STRENGTHS-BASED *versus* DEFICIT-BASED THINKING

It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Deficit-based thinking is all about can't, problems, weakness, and obstacles. Deficit-based thinking creates more problems. It creates a mentality of fear, of helplessness, and low expectations. It also creates a dependency on outside resources and solutions.

Strengths-based thinking focuses on what is working well, on opportunities, and possibility. It creates a mentality of growth, resiliency and agency. It is a perspective that is based on the assumption that people have existing competencies and resources for their own empowerment. It assumes that people are capable of solving problems and learning new skills; they are a part of the process rather than just being guided by a professional.

Research has shown that strengths-based programs are more effective and the results are more sustainable. By focusing on strengths, you increase your ability to act which encourages greater possibilities for success.

Strength-Based Thinking	vs	Deficit-Based Thinking
What's working?		What's wrong?
Co-constructing		Problem Solving
Sustainable Solutions		Short-Term Solutions
Discover & Adapt		Predict & Control
Emphasizing Possibilities		Overcoming Weakness
Engage		Intervene
Persistent		Resistant
Understand		Diagnose
Opportunity		Crisis
Celebrate Success		Punish Non-Compliance
Adapt to		Reform
Empower		Control
Process-focused		Behavior-focused
Dynamic		Static
Unique		Deviant

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A Framework for Reflective Questioning

Question Content \ Question Types	Awareness	Analysis	Alternatives	Action
Knowledge/ Understanding (What you know)	What do you know about…? What is your current understanding of (topic, situation)? *Probes (e.g.,):* How did you come to believe this?	How does that compare to what you want to know about…? How is that consistent with (standards, evidence)…? What do you know now after trying…? How does that compare with what you originally thought?	How could you find out about…? What different things could you do to learn more about …? What are other ways to view this for next time?	How do you plan to learn more about…? What option do you choose? Why? How are you going to put that into place? *Probes(e.g.,):* What resources do you have? What supports will you need? Where will you get them?
Practice (What you did)	How are you currently doing…? Why? What kinds of things did you do (have you done so far)? Why? What kinds of things did you try? Why? What kinds of things are you learning to do? What did you do that worked well? *Probes(e.g.,):* What is the present situation in more detail? Where does that occur most often? When did you first notice this?	How is that consistent with what you intended to do (wanted to do)? Why? How is that consistent with standards? Why?	What else could you have done to make practice consistent with standards? Why? What would you do differently next time? How might you go about doing that? What different ways could you approach this? *Probes(e.g.,):* What would it take for you to be able to do…? What would you need to do personally in order to do…?	What do you plan to do? When will you do this? What option did you choose? *Probes(e.g.,):* What types of supports will you need? What resources do you have? What would it take for you to be able to do…? What would you need to do personally in order to do…?
Outcomes (What was the result)	How did that work for you? What happened when you did…? Why? How effective was it to do that? What did you achieve when you did that? What went well? *Probes(e.g.,):* How do you feel about that? What do you think about…? How much control do you have over the outcome?	How did you know you needed to do something else? How did that match (or was different from) what you expected (or wanted) to happen? Why? How do these outcomes compare to expected outcomes based on standards of practice? What *should* happen if you're really doing (practice)? What brought about that result? *Probes(e.g.,):* How do you feel about that? What do you think about…?	What else might happen when you do …? Why? What different things could you have done to get expected outcomes? What might make it work even better next time?	Which option could get the best result? What do you plan to do differently next time? *Probes(e.g.,):* What types of supports will you need? What resources do you have/need? Where will you get them?
Evaluation (What about the process)	What opportunities were useful to you in achieving… (or in learning…)? In what way? How was it useful? Why? What supports were most helpful? What about the supports were most helpful?	How was that consistent with what you expected?	What other opportunities would be useful?	What opportunities do you want to access? How will you access those opportunities? *Probes (e.g.,):* What resources do you need? Where will you get them?

Joyce & Showers (2002)

Training components and attainment of outcomes in terms of percent of participants

	Outcomes		
Components	**Knowledge (thorough)**	**Skill (strong)**	**Transfer (implementation)**
Study of Theory	10	5	0
Demonstrations	30	20	0
Practice	60	60	5
Coaching	95	95	95

Joyce, B., and Showers, B., (2002). *Student Achievement through Staff Development* 3rd edition. Chapter 5. Designing Coaching and Peer Training: Our Need for Learning. Alexandra VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

LSL Coaching Behaviors Observation Tool

Learning Partner Observed:

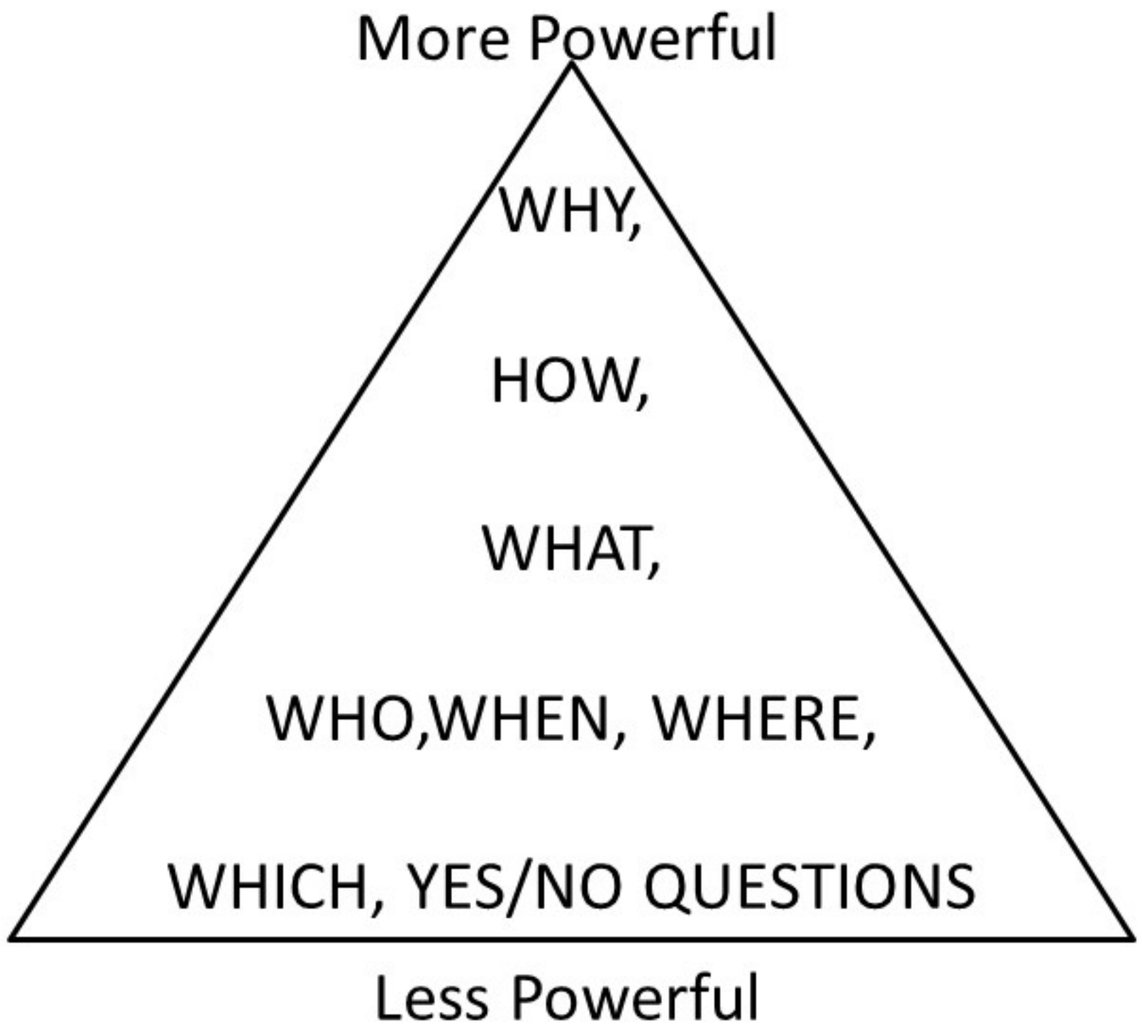
Observer:

Date:

Strategies	Tally	Examples	Questions & Comments
Storytelling/Energy Check			
Identify Needs/Feelings			
Observe without Evaluation			
Celebrate Strengths			
Invite Possibilities for Growth			
Model/Instruct			
Role Play/Learner Practice			
Brainstorm			
Commit to Plan/Discuss Carryover			

Adapted from Lillian Henderson, MSP, CCC-SLP, LSLS Cert AVT & Katherine Wilson-Linder, M.A., CCC-SLP, LSLS Cert. AVT. Hearing First: Strengths Based Coaching & Mentoring, 2017 for Hearing First: Introduction to Strengths-Based Coaching. May 2020.

