implores us to view the consequences of our difficult experiences as potential doorways to liberation and learning. Our Judger self is necessary and valuable because it can become the doorway leading to acceptance of ourselves and empathy for others, thus providing us access to the full range of our humanity.

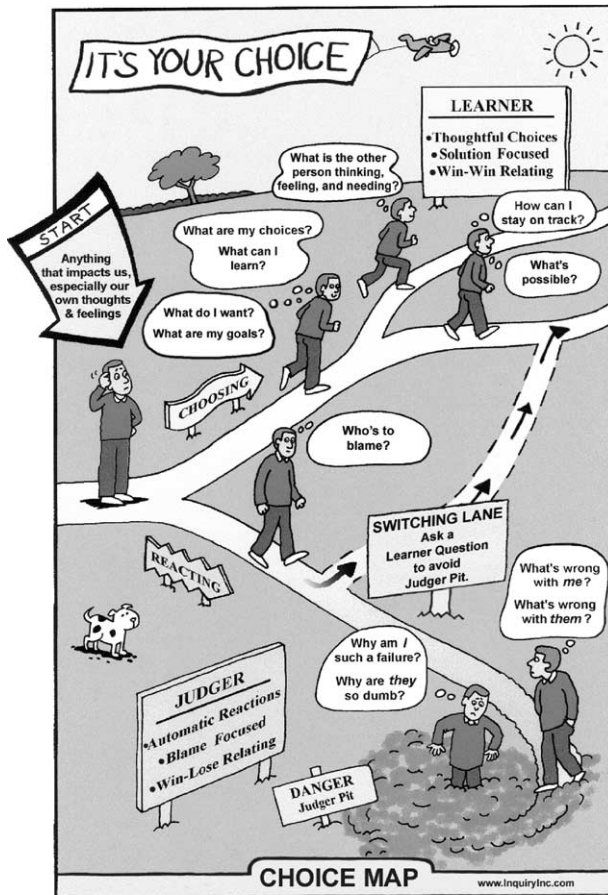
A MATTER OF CHOICE

The Choice Map is a learning tool that shows the divergent worlds that ensue from asking either Learner or Judger questions. It illustrates the assertion that we create and then inhabit different worlds depending on the kind of questions we ask. Employing the distinctions of the Learner-Judger Model empowers personal choice and therefore personal power. We make these choices individually as well as collectively. Teams, families and organizations may also be characterized as either primarily Learner or Judger at any moment depending on their attitudes, norms, and behaviors (Fig. 2).

There are three aspects of the Choice Map that make it a useful tool for learning and making transformational cognitive and behavioral choices. First, the Choice Map demonstrates that we *always* have choice, moment to moment, even when this is not immediately apparent – with our choices based on the questions we ask ourselves. This empowering recognition reinforces hopefulness. If there is a way to move beyond negative emotions and defeat, then there is always a way to a new, more preferable future. Our job is to move forward by utilizing Learner questions, fueled by Learner intentions. Thus, appreciative inquiry is a continuously available vehicle.

Second, the map shows the consequences of traveling the divergent paths of Learner mindset and Judger mindset; they take us to different worlds of relatedness and possibility. Third, the Switching Lane is the practical location of new choices. It is where we find hope, action, and change. In this sense, hope is always alive, always an available possibility because we can ask a “turnaround” question to rescue us from tumbling down the Judger path and landing in the Judger Pit.

Choosing to switch from Judger to Learner is a life-affirming decision. Switching questions help us reverse direction and move up to Learner territory. Such questions simultaneously shift moods, allowing us to see solutions and possibilities that would otherwise be invisible. Examples of questions that allow us to step onto the Switching Lane include: “*Am I in Judger? Do I want to go in*



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Fig. 2. The Choice Map.

this direction? Will it make the difference I/we want? Where would I rather be?"
and *"What positive possibilities are present?"*

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND LEARNER MINDSET

The intentional Learner mindset is at the heart of appreciative inquiry just as the practices and values of appreciative inquiry rest securely and energetically

within this way of being. With appreciative inquiry we choose the strategy of operating from appreciative curiosity. In striving to embody this stance, we begin with intentionally shifting from seeing the problems inherent in situations to recognizing expansive opportunities and challenges. The very words “problem” and “solution” convey built in limitations that the words “challenge” and “puzzle” do not. Problems call for solutions. Solutions suggest a permanent, fixed state. Challenges, on the other hand, invite us to meet them, replicating the dance of co-construction. The vehicle for this attitudinal and perceptual choice is a Learner question, i.e. a question that is unconditionally positive and filled with possibility.

