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A POWERFUL TOOL FOR CHANGE

QUESTIONS CAN DRIVE PARTICIPATION, LEARNING AND CHANGE.

Questions are at the heart of getting to results. They challenge fixed ideas, open up minds to new information, enhance dialogue and stimulate creativity. Questions are a powerful tool for change and improvement.

CAUTION: CERTAIN QUESTIONS CAN INHIBIT PARTICIPATION, LEARNING AND CHANGE.

Mindsets are crucial when it comes to questions. The default human response in the midst of stress, conflict, pressure and complexity is a **reactive mindset**. The dominating push in this mindset is survival--to close off exploration of data in order to fix things as quickly as possible.

This does not mean that quick fixes are always wrong or reactive. An additional quality of reactive mindsets is that they often take hold outside of our awareness. Then, the questions we ask can inadvertently have a quality of judging or finding blame--of deciding "good vs. bad" or "right vs. wrong." This inhibits participation and learning.

Examples of questions from a reactive mindset

- "What's wrong?; What's wrong with me?; What's wrong with them? How can I prove I am right?; Who is to blame?"¹
- What errors of judgment and technique led to this situation?; Who is at fault?²

A systems/learner mindset promotes creativity and better results.^{1,2,3,4} Human systems are complex arrays of relationships and processes. It is infrequent that one person is to blame for a problem. Causes usually involve multiple relationships and processes. Exploration and discovery are needed to get to root causes and to the best solutions.

The systems/learner mindset expands thinking beyond dichotomies of "good vs. bad" or "right vs. wrong." Instead, any idea or solution is seen from the standpoint of benefits vs. risks within a *particular* situation. The same idea could be great in one context but not so good in another.

Examples of questions from a systems/learner mindset:

- "What are the facts?; What outcomes do I want?; What responsibility do I and others have?; Am I coming from a judge place?"¹
- What were the systems factors that contributed to this problem?; How did I and others participate in creating this problem?²

PROMOTE A SYSTEMS MINDSET BY INVITING OTHERS TO QUESTION YOUR IDEAS.

Reactive mindsets lead to strongly held positions that people tend to *defend* from challenges. A defensive posture shuts down mutual learning, limiting discovery and creativity. In contrast, in

a systems/learner mindset, we sustain awareness of how easy it is for a strongly held position to be in error in a small or large way. Human systems are just too complex for *certainty*.

So, instead of defending a position, it is very powerful to invite others to question our own ideas. Ideas then get confirmed, modified or discarded based on new observations and data. We invite people to question our own ideas in the service of creating the best strategy.

Examples of ways to invite others to question our ideas

- What data might I be missing?; How might my idea be wrong?; Is my idea consistent with our values?; Who has an opposite or different point of view?; Do you think I am seeing this clearly?; Is there a way I might be participating in this problem?⁴

This approach is not easy. It creates personal vulnerability. A key here lies in the strength of *not abandoning* our own position even while we ask for differing views. The goal is a mutual, careful assessment of benefits and risks. All of this takes great skill and practice.

A RESOURCE FOR QUESTIONS THAT DRIVE CHANGE

To help with our practice of asking questions from a systems mindset, I have compiled a list of questions for a variety of situations you can find at [Questions that drive change](#). Please send me your favorite questions to add to this list.

REFERENCES

1. Adams, Marilee Change Your Questions, Change your Life Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2009
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3. Neave, Henry R. The Deming Dimension SPC Press, 1990
4. Argyris, Chris Flawed Advice and the Management Trap Oxford University Press, 2000