Powerful Questions – from The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action by Eric E Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs



Results Coaching: The New Essential for School Leaders

Powerful Communication Skills: The New Essentials

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Powerful Communication Skills: The New Essentials

"The problem with communication … is the illusion that it has been accomplished."

—George Bernard Shaw

About 25 years ago, many of us chuckled to ourselves when we heard the prediction that by the 21st century, every home would have a computer. From our perspective, at that time, we thought it sounded like a farfetched prediction, and yet now, many of us have at least two computers, not to mention all the other things in our homes that are computer operated.

So, how did we move from being unskilled to proficient computer users? We moved through a process from the hearing, seeing, wondering stages on to the investigating, exploring, battling, and conquering stages. As we progressed through these stages, the more intentional we became in our use of the computer. We began to experience the value of this new tool, and we became much more committed to learning how to use it. At some stage during the process, the computer moved from a "don't have" to a "nice to have" to a "must have"—a true essential in our lives. We became one with the computer (at least we felt we couldn't get along without it), and we said good-bye to the no longer essential typewriter.

It's this change process that Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, and Hall (1998) discuss in their book *Taking Charge of Change* that moves individuals from an attitude of investigation to an acquisition of new behaviors, if they are willing to take the journey and if they believe that the new behaviors are essential, a "must have," for them.

As school leaders, we understand this concept of *new essentials* because we are working in a time when the stakes continue to increase expectations about student performance and for the adults working with them. We know that we must thoughtfully and intentionally determine the best tools and skills that will help move us to the next level of our effectiveness. Thus, we offer RESULTS Coaching as the new *essential*. As mentioned earlier in the book, district and school administration is no longer about school leaders who lead only because they supervise others; it's about leaders who lead through the lens of coaching, helping others acquire for themselves their own set of new essentials. It's about helping others move to action based upon their own thinking, doing, and being.

When coach leaders make public their engagement in the difficult processes of change, they become extraordinary teachers. Leaders, who themselves model learning, support a much more powerful learning organization (Kagan & Lahey, 2001).

The focus of this chapter is on the RESULTS coaching skills that committed leaders intentionally use as they coach others to discover and use the brilliance within themselves. This chapter will examine the communication skills of committed listening, paraphrasing, presuming positive intent, reflective feedback, and the cousin to presuming positive intent—powerful questions. For each skill, an opportunity for practice and deepening understanding is provided. To totally integrate these new essentials, continuous ongoing practice is a must!

The intention to focus on these four essential skills does not lessen the importance of a variety of other skills that impact results that will be listed and identified at the end of the chapter and in the Resources.

Skill 1: Committed Listening

How do we, as coach leaders, begin our journey of identifying, refining, and/or acquiring the essential skills of RESULTS *Coaching?* One important way is to begin with self-assessment. The following self-assessment opportunity provides a structure to look within, to determine where we are now as it relates to where we want to be. Committed listening is so critical and important that it is the most essential of all essential skills. It is the foundational skill for all communication skills.

As Dennis Sparks (2006), former director of Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council), says, “Committed listening transforms relationships and deepens learning. Its skillful use requires practice and discipline” (p. 52).

When we listen with commitment, we convey, “I care about what you have to say, and I'm listening with all my senses so that I fully understand an issue from your perspective. I am listening for both the content of the words and the emotions that resonate or peek out from behind the words. I am listening to hear the underlying beliefs and thinking that are occurring for the speaker as she or he continues to talk as well as what she or he is creating and learning.”

As committed listeners, we listen to

- gain clarity about an issue;
- understand the needs, perceptions, and emotions of the speaker;
- gather data for feedback;
- allow the speaker to refine thinking by speaking to an attentive listener;
- seek patterns of behavior; and
- lay a path for building responses and solutions.

Using the *CFR Committed Listening Reflection Tool* takes a few minutes and identifies where you are, right now, in your use of committed listening. Knowing that your intention is to reside on the right side of the tool as you acquire the skills necessary to do so, where are you now? Identify your current level of consistent use. Where are your strengths, and where are the areas for desired growth?

In completing the self-reflection tool, you may have found some areas that spoke to the need for you to become more intentional in your committed listening behaviors. And if you did, it's safe to say that you are not alone. The inability to use the skills of committed listening in a consistent manner is most likely the reason why people find conversations to be so challenging, unfulfilling, or at the very least, not as productive as they could be.

What keeps us from residing on the right side of the reflection tool? What are all the internal and external distracters that compete for our attention? And how do we, by knowing about these distracters, triumph over them and take control of our listening behaviors?

Cognitive Coaching has identified some unproductive patterns of listening behaviors. Let's examine four patterns that unintentionally lessen our listening effectiveness (Costa & Garmston, 2002). As we listen, any of these patterns have the potential to become “loud” in our head; in other words, it is like listening to a commentator in our head while we are trying to listen to another person. When we allow judgment, criticism (both positive and negative), autobiographical, inquisitive, or solution listening to overtake our thinking, we unintentionally lessen our ability to be a committed listener. Let's take a closer look at each of these

distracters and consider ways we will intentionally set aside any unproductive patterns of listening that may reduce our skill as a listener—we want to “turn down the noise in our head.” When we purposefully set aside unproductive patterns of listening and focus on productive patterns of listening, we are literally building new mind maps in our brain that have the potential to become new hardwiring (Rock, 2006). Now, how exciting is that?

Figure 5.1 CFR Committed Listening Tool

When I am listening to someone speak, my thoughts drift away instead of listening to what is being said.	Low 1 2 3 4 5 High	I concentrate on what the person speaking is saying and feeling while monitoring my listening behaviors as the conversation evolves.
While I'm listening to someone else, I'm being critical, thinking about my response, or relating to my own experience.	Low 1 2 3 4 5 High	I listen fully to the person speaking and set aside judgment, solution finding, or personal stories.
I'm quick to interrupt to express my own thoughts and opinions.	Low 1 2 3 4 5 High	Before responding, I wait to be sure the other person is finished with his or her thoughts.
I don't ask for clarification when I don't understand what the person means by what he or she is saying, or I interrupt with questions that either hijack or sidetrack the conversation.	Low 1 2 3 4 5 High	I ask questions to better understand what the other person is saying when I'm not clear on what he or she means (I don't interrupt to ask questions or redirect the conversation)
I don't make eye contact or show through my facial expressions, gestures, and posture that I am listening.	Low 1 2 3 4 5 High	I convey nonverbal attention and interest through facial expressions, gestures, and posture.
When I don't agree with what is said, I interrupt and force my ideas into the conversation, or I respond by attacking what the person has said.	Low 1 2 3 4 5 High	I honor others' views, even when they are not my own or when I disagree.
I feel like I need to respond or take action to comments made by others.	Low 1 2 3 4 5 High	I listen without obligation to act and illuminate answers within others.
I don't feel comfortable paraphrasing, and when I do, I tend to "parrot" back what the speaker has said.	Low 1 2 3 4 5 High	I paraphrase for clarity, elaboration, summary, and/or to help shift the thinking for greater meaning.