In choosing appreciative ways of thinking, feeling, being, and behaving, we must also honor the Judger aspects of ourselves and others, simply because this is our shared human nature. At the same time, we choose a deep commitment to the possibilities inherent only from the Learner position. To resolve this seeming paradox, we advocate *accepting Judger while continuously practicing Learner*.

In the quest for transformational questions, the first focus should be on our mindset and intentions as question *askers*, rather than on the question itself. This is where the real action and traction first occur. This is the place from which expansive, paradigm-altering questions are born. This is also consistent with Gandhi’s dictum that, “We must be the change we seek in the world.” So as we get ourselves ready to ask a question, “. . . we should begin with the ‘in’ of inquiry” (Schiller, 1998). In the act of seeking these new appreciative, life-giving questions, the more we maintain, nourish, and operate from our Learner mindsets, the more successful we can be in guiding change, both organizationally and personally.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY, A LIFE-CENTRIC PRACTICE

Every question has the potential to contract or expand life-centric possibilities. Every question has the potential to damage or enhance a relationship. Our challenge is to couple the wonder and mystery of question asking with the skill and mastery of question construction. The wedding of appreciative inquiry theory and practice to the idea and implementation of Learner mindset and methods become apparent in the life-centric questions that guide each of the 4 D phases. “What gives life?” guides Discovery. “What might be?” and “What is the world calling for?” lead us to Dream. “What can we innovate to create our preferred future?” allows us to Design. “How will we sustain ourselves and others in this transformative cycle?” guides us in the direction of Destiny.

Research in appreciative inquiry is intrinsically life-centric. Research is always about questions. “The Questions we ask, the things that we choose to focus on . . . determine what we find. What we find becomes the data and the story out of which we dialogue about and envision the future. And so, the seeds of change are implicit in the very first question we ask.”

POSITIVE IMAGE; POSITIVE ACTION

The theory and practice of appreciative inquiry is relatively new. It is continuously exploring and investigating, which constantly provides us with new questions and new directions. Qualitative and quantitative research in organizations and at universities is opening new avenues for exploration. We know only a small percentage of what we will discover as practitioners experiment, document, and share their findings. Therefore we operate out of a Learner questioning mode. As we gain skill and learn to “live” as appreciative inquirers, our skill revolves around reframing almost all questions into Learner questions. And our roots in social constructionism invite us to take an open, “not knowing,” and critical stance towards any taken for granted conclusion.

Great questions are often ones that invite us to tell a story. Appreciative inquiry is based in the stories we tell about ourselves and others, stories that spark the imagination and give us the essence of who we are and what our purpose is in the world. Appreciative questions call forth appreciative stories of wonder, transformation, and guidance. At best they are Learner stories. It is this spirit that Antoine de Saint-Exubery refers to when he said, “If you want to build a ship then don’t drum up men to gather wood, give orders, and divide the work. Rather teach them to yearn for the far and endless sea.”

In the quest for organizational transformation, we might first look to the questions the organization is already answering in its implicit and explicit behavior. Oftentimes, these questions can be discovered in the stories that abound in the organization. Consider what kind of organization might result from a guiding question such as, “*How can we produce long-term profitability while adhering to our positive core values?*” in contrast to one that answers this question, “*What must we do in order to make our predictions for the next quarter?*” What kind of organization might result from primary guiding questions such as, “*How can we best serve our customers?*” in contrast to one that primarily focuses on a question such as, “*How can we please stockholders?*”

Transformation in organizations will most predictably and efficiently follow a transformation in the questions that animate it. The field of appreciative inquiry is replete with such stories of “before and after” questions. Here are several eloquent

examples of such success stories, each of which resulted in remarkable, positive change. In each of these situations, one can clearly see how the guiding question would direct thinking, behavior, and results, as well as the story the organization and others would tell about it.