Unproductive Patterns of Listening

Judgment and Criticism

Judgment takes place when our listening focuses on what we see as flaws or greatness in another person's comments or ideas. Anytime we think or make a judgment statement, something like, “That's a great idea!” or “That won't work!” while another is speaking, we have presented ourselves as the authority, as the “wise one” over the situation. What we want to do, at the very least, is to present the respectful attitude of listening fully to what the speaker has to say. Judgment, as criticism, occurs when we feel a dissonance between what the speaker says and what we think and believe. Use of negative judgment or criticism may be perceived by others as adversarial, and thus, the conversation begins to shut down or take on a totally different tone. Positive judgments given as compliments feel good for a few moments but also can be perceived as if you believe you know best or you are an authority. Through our years of leadership and communication experience, we have seen how criticism or negative judgment is a sure way to reduce or limit thinking, inspiration, and creativity.

Criticism as the first step in a discussion risks halting the discussion and in turn becoming the last step as well. It also holds the potential of impeding the speaker's self-confidence, interfering with her thinking capability, and increasing her dependency upon approval from the listener.

Refraining from listening with an attitude of judgment may present challenges for school leaders because as the leader, you may have been trained or conditioned to appear to know best. Many of us were. It was our old hardwiring of how we thought leaders were supposed to lead. Like the TV series of yesterday, *Father Knows Best*, many thought “Leader Knows Best” was the role we were to assume, even when we were in the role of listener. We now understand that use of criticism or judgment could be viewed as arrogant and could send a message that our thoughts are the only correct thoughts.

The following are examples of judgment or criticism thoughts or statements:

- “How ridiculous!”
- “I tried that three years ago.”
- “She's not serious.”
- “Your premise is completely flawed.”
- “I like what Ann said.” (As soon as you approve of one idea, you discredit others.)
- “I tried that once, and it didn't work.”
- “Why on earth would you want to do that?”

Autobiographical Listening

Autobiographical listening occurs when our brain exercises its associative powers and the speaker's story stimulates us to think of our personal experiences connected with those being addressed by the speaker. Oh, how we love to tell our own stories when what we want to be doing is listening fully to the thinking of the speaker. As one leader said, “It's hard not to interrupt just long enough to share a personal experience, one that says to the teacher, ‘I understand what you mean.’”

As an effective and committed listener, we set autobiographical listening aside as soon as we become aware that our attention has drifted away from the speaker and into our own story. This listening pattern has the potential to lead us to the place of making judgments, forming comparisons, or totally breaking down our ability to attend to the speaker's thoughts. So, we

constantly monitor our thinking to make sure we are staying with the speaker. For example, Karen was being consoled by a friend after the death of her mother. What Karen needed from her friend was a space to talk and reflect back on her mother's life and death. Instead, the friend, meaning to be supportive, began to share about her own mother, going into much detail about her mom's illness and subsequent death. What happened? The friend unintentionally hijacked the conversation and went off on her own story, staying there for most of the remaining time of the conversation. The friend thought she was showing compassion by sharing her personal story and most likely left the conversation thinking she had provided much support to Karen, but in fact, Karen left the conversation feeling “unheard” and empty. We are not suggesting that a person never share a personal story or example as they are intentionally listening to another. If the friend had told a brief personal story as an extension of Karen's story or as an illustration of something Karen had shared, it might have been beneficial, serving as a way of empathizing with Karen's emotions.

We know that personal comments provided while you are listening to another can be beneficial to show your empathy and understanding. The brain is making natural connections to show caring. The committed listener is always monitoring the amount of personal sharing they offer. The committed listener knows sharing a personal example is a way to offer empathy and then quickly return to the other person's story.

One experience Kathy shares is when, as an assistant superintendent, very angry parents arrived at her office demanding the firing of a principal and a teacher. She quickly acknowledged their anger and disappointment in how a situation had been handled and invited them to share how she could partner with them in a solution. The parents shared the details of a situation of how their child, a middle schooler, had been accused of lying. Immediately, the details of their story sent Kathy's brain darting down her dendrites connecting to being a middle school teacher and wondering what made this kid different … and then remembering a similar situation with her own daughter. As she listened, she decided to take a chance using autobiographical listening to connect with and show empathy toward these hostile parents. She shared with the parents her similar feelings of a common experience when her daughter was in middle school and asked permission to share what happened to her. The parents eagerly agreed, seeing her genuine caring and interest and obvious similarity to their situation.

Kathy explained that her daughter brought home a letter stating that she had lost her bus privileges for a month for a continued violation on the bus. Her daughter, Jill, vehemently denied that this happened, that she was a victim of false identification, but she knew “her mother would never go to her defense because her mother was a teacher, and teacher parents never go against their fellow teachers.” Saddened by her daughter's strong opinion, Kathy assured her daughter that she was her advocate and would go with her the following morning to clear up this false identification. Kathy concluded by asking her daughter one more time, “Are you sure you were not involved in this incident?” to which Jill replied, “Absolutely not, Mom, I am innocent!”

The next morning, they arrived at the assistant principal's office requesting a few moments to clear up the misunderstanding. It was especially uncomfortable because this was the same school where Kathy had taught before becoming an administrator, and these educators were her peers. Very quickly, other players were called into the small office, including her special friend, a prior teaching partner, who was also the bus driver. Kathy began the conversation by stating she knew how busy everyone was and she only desired to advocate for her daughter and a situation that had her mistakenly identified as part of a bus incident. As everyone sat

together—the administrator, a teacher, the bus driver, Kathy, and her daughter—Kathy could see the look in the eyes of her friend who drove the bus. He spoke up gingerly offering "Kathy, I am so sorry, but I personally witnessed the incident with Jill."

Kathy slowly turned to look at her daughter, tension building, to hear what she would say. With the innocence of a six year old, Jill replied, "But I only did that one time!" Hearing her daughter's perception of the situation caused an avalanche of emotions within Kathy. She thought first about how sad it was that her daughter would never enjoy the fun of driving, never see her walk across the graduation stage, and so on because her life, as she knew it was over! Then, a second wave of emotions came from being so embarrassed that her daughter would put her in this position with her peers. Kathy was mortified!

At this moment, observing all along the body language cues of the angry parents, she paused, knowing it was time to return to their situation. She could see a change, a softening in their eyes. Almost immediately, the father lifted his hand to stop her. The father spoke by saying, "We have probably overreacted to this situation, but we had to stand up against such a negative accusation about our son." Kathy affirmed all parents' roles as chief advocate for their children and applauded their demonstration of belief to come forward and talk about it. A delightful conversation followed, a new relationship was born, and the parents left with smiles on their faces and a document in their hands that described the developmental characteristics of the seventh and eighth grader.

Autobiographical stories offer the possibility of connecting to others in a way that shows caring and understanding, but without monitoring, they can also highjack another's story and turn the focus away from that person. The committed listener will know exactly when it is time to return to the story and situation of the other. The speaker will feel empathy is when someone is fully listening and attending.