Lead consultant Diana Whitney helped British Airways address a major concern by shifting their question from “How can we have less lost baggage?” to “How can we create an exceptional arrival experience?” Lead consultant Marjorie Schiller served Avon Mexico in ameliorating a diversity issue by switching their question from “How can we correct the current situation of too few woman corporate officers?” to “What will it take to have men and women involved at every level of organizational decision-making?” She also helped the West Springfield Public Schools in Massachusetts alter their question from “How can we have fewer students failing state mandated tests?” to “How can we be the school where everyone smiles?”

THE ART OF THE TRANSFORMATIONAL QUESTION

A question calls forth that which does not yet exist (Goldberg, 1998). Creating world-opening new queries is the central mandate for practitioners of appreciative inquiry. In our quest for discovering paradigm-shifting questions, a partnership of our creative and logical selves catalyzes the most imaginative and positive possibilities. Mozart is said to have asked, “*What would music sound like if the notes loved each other?*” This is not a question that one can construct in a logical, linear manner! You just can’t get there from here. Such questions arrive in a flash and require that we be open to receiving them.

Constructing questions, on the other hand, requires a logical, conscious process. It is much like building a structure by following a blueprint that prescribes the steps along the way. It calls for linear thinking. But transformation does not occur from following a set of logical plans. Rather, it is evident in the inspiration and imagination that *preceded* the blueprint. Using an architectural metaphor, a transformed way of conceptualizing and configuring space would appear *first as an answer to a paradigm-shifting question of the architect*. Perhaps Frank Lloyd Wright asked himself a breakthrough question like, “*What’s a unique way to conceptualize and configure a ‘container’ of light and space for human beings to inhabit?*”

We believe that the spirit of inquiry, along with specific guiding inquiry practices, generates the most positive, world-creating questions. Since the spirit of inquiry animates our creative selves, this is where we first turn attention in this section. Next we provide question construction practices that can be used, both

individually and collaboratively. Finally, we propose an inquiry format for “questioning our questions” to help assess the transformational potential inherent in new queries.

Cultivating the Spirit of Inquiry

Everything that serves to infuse what OD has referred to as the “spirit of inquiry” emanates from experiences of awe, curiosity, veneration, surprise, delight, amazement, and child-like wonder. We believe that OD practitioners need to reclaim and aspire to openness, availability, epistemological humility, the ability to admire, to be surprised, to be inspired, and to inquire into our valued and possible worlds. We are naturally more effective when we maintain the spirit of inquiry of the everlasting beginner (*Cooperrider, child as agent of inquiry*). “Beginners mind” lives in a stance of innocent “not knowing.” The President and CEO of the Fetzer Institute, Dr. Tom Inui, has a reputation for his “delight in the unknown” and the way he models “not knowing” as the leader of this national philanthropic organization (*Appreciative Leaders: In the Eye of the Beholder, Schiller et al., 2001*). The more we intentionally place ourselves in this position of open wondering, the more appreciative and spacious our questions can naturally be.

While we can’t force this spirit, we can invite it. We can be an opening, a clearing, where such questions can presence themselves. Such world-altering questions rarely arrive in the rushing demands of everyday life. They may occur when we’re in the shower, or on a walk, or meditating. When we “call for” transformational questions, we must be patient and still, allowing time for percolating, mulling, gestating, and reflecting. Here are some sample self-queries for inviting such queries.

- How can I cultivate curiosity, stillness, and spaciousness?
- Who must I be to attract beautiful new questions?
- What practices can I use to create a receptive space in myself?