Examples of autobiographical listening include thoughts similar to the following:

- You think Johnny is a challenge? You should have known Sue. Let me tell you about her!
- I remember when I felt like that too. Why let me tell you. …
- She thinks she works hard; well, I remember when I first became a teacher. We had no help at all. …
- How do you think you would feel if you had four different preps? In my first assignment. …

Inquisitive Listening

A third unproductive pattern of listening is inquisitive listening, which occurs when we become curious about something the speaker says that is not relevant to the issue at hand. For example, Mary, one of your third-grade teachers, comes into your office and asks for your help. One of her students, Bill Smith, has just fallen asleep in class for the third time this week. Mary begins to explain why she is so concerned about Bill's change in behavior over the past few weeks. She tells you that she knows she needs to contact Bill's mother, to discuss this with her but knows that Mrs. Smith is leaving tomorrow for an extended trip to Spain. Before you realize it, you are thinking, "I wonder where in Spain she is going? I wonder if she will go to Toledo?" Your inquisitive thoughts have caused you to stop hearing Mary. You might even go from thinking to speaking and provide evidence to Mary that you were not hearing her need. A committed listener knows how distracting inquisitive listening can be, and they intentionally set aside distracting thoughts to stay focused on the words of the speaker, committed to ask questions only for the sake of gaining clarity around the issue at hand and

without interrupting the speaker's flow of thinking.

A committed listener needs only to understand the speaker's perspectives, feelings, and goals and how to pose questions that support self-directed thinking and learning. When we speculate, we are trying to figure out what someone is thinking and feeling before they have said it. Speculation is another distraction that does not allow us to pay sufficient attention to what another is saying.

Scrutinizing is also a by-product of inquisitive listening—a curiosity about what is not relevant to the listening moment sinks the conversation into a hole of minutiae that causes us to lose sight of the larger issue. For example, when we become so distracted by the conversation and start focusing on little details that are not essential or are unimportant to the overall purpose, we are demonstrating scrutinizing listening. Or if a teacher brings in a letter to share with me as the leader, and I place my focus on editing the letter instead of the content of the message, I'm scrutinizing while listening.

Kathy witnessed this amusing example between two colleagues:

> Excitedly, Anita rushed to her fellow teacher, Sharon, and immediately began to tell her of the weekend encounter she had had with one of their ever-difficult teammates. Anita said, “You will not believe what Lorraine said to me when I saw her this weekend at T.J. Maxx.” To which, Sharon replied, “Where is a T.J. Maxx? I love that store.”

While pretty funny, the impact to the one desiring to be listened to can be like being stopped by a wall and wanting to yell out, “Did you hear anything I said?”

Examples of inquisitive listening include the following:

- A parent is sharing distractions in their family due to the dad getting a new job. The teacher begins to wonder how much money he will be making and if he might travel.
- A new teacher is talking about the wonderful success she had with her students using a certain strategy. Her teammate wants to know what book she got that idea from and what materials were needed to do it.

Solution Listening

A fourth pattern of unproductive listening occurs when we view ourselves as great problem solvers, ready and eager to help and give suggestions to others. We have probably even been hired for a position because we are such great problem solvers. This ability, this behavior, interferes with our commitment to listen fully because we are searching for the right solution for someone else. In committed listening, however, solution finding interferes with understanding the situation from the colleague's perspective. As we solution listen, we often filter by listening to some things and not to others, paying attention to only those ideas that support the solution approach we see. We filter when we hear what we want to hear or what supports our point of view but not necessarily the point of view of the speaker. As our attention gets focused on preparing the way we are going to present a solution or on

rehearsing what we are going to say, we have again stopped listening. Stephen Covey (1989) asks, “Are we listening to understand or to reply?

The following are a few examples of solution listening:

- “ Why doesn't she see that will never work. … She is going to have to make sure of these things. …”
- “I would never write a letter of resignation under those circumstances. He needs to write the personnel director and make sure that he knows about this situation and say. …”
- “If she would just stop talking; I need to make her see the need for more student involvement.”

Effective listeners monitor and manage their own listening skills by focusing their mental energies to committed listening. To listen with such intensity requires intentionally avoiding these unproductive behaviors that interfere with the ability to hear and fully understand another.

Barriers to Committed Listening

Madelyn Burley-Allen (1995), in *Listening: The Forgotten Skill*, speaks to barriers of committed listening we may encounter and how to remain intentional in our committed listening. These barriers naturally organize themselves into two large groups: internal and external distracters.

Internal Distractions

Internal distracters are those emotions and thoughts from within us that have the potential to hijack our attention. The list can be endless and includes feeling hungry, sleepy, cold, hot, sad, happy or angry, or thinking about your next appointment. Let's look specifically at four of these areas.

Physical Barriers

Our body can serve as a barrier to being a committed listener. For example, when we are fatigued, our thought processes slow down as it takes more energy to concentrate on the speaker's meaning. When our energy is low, our concentration declines and our daydreaming capacity increases. Likewise, when our energy is captured by personal problems, we have less energy available for focused listening. To increase the challenge of physical barriers, the human mind is able to hear words at a faster rate than we are able to say them, so if we are not committed listeners, we will find little pockets of time that we can use for our personal daydreaming.

Emotional Reactions

As we listen, we attend to both the content and emotions of the speaker. As Jill Bolte-Taylor (2006) tells us in *My Stroke of Insight*, although many of us may think of ourselves as thinking creatures that feel, biologically, we are feeling creatures that think. Therefore, we must listen for emotions and content from the speaker, and we must also be aware of our own emotions as we listen. What do we do with these two sources of information that come to us from the speaker? If we are not intentional, we may find ourselves being hijacked from committed listening to emotional or reactive listening. For instance, the speaker uses words that push

our “hot button,” and before we realize what's happened, we tune out the speaker, rise to our figurative soapbox, and begin to defend our differing point of view, either verbally or internally. Or we may begin to formulate our response to the speaker in the form of either questions or comments. It is critical to remember to keep listening to understand the speaker and to set aside emotional reactions, knowing that you will have a time in the conversation to ask clarifying questions or speak from your point of view. As we have learned from the work of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998), we know that the ability to self-monitor and hold our emotions in check until an appropriate time to share is a sign of emotional strength. A RESULTS Coach demonstrates emotional intelligence as he listens to others.

Biases and Judgments

As discussed earlier, forming judgments while listening is a huge distracter to committed listening. So are personal biases. If we are not intentional in our listening behaviors, previous experiences—whether positive or negative—may influence our ability to listen with intention. For example, Mrs. Billings, an elementary principal committed to overcoming the distraction of listening through the lens of personal biases, speaks about the process she uses to coach Mrs. Garrett, a second-grade teacher on a professional growth plan. Mrs. Billings says, “When Mrs. Garret and I are in conversation about her growth plan, I intentionally set aside thoughts that could move me to forming judgments based on previous years' performance and instead listen intentionally to her descriptions of progress and the steps she is taking to achieve her professional growth plan. I'm setting aside the distracter of where she has been and am listening intently to where she is going. I'll ask clarifying questions or make my comments when it is my time to speak. I find it very helpful to intentionally set aside distracters of biases and judgments.”

Here is another example. Mrs. Smith, a third-grade teacher, walks into the principal's office and says, “The influx of all these kids from the new apartments just can't learn like our other kids! It's so frustrating and how on earth are we going to be expected to stay on pace in the curriculum?” Mrs. Smith's statements are in direct opposition to the belief in this school that all students can and will learn at high levels, based on what we do to help and encourage them to learn. While she does not agree with Mrs. Smith's statements, the principal, committed to deep listening, is listening to understand what is behind the teacher's words and emotions so that she can best help her move forward to positive actions based on her concerns.

Bias around poverty, race, religion, lifestyle, and age are other possible examples of internal barriers that may keep us from listening fully to another's point of view. We may encounter big challenges when we, as committed listeners, are faced with issues that confront our own value systems. Instead of trying to change the speaker's point of view, how do we intentionally set aside our bias or judgments to be fully present for the person speaking? As RESULTS coach leaders, we know that we can never influence a new point of view until we first hear and attempt to understand another's point of view.

Semantic misunderstandings may occur as each of us has our own meanings for words that we filter though our personal experiences, beliefs, education, and mindset. While we share words with the people we work with, we still have our personal interpretation of those words. A most important caution for us, as leaders, is to be on guard that what speakers may be saying is not exactly the same as what we think they are saying. Their mind map may be totally different from our mind map. Their words may have different meanings. Remember the quote mentioned earlier in the book, the one that hung for years in Vicky's dentist office? It said, “I

know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." The message for all is to listen for the intent of understanding from the perspective of the speaker and not to let our own words and meanings halt or slow down our understanding. Effective paraphrasing, addressed later, offers a powerful tool to listen and fully understand.

External Distractions

In addition to internal distracters, our listening is challenged with external distracters from our environment, competing for our attention. If we are not careful, these distractions can rule us instead of us ruling them. A few that might impact our ability to be a committed listener are as follows:

- You are listening to the speaker when your phone rings, either fully or in the silent mode. What to do? Do you stop and see who is calling, or do you let it go to your voice mail?
- You are listening fully when you hear the sound on your computer that tells you there's new e-mail. Should you take a quick peek? It might be the superintendent or the board president.
- You are listening fully when your secretary opens the door and hands you a paper to sign. Do you sign it as you listen and also make a few comments to your secretary about the paper?
- You notice that the speaker is wearing a beautiful necklace. Do you begin to think about what that necklace might look like on you?

The list could go on and on, but you get the point. Committed listeners strive to be fully present with the conversation. When we cannot, because of external distracters, we have some choices to make to help us stay in the "fully present" mode. We can ask for permission to make an accommodation, like rescheduling the meeting or stopping the conversation for a few minutes to deal with a pressing issue so that we are able to return to the state of being fully present during the conversation. A principal shared with us recently that when she saw the movie, *Up*, she realized she was exactly like the eager dog, who while really wanting to listen, could not resist the distraction of a squirrel running past. She confessed she must look like that dog in her conversations that might sound like the following:

> "Yes, how is your class doing?" Squirrel!
>
> "You said Billy was making what grade?" Squirrel!
>
> "Oh, the meeting tonight is about what?" Squirrel!
>
> Squirrel … squirrel … squirrel … They are everywhere!

Reflection

RESULTS leaders know that listening is the first step toward helping others move to action. First, we listen, and then, we respond based on what we have heard. To listen with such intensity requires intentionally avoiding unproductive behaviors and overcoming barriers to committed listening that interfere with our ability to hear and understand another.

1. In reflecting back on the unproductive patterns of listening that have been presented in this chapter, what are you learning about what you need to pay attention to in order to

intentionally avoid these patterns in your conversations?
2. How do you plan to develop strengths as a committed listener?
3. How do you plan to “be” as a committed listener?
4. Choose one of the barriers from the list above. Create a web with the distracter in the middle of the web. Brainstorm as many options as possible for handling this distraction.
5. What are other barriers that you have discovered that can impede your listening if not addressed and eliminated? What have you learned about the importance of dealing with these barriers or distracters?

Skill 2: Paraphrasing

Closely connected to the essential skill of listening is the essential skill of paraphrasing. In fact, there is such a strong connection between the two, it's like the song says, “You can't have one without the other!” A skillful paraphrase follows intentional listening and is offered in response to the words spoken and the emotions observed as well, as those hidden or not yet revealed or realized by the speaker. The benefits of paraphrasing are multidimensional both for the listener and the speaker, providing the opportunity for greater clarity and movement of thinking. Paraphrasing is intended to align the people in a conversation and create a safe environment for thinking.

Interestingly, while paraphrasing is an essential skill of RESULTS Coaching, it is typically one of the least used communication skills. Perhaps that is because it requires a commitment to listening more than talking during the conversation. Leaders who develop a consciousness about the power of this skill and commit to using the reflective tool become clearer and more effective in their conversations. In so doing, they are much more likely to help move people to action, action that benefits the individual and the entire organization. Frequently, people ask, “Why paraphrase, I know what he said?” The purpose of the paraphrase is not as much for the listener, as it is for the benefit of the speaker. It reflects the content (and emotions) back to the speaker for consideration and connects the response to the flow of the emerging conversation.

Recently, Vicky observed the value of a paraphrase as she worked with a group of incarcerated women. It was as if a wave of relief came over them when they heard someone say back to them in summarized form what they had expressed in their thinking and feeling. She observed eyes that seemed to say, “Oh yes!You get what I'm saying!” If paraphrasing can positively impact women's thinking in prison, consider the value of paraphrasing within our schools and our personal lives.

A paraphrase has the potential to serve as a gift to the speaker while at the same time creating permission to move forward with more details and elaboration of thought. Without paraphrasing, questioning may seem more like interrogation. With paraphrasing, trustful pathways for thoughtful communication open up, leading towards possibilities of deliberate actions.

Three Messages of Paraphrasing

A paraphrase sends three messages:

1. I am listening.
2. I am interested—I care.
3. I understand you, or I'm trying to understand you.

Moving from I to You

During the 1970s, many people were taught to paraphrase in one particular way that has been very hardwired in our language but is very ineffective. The use of the phrase, “What I hear you saying is …” signaled to many speakers that their thoughts became secondary to those of the paraphraser who was inserting his or her own ideas into the conversation. Clearly, that was never the intent of beginning a paraphrase with an “I” statement. By simply moving the paraphrase to a “you” statement, greater benefits are provided to the speaker.

Years ago, Madeline Hunter stressed this point during a UCLA summer institute when she said, “Take the I-Yi-Yi-Yi-Yi out of your paraphrasing and replace it with the you, you, you, you, you!” That point has stuck with us as we help others discover the power potential of paraphrasing!

Principles of Paraphrasing

Costa and Garmston (2002), Lipton and Wellman (2001), and others have offered some principles of paraphrasing well worth considering. We highlight five that have brought much value to our RESULTS Coaching experiences.

1. **Fully attend**. Set aside all distracters and barriers that compete for your attention and use your committed listening skills. Monitor yourself as you listen to make sure you stay in the moment with the speaker. If you find your thoughts straying to other areas, intentionally bring yourself back to the role of the listener.
2. **Listen with the intent to understand.** Concentrate on both the content and the emotions of the speaker and remember about the words behind the words, or what we have earlier referred to as the river that flows beneath the words. For example, a teacher comes into the principal's office and says, “I've had it with Johnny, and I don't want him in my classroom anymore!” The RESULTS coach leader is hearing her words but is also hearing (and seeing) that she is frustrated and feels she is out of strategies to help Johnny.
3. **Capture the *essence* of the message in a paraphrase that is shorter than the original statement**. It's not about parroting back but rather pulling forward the most important messages contained in the talking. For instance, someone speaks for a full five minutes. You listen and capture the heart of his or her thoughts in a one-or two-sentence paraphrase rather than shifting your thinking over to a space where you tune him or her out, create a response, formulate a solution, or simultaneously attend to another task, clearly moving you from being a committed listener.
4. **Reflect the essence of voice tone and gestures**. Capture or identify emotions you hear or see. Earlier, we talked about listening fully with all of your senses. Much information can be gained through voice tone and gestures. If the speaker is loud, you don't have to respond in kind. Instead, you can name the meaning of the voice tone and gestures and await validation from the speaker. For instance, a paraphrase that deals with voice tone and gestures might be as simple as, “You feel strongly about this issue,” rather than, “You don't need to yell!”
5. **Paraphrase before asking a question**. This is frequently overlooked if we are not intentional in our paraphrasing. Cognitive Coaching taught us to “Pause, Paraphrase, Probe” the three Ps that can transform conversations. Pause to truly listen first, paraphrase next to allow the speaker to feel understood and heard, and then ask a

question. For example, in talking with a former principal, a firsttime administrator expresses her concern about the relationship with her peers in her new role. The former principal could say, “So, what do you want the new relationship to be? How will you do it, and when will you start working on it?” Instead, she begins with a paraphrase that speaks to the value of her new role, reflecting on her relationship with her new staff by saying, “You are wondering how the relationships you value with your peers will change as a result of your new role,” pausing for the response. Depending on the speaker's response, you may ask a question such as those asked above.