Learner mindset is firmly anchored in valuing the openness of “not knowing,” in being a clearing for possibility. Centering ourselves in Learner mindset helps us operate with the curiosity, flexibility, acceptance, and openness required for truly novel questions to show up. The following list of self-questions is meant to encourage the activity of Learner mindset. The list is not inclusive and we suggest you add other questions that inspire you.

- Am I in a calm, centered, open Learner place? How can I shift to there?
- Is there any Judger mischief going on that could inhibit curiosity or possibility?

- What assumptions might I be making?
- Am I being honest? Am I missing or avoiding anything?
- Can I move beyond self-interest to see the larger picture and serve others?
- Am I calling for questions with an open heart, an open mind, and positive commitment?

Practices for Constructing Questions

All communication begins with intention, regardless of whether the individual is aware of his or her goals. The three practices described below share a background question, “What do I want my question to accomplish?” This question is easy to overlook either because it appears obvious or because it feels like too much trouble. Perhaps it seems too time-consuming to articulate the answers. Here is our caution: to take question generation seriously, we must approach it as a *discipline*. This means taking the time to consider and examine each question, especially the ones we might want to avoid, either because they make us uncomfortable or because we might not welcome the answer.

The questions in each of these three practices are phrased in the first person singular (I/me). However, in the spirit of co-construction, we encourage you to also ask them in the plural (we/our). So, for example, we get, “What do *we* want *our* question(s) to accomplish?” We suggest you add queries that are particularly relevant to your particular goals. The answers to each of these questions will suggest follow-up questions and further responses to ponder and act upon.

- (1) *Reframing*. In order to reframe something, one must first understand and articulate the original frame, including the presuppositions that hold it in place. In other words, when searching for powerful, positive, life-giving questions, we must first make explicit any implicit frame we wish to transcend. The process can go like this:
 - (a) First, make explicit the original question, “frame,” or limitation one wishes to transcend.
 - (b) Next, make your goals for the new question explicit. What do you want the new question to accomplish? What new possibilities do you intend for the reframed question to open or point to?
 - (c) Then, write down new questions as they occur to you (perhaps using Q-Storming, which is described below).
 - (d) Finally, assess each new question (see below for some criteria questions).
- (2) *Strawman Questions*. To illustrate question writing in workshops, we provide a good “strawman” question, one that we have already authored. Then we ask

participants to work together in teams to make the question even better. The original questions are always enhanced by the workshop participants' ability to more powerfully rewrite them. Just as fine old wood needs to be buffed and shined, so do questions need to be cared for and nurtured. Moreover, each time we alter our questions, we also alter the consciousness that allows us to see, design, and unleash even deeper and more transformative possible new ones. Appreciative Learner question development requires continual reconsideration (Schiller, 1997).

- (3) *Q-Storming*. Q-Storming is a collaborative QuestionThinking exercise. It is like brainstorming, but with an important difference. It seeks new questions, *not* answers, suggestions, or ideas. Because this is a QuestionThinking exercise, the questions sought must be stated in the first person singular; these are questions for the individual to ask him or herself, not to ask others.

The premise is that “a question not asked is a door not opened” (Goldberg, 1998). New possibilities lie behind those doors, which can best be unlocked with the key of a new question. The goal, therefore, is to generate and collect as many novel questions as possible. The more new questions, the more new doors may be opened, with the promise of more imaginative and potentially transformative new possibilities laying in wait.

The exercise begins when an individual requests some collaborative QuestionThinking to help with a situation in which he or she feels stuck or frustrated. The facilitator asks for the volunteer to describe the situation along with his or her goals. Then the Q-Storming begins. Scribes capture each new question and give them to the volunteer at the end of the exercise. In a fifteen-minute period we often generate fifty or more questions, any one of which could be the key to open new possibilities. The exercise ends when the volunteer reports having been gifted with questions that open new possibilities. We know we've struck gold when he or she exclaims with wonder, “I've never thought of that before.”

With this harvest of questions in hand, the individual is encouraged to later cluster, prioritize, and sequence the question list. Reworking and reconfiguring promotes the discipline of considering each question seriously. Q-Storming can be done with a group, with another individual, and even alone by “calling for” new questions and writing down what “arrives.”

Questioning Our Questions

Regardless of how we generated our new questions, we still must assess which ones are more likely to lead to the direction and futures we seek to create. Some of the new questions will be obviously transformative – one experiences an

“aha” merely upon hearing them. Other questions may be helpful, even though the “earth didn’t move under our feet” in response to them. In either case, it is important to engage in a discipline of assessing the possibilities suggested by the questions.

What we thought was a wonderful question might seem unclear or repetitive for dialogue partners. The goal of question generating is not simply to write a *beautiful* question. Rather, it is to *write a great question that calls something new into existence*. It is as simple as that. Since questions are always contextual, one that may seem inadequate today may become the perfect opening tomorrow, or with a different group, or at a different stage in a group’s development. Here are some criteria questions with which to consider the new question crop:

- Is this question expansive and bold?
- Does this question access heart, head, and hands?
- Am I uplifted, energized, inspired by this question?
- Is this question life affirming?
- Could this question lead to unforeseen answers?
- Am I surprised by this question? Does it provoke an “ah ha?”
- Does this question succeed in reaching a transcending view?

CONCLUSION: THE SPIRIT OF INQUIRY

The solution, like all solutions to apparent contradictions, lies in moving away from the opposition and changing the nature of the question, to embrace a broader context (Maturana & Varela, 1987).

The spirit of inquiry is animated by awe, wonder, and curiosity. When infused with its grace, we live “in the zone” or the “flow state” of creativity for its own sake (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In those moments, discovery and learning are all that exist. In the joy of exploration, we succeed in temporarily suspending attachments to old answers, particular outcomes, or thinking that we already know. This is the fertile void from which transformation becomes a vibrant possibility. It is from an Appreciative Learner stance that the most startling, innovative, and life-affirming new questions and possibilities can arise. This is the heart of appreciative inquiry.

Through our questions we can create the world we desire but this can happen only when we cultivate the spirit of inquiry and use it to enliven specific question construction practices. In this way, we become strategically and continuously more skillful in spontaneously generating Appreciative Learner questions. By becoming exemplars for the richness of not-knowing we embody the courage

to transcend question reluctance in ourselves and others. Through questions we access our own innate wonder and creativity. We believe that this wonder-full Appreciative Learner mode of inquiry provides the context and skills for inspiring, mobilizing, and sustaining transformative human system change.

SIDEBAR: A TOOL FOR LEARNING

Experiencing Learner and Judger Mindsets

Look at the Mindset Model and slowly read all the questions in the Judger column. Notice how these questions affect your physical and emotional reactions. Now take a deep breath, release those feelings, and slowly read the questions from the Learner column. Notice whether you are affected differently after experiencing the Learner questions. Which set of questions makes you feel uplifted or depressed, energized or deflated, optimistic or pessimistic?

When this structured experience is introduced in workshops, we always begin with Judger mindset and nearly everyone reports some feeling of discomfort. Some people even unconsciously hold their breath when Judger questions are read. Participants report that Judger questions evoke feelings of depression and depletion. Some of their comments include feeling out of control, lost, pessimistic, fearful, despairing, helpless, and hopeless. In contrast, Learner questions usually access for them feelings of energy, optimism, hopefulness, openness, enthusiasm, control, and proactively looking for solutions and possibilities. One individual noted, “When I’m looking with Learner eyes, I can be hopeful about the future.”

Workshop participants recognize that, in just a few moments, asking either Learner or Judger questions has the effect of putting them in distinctly different moods. Since questions can be asked from either stance, they realize that it was not the actual “question sentence” that impacted them so strongly. Rather, it was the presuppositions encoded in the questions. In other words, “coming from” either Learner or Judger has a programming effect on the world of experience and possibility made available.

NOTE

1. The term “Judger,” as we use it here, is not related to how it is used in the Myers Briggs Type Indicator. There, the term points to a preference for closure; here the term references judgmental attitudes and behaviors.

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