Recently, Kathy had the opportunity to experience the power of paraphrasing while working with a group of school leaders. After completing a teach piece on paraphrasing, participants moved into small practice groups to try out their new learning. As it happened in one small group, a superintendent was assigned the role of listener for a principal who was asked to speak about an authentic issue she was currently facing, one where she knew she needed to take action. Both the superintendent and the principal voiced feelings of uncertainly as they began the process and both spoke favorably of the experience at the conclusion of the activity.

During the debrief time, the superintendent described feelings of apprehension as he began the activity, unsure of how best to help the principal get what she wanted out of the conversation. He understood that as the listener, his role was to paraphrase but was somewhat hesitant about how to actually do the paraphrasing in the “right” way. The superintendent listened, paused, and then said, “So, you are disappointed in yourself that you have not had a conversation with your teacher.” The principal, not feeling judged, continued to speak honestly about the situation. Again, the superintendent listened, paused, and then said, “You have a deep belief that if this teacher's practice was more effective, it would dramatically impact the results of your school.” Without judgment, the superintendent paraphrased, and that paraphrase caused insight for the principal that provided the energy for action. The principal resolved to have a conversation with the teacher before the end of the day.

As the two reflected on the conversation, the superintendent spoke of feeling awkward and stiff with his paraphrasing. The principal, however, didn't feel the paraphrases were stiff; in fact, she spoke to the value of his nonjudgmental language in creating clarity, insight, and a sense of support that propelled her to action.

What does this story say to each of us? Perhaps, the message is that a “stiff” paraphrase is better than no paraphrase at all, and the more practice we have with paraphrasing, the better we become at using the skill. The more skilled we become at paraphrasing, the greater the possibility for helping others bring clarity and accuracy to their thinking and doing. The insights created provide energy for action.

One strategy Vicky learned years ago for increasing her paraphrasing skills was to sit in front of the TV, listen to someone talking, and paraphrase what he or she said. It's a great way to flex your paraphrasing skills and to help prepare you to become more proficient in your use of three main types of paraphrases.

Three Types of Paraphrases

We acknowledge again the work of Bob Garmston and Art Costa (2002) in *Cognitive Coaching* and Laura Lipton and Bruce Wellman (2002) in their work on *Mentoring Matters.* We use a

scaffold approach for creating paraphrase from three levels:

1. Acknowledging and clarifying
2. Summarizing and organizing
3. Shifting conceptual focus

We paraphrase from two perspectives or arenas: the emotions and the content provided by the speaker.

Level 1: Acknowledge and Clarify

When we acknowledge and clarify, we restate the essence of someone's statement by identifying and calibrating content and emotions. By design, acknowledging and clarifying paraphrases communicate our desire to understand and our value for the person. We intentionally eliminate the word "I" in our paraphrase. Some examples might include the following:

- "So, you're feeling overwhelmed by the new state standards for science."
- "You're noticing that some students are actively involved in the learning and some are not."
- "You're frustrated because your plan is not working as you expected."
- "You're excited about the possibilities of your new approach!"

Kathy offers the concept of "Witness the Struggle" as a powerful acknowledge (emotion) paraphrase. The concept comes from a significant learning that occurred in 1982 while serving as the district gifted and talented coordinator. A psychologist came in to work with the parents of gifted children and with Kathy and her team. As the psychologist listened to Kathy voice concerns over parents who demanded many things of the district, he asked Kathy to remember a very important thing. He said, "People know, rationally, that we cannot always give them everything they want. They know that we can't change policy for them. They understand that there are circumstances or situations that determine our actions in school systems. But they demand that … we 'witness their struggle.'" That experience was one of the greatest gifts Kathy received as an educator and fellow human. Those three words became one of the most powerful strategies to really witness the power of paraphrasing.

When a parent would come in upset and say, "My child has got to qualify for the gifted program!" Kathy would remember and say, "You are disappointed and frustrated that our restrictive criteria is not recognizing the talents of your child," or "You are feeling frustrated by the requirements of a program and fearful that without our program your child will miss opportunities."

The significance of " witnessing their struggle" was evident every time. Parents felt heard and understood, which created a pathway to have a conversation, whereas before, there was no real conversation, just a confrontation. Opportunities abound for paraphrasing by "witnessing the struggle." As Assistant Superintendent, Kathy oversaw the district extracurricular activity of cheerleaders. Joyful and thrilling as that responsibility was, it never failed to offer a tearful or angry phone call from mothers whose dreams for their daughters were shattered by not being selected to the squad. One memorable conversation went somewhat like the following:

> **Cheerleader mom** …"I want the district supervisor and the sponsor for cheerleaders fired for having a biased and unfair competition."

Response …"You are extremely disappointed in the district's execution and outcomes with this competition."

The mother …"Is there no intelligent person in this district

continued who can organize and run a competition? Did they hire everyone is this district from substandard community colleges?"

Response … Mrs. Cheer, you are convinced that those running our cheerleading competitions need organizational skills."

While the exchange continued for 30 minutes, all Kathy did was patiently listen and "witness her struggle." At the end of her tirade, the mother said, "Well, finally I found someone in the district who listens."

Her final statement was another powerful affirmation that so many times, people simply want to be heard. While this mother had a reputation of being quite troublesome and rude, her future interactions with Kathy were always courteous and respectful.

To acknowledge and clarify are easy and yet powerful ways that language exemplifies listening, caring, and concern.

Level 2: Summarize and Organize

As we move beyond acknowledging and clarifying, we summarize and organize the speaker's comments. By summarizing and organizing, we offer themes and containers that shape the initiating statement or separate jumbled issues. This paraphrase is useful when there has been a great deal said in a long stream of language.

Some examples follow. Notice the inclusion of emotions and content as the paraphrase moves the thinking to a higher level:

- "So, there seems to be two key areas of concern for you with students who have yet to meet the reading standards. First, you are concerned about absences. You are seeing a direct correlation between concept acquisition and consistent attendance. Your second concern is with time. You feel that additional instructional time must be provided to these students for concept development, and you're wondering how best to provide that time."
- "You're describing three big tasks you see for yourself. First, you want to conduct weekly assessment checks with "at risk" students. Second, you want to provide specific instruction twice daily based on the data you have collected from these assessment checks. Third, you want to hold weekly updates with the parents to keep them involved in this concentrated instructional approach."
- "On one hand, you want to talk frankly with the parent, and on the other hand, you are concerned about the receptivity of the parent to a frank conversation."

Level 3: Shifting Conceptual Focus

The third level of paraphrasing is shifting the conceptual focus of the thinking by surfacing assumptions, beliefs, core values, and mental models. Metaphors, analogies, perspective taking, and reframing shift the focus upward or downward. This type of paraphrase helps move thinking to a higher, more conceptual level or to a lower, more logical level, based upon

observed need. A shifting-up paraphrase illuminates large ideas or categories, often leading the speaker to new discoveries. A shifting-down paraphrase focuses and clarifies, increasing precision of thinking.

For individuals who think in highly global patterns, the shift down is a way of grounding their thinking in specific examples and details. For individuals who think in highly sequential and concrete patterns, the shift up is a way of helping them explore a bigger picture and provide a wider context for their thoughts. Shifts up tend to grab big ideas about values, beliefs, assumptions, goals, or intentions.

In a conversation years ago with Bob Garmston, Kathy shared her emotional exhaustion from trying to meet demands of the community for the district to be innovative with structures for teaching and learning. With each idea she presented to the district-level committee of parents and community leaders, she felt hammered by their strong allegiance to traditional approaches, contradictory to their requests for innovation. She was feeling defeated and tired of trying. Bob paraphrased, ”Kathy, you are feeling like a pioneer, forging a new path and meeting with resistance at every turn of the path.” Kathy's tear-filled eyes dried with amazing speed as she heard the word, *pioneer*, … wow, yes, that was how she wanted to be, the spirit of a pioneer. Her head immediately went to leadership visionary Joel Barker and the critical importance of pioneers. Her body language went from hunched to straight, from beaten down to strength. One word of a paraphrase had the power to totally transform her attitude and energy to her work … a single conversation that reconnected her to her drive and commitment toward the district goal. Within three years, her district became the largest district in the state to achieve the ranking of exemplary.

Another example finds a teacher upset about the consistent tardiness of one of her students. The counselor paraphrased, “So, your frustration from the tardiness is causing you to feel your student doesn't care and preventing you from uncovering the family issues impacting his behavior.” After a long pause, it was clear the paraphrase influenced a huge shift in the teacher's thinking. Simply hearing the words of the powerful paraphrase, the teacher's thinking opened to other possibilities around motivation other than simply not caring.

Other examples of shifting up paraphrases include the following:

- “So, a goal that seems to be forming for you this year is to focus on increasing your students' ability to become self-directed learners.”
- “You're realizing that one of your strongest beliefs about always maintaining the dignity of every learner is not a belief shared by some of your colleagues.”
- “Your view of your work is to build bridges between your content and the real world your students will experience in the future.”

We shift down when abstractions and concepts need grounding in details, examples, non-examples, strategies, choices, and actions. A shift-down paraphrase might sound like these examples:

- “Given your deep concern for an engaged, collaborative environment, you think that you need to pay attention to individual discipline procedures you consistently use in your classroom.”
- “So one strategy you are considering to address your concern about balance between relationship building and information sharing is to establish a more formal agenda for your parent conferences.”
- “Knowing that parent involvement is an important component of successful schools, you

are beginning to think about specific steps to increase parent involvement in your classroom."

Reflection: Practice Paraphrasing

The Practice Paraphrasing activity is an opportunity for you to practice your paraphrasing skills, using what you are learning about the two perspectives of paraphrases (emotion and content) and the three levels of powerful paraphrasing (acknowledging and/or clarifying, summarizing and/or organizing, and shifting focus). The following are sample statements made by teachers, organized into the three levels of paraphrasing. Read the teacher comment and create what you consider to be an appropriate paraphrase response. First, look at the example responses provided. Do you agree or disagree with the response? Do you see a need to change the response? If so, how would you change the response? Then, move on to providing your own responses to the other teacher statements.

Figure 5.2 Practice Paraphrasing

Teacher/Parent Comment	Your Paraphrase
Skill: Acknowledge and/or Clarify	
1. **Teacher**: All we seem to do is assessment practice and district benchmarking, and I never have time to teach.	*Example: You are obviously concerned about the students' real learning if all we are doing is assessing tested objectives.*
2. **Teacher**: This student misses school once or twice a week. How can I ever expect to impact her learning?	

Teacher/Parent Comment	Your Paraphrase
3. **Parent:** I want my child in Ms. Brown's class next year. I know she is a great teacher and keeps the kids in line.	
4. **Parent:** I can't believe the way the teacher humiliated my son. I want him removed from this class immediately!	
Skill: Summarize and/or Organize	
1. **Teacher**: You want us to meet with our team and differentiate instruction for a half-dozen, different kinds of kids. I never have any time to just plan for the majority of the kids in my class.	*Example: So there are two real areas of concern for you: planning for the majority of your kids and meeting with your team to plan differentiation.*
2. **Teacher:** There are just too many different demands on my time: afterschool meetings, nighttime parent meetings, Saturday tutoring, summer staff development requirements. When do I ever get time for my own life and the life of my family?	
3. **Parent**: I am very concerned about my child's teacher. The work I see is so easy, hardly any homework; my child is not looking forward to going to school anymore; I never know what is upcoming or due. I just am very upset with the quality I am hearing about.	
Skill: Shift Conceptual Focus and/or Mental Model	
Teacher: I have very high standards for my teaching, and some kids just don't meet those standards. I would think you would applaud my efforts for rigor and excellence.	*Example: You are very proud of the rigor and high standards of your teaching and believe that not all of your students have the potential to meet your standards.*
Teacher: I have been teaching a very long time, and my students have been successful. What is the big deal about "best practice" that is so different than what I have been doing for years?	
Teacher: AYP is unrealistic and is another thing to keep our schools from looking like we are making a difference.	

Teacher/Parent Comment	Your Paraphrase
Practice—Practice—Practice	**Response Of Your Choice**
"This student is out of control. I don't think I can be expected to teach this curriculum to every child if this student continues to disrupt in my classroom."	
"I believe my twins should be in the same class together. They have been together since kindergarten and just because they are going into the intermediate grades should not make any difference."	
"The parents in this class are in my face all the time. Talk about "helicopter parents!" They question every assignment, every grade, and every test question I ask. I am just sick of it. How am I expected to teach kids with 22 parents thinking they are the teacher?"	
"You keep talking about engaging the students. If I have them work in cooperative groups for every objective I teach, I will finish my curriculum in four years. You don't really mean engage them for everything, do you?"	
"My principal is always in my face. I think she has something in for me and just wants to get rid of me."	
"I have tried to get my team to plan together because I know we could be sharing so many ideas and saving all of us time. The team leader refuses to discuss how we can improve our instruction by team planning."	
"My assistant is very strong in her knowledge and skills about content. She knows hundreds of powerful strategies for teaching and learning, but when she talks with my teachers she is so arrogant and pushy or bossy they don't hear what she says. I am so sad that her knowledge and skills are lost to her poor people skills."	
"My number one priority this year is helping my principals define and measure high quality teaching and learning in their classroom."	

Skill 3: Presuming Positive Intent and Powerful Questions

At the beginning of this book, our strong belief in the positive was articulated and influences our approach to teaching and supporting others. Our point of view is founded in the belief that people grow from their successes and strengths. Our combined years of life and work experience has shown us that very few people are inspired to greatness with negative and demeaning language. Because our profession is committed to teaching and learning at the highest levels, it must begin with language that aligns with the belief we have—that people want to be their best and do their best. We do believe in the power of positive change and positive psychology. Social psychologists and sociologists all recognize these positive phenomena. Most people want to feel good, do good, have value and worth, and want to make a contribution. Presuming positive intent in others is simply required to walk in any leadership coaching role. So, we begin with the language of presuming positive intent.

Suzette Haden-Elgin (2000, p. 261) teaches us, “A presupposition is anything that a native speaker of a language knows is part of the meaning of a sequence of that language, even if it doesn't appear on the surface.”

You know that “he stopped drinking and driving” presupposes “he started drinking and driving” even though “started” in not in the language of the statement. Suzette Elgin says this is why questions like, “Have you stopped cheating on your taxes?” are so dangerous. The sequence, “If you really cared about your health” presupposes, “You don't really care about your health.” Language has power and rewiring our language patterns to presume positive rather than negative helps guide our interactions to greater outcomes. Surprisingly, it is harder than anyone can imagine. We have very strong hard wiring when it comes to language patterns in our culture that tend to presume and believe negative as a default.

Communication is almost always troublesome in any relationship, personal or professional. It often stems from the fact that our language is full of embedded presuppositions, subtle and not so subtle meanings that are disguised as overt and covert messages we send to others. By paying attention to our language and the presuppositions within and choosing our words with care, we can more positively influence the thinking and feelings of others.

We say something that may be interpreted at a much deeper level than the surface words we use. At times, our presuppositions may be received by others as negative or demeaning, even when it is not our intent to speak from a negative perspective. Negative presuppositions, both the subtle and not so subtle ones, can be hurtful to others, can move people into a reactive or defensive mode, and can shut down a conversation.

Statements such as the following are rampant in our systems:

- “You look so nice today, are you being evaluated?”
- “That is such a flattering picture of you.”
- “Now, can I hear a practical idea?”
- “Did you not have a plan or simply not work your plan?”
- “Have you thought about the message your appearance sends?”
- “Did we do anything important in class today?”

It is no wonder that so few people are joyful, and the field of teaching seems a lesser choice for graduates. Think about it. What meaning do you get from a T-shirt or a coffee cup that reads, “The best thing about teaching is June, July, and August.” Or on Monday afternoon, the most common question is, “How much longer until Friday?”

Presuming Positive Intent offers powerful ways to influence by sending messages to the

conscious and subconscious that we think the best and find the best in others.

In the work in schools using positive presuppositions presume that others

- have done prior planning,
- have done prior thinking,
- have noble purpose and intent (i.e., others want to be responsible, dependable, competent),
- have articulated standards (we can only expect if we know), and
- have articulated expectations (we can only meet if we know).

Positive presuppositions send out a message that others are acting with positive intentions. As a colleague says, “I want my attitude, words, and actions to reflect positive intent about others' thinking and doing until specific events demonstrate otherwise.”

Use of Presuming Positive Intent helps create an environment of trust and respect where people feel safe to think out loud and interact in meaningful conversations. As RESULTS coaches, we pay attention to our use of presuppositions and choose our words with care. It is always our intent to impart messages that convey positive intent on the part of others.

> As Costa and Libermann (1997) state in *The Process-Centered School*,
>
> People operate on internal maps of their own reality, and therefore, we assume that they act with positive intentions. This assumption promotes and facilitates meaningful dialogue. Using positive presuppositions assumes and encourages positive actions. (p. 591)

Imagine the influence over time if students heard the following:

- “What was the easiest thing about your homework?” rather than, “Did you do your homework?”
- “When do you expect to finish your report?” rather than, “Did you finish your report?”
- “What other ways can you solve the problem?” rather than, “Do you know any other ways to solve the problem?
- “What character are you finding the most interesting in your novel?” rather than, “Have you started reading your required novel?”
- “Knowing that you want to play with your friends after you've cleaned your room, when do you anticipate being finished?” rather than, “Have you cleaned your room?”
- “What are you looking forward to the most this year in school?” rather than, “Are you looking forward to anything in school?”

Statements framed with positive presuppositions assume that the person has already thought or done what is being asked and embed the standard or the expectation within the statement. Statements framed with positive presuppositions assume that the person has already thought, planned, or done what is being stated or asked by the listener. Embedded in the listener's comment and/or question is the standard or the expectation framed with positive intention on the part of the speaker. This can happen through affirmation of effort, skills, and/or competence.

Imagine the influence over time if educators heard the following:

- “What literacy strategies are having the best results for you?” rather than, “Do you know

any literacy strategies?"
- "What best practices are accelerating your students' successful learning the most?" rather than, "Do you know any best practice?"
- "How is the curriculum assisting you in pacing the objectives of the unit?" rather than, "Have you used the curriculum?"
- "What did the superintendent say when you shared your concerns?" rather than, "Have you thought about telling the superintendent?"
- "What learning goals are your students setting this year?" rather than, "Do your student have any learning goals?"
- "Because building trust is a strong commitment for you, what plans have you determined for your new PTA council?" rather than, "Have you thought about how you are going to deal with the distrust on the council?"

Let's look at more examples that demonstrate how our language can send covert messages in Table 5.1. Notice the comment below on the left of the table, all containing presuppositions. Read the comment, and identify the presupposition that has the possibility of being received with negative undertones. Notice the presumption or overt message of the comment. Then, look at the reframing of the comment. Which now speaks from an attitude of positive intent? What do you notice about the change or reframing of the comment? What are the positive presuppositions within the comments on the right side of the table? Why is reframing to reflect positive intention more valuable and helpful to the productivity of the conversation?

Table 5.1

Comment	Presumption or Overt Message	Positive Presuppositions
"Even Johnny can get an A in this class."	Johnny is not very bright, *and* the class is too easy.	"Knowing that you want your class to be challenging for all students, what is your strategy for accomplishing what you want?"
"Do you use technology in your classroom?"	The teacher is not using technology.	"What technology applications are your students enjoying the most?"
"Have you finished your assignment?"	You have not even started your assignment.	"What in your assignment are you discovering is the easiest to complete?"
"Do you know any discipline strategies?"	Your class looks like you don't know any discipline strategies.	"What discipline strategies are having the best impact on your students?"
"Have you thought about …?"	You have not thought.	"What options are you considering?"
"Do you have any goals?"	You don't have any goals and have not thought of any	"Based on the performance of your students in mathematics, what goals have you set for yourself this year?"
"Did you not have a plan or just not work your plan?"	You did not do anything.	"What are you celebrating the most in your plan for student success?"

Notice the opening phrases of the positive presuppositions above. Other opening phrases used with positive presuppositions might include the following:

- As you …
- When you …
- While you …

Table 5.2 lists other examples of negative presuppositions converted to positive presuppositions. Compare the examples and consider how each might be received.

Table 5.2 Examples of Negative and Positive Presuppositions

Negative Presupposition	Positive Presupposition
“Why did you do that?”	“What factors influenced your choice or decision?”
“Are your students having any success?”	“What are you seeing that indicates you are getting the results you expect on a consistent basis?”
“Why aren't you planning with other teachers?”	“When you are planning with your team, what do you find most valuable?”
“Have you thought about using Cooperative Learning?”	“What additional options for student engagement are you considering?”
“Have you thought of any discipline strategies that will work with Johnny?”	“Knowing how important it is to you that every student is successful, what discipline strategies are getting the best results with Johnny?”
“Don't you think you are wasting important instructional time by taking so long to get started in the morning?”	“What have you found to be your best strategies for managing routine procedures?”
“You seem to be more focused on creating activities for your students than you are on using the district curriculum.”	“How has the district curriculum been helpful in planning your instructional activities?”
“Do you use any special process to plan your lessons?”	“As you were planning your lesson, what aspects of the instructional objectives influenced your selection of strategies?”
“Can't you assess student acquisition of skills without giving them so many problems to solve?”	“What criteria do you use to know when students have mastered the required standards?”

Recently, Vicky asked a school leader whom she coached to share which of the coaching skills learned through their coaching relationship he was using regularly in his work as a school leader. He responded,

> Talking with expectations (use of positive presuppositions) and the way I phrase things with individuals so that I am not demanding something. For example, I now say, “How long did it take you to clean the floor last night?” instead of, “Did you clean the floor last night?” Or instead of saying, ‘Did you talk to the teacher about that student?’ I will say, “What was the outcome of that situation or your discussion with the teacher?” With teachers, instead of firing back with a solution, I now say, for example, “Clearly you are frustrated, and I want to help you move forward.” They don't need for me to give them a solution. You don't want to spoon feed your staff,

> but rather you want them to grow. I'm learning I don't have to solve all the problems.
>
> Instead of figuring it out for them, they figured it out. If you lead with the positive, you set the tone and that makes them feel more empowered to reach their own decision for taking action. And the expectation for taking action is always there.

The longer we use and presume positive intent in our language, the more opportunities for the mirror neurons to be fired. Researches in the fields of cognitive neuroscience and cognitive psychology are learning and speculate that our mirror neuron systems are important for understanding the actions of other people and influencing language abilities. Imagine the possibilities of how leadership language can and will be mirrored in the classrooms.

Another observation has been the numerous opportunities for reinforcing and affirming behaviors in everyday language and conversations. No waiting for a special conference or summative time frame to reinforce and affirm your teachers and students. Consider the language we are beginning to hear in the mailroom, print room, in the halls, and just walking to a car at the end of the day.

Positive Presuppositions offer opportunities to ask powerful questions while affirming

- effort,
- prior knowledge and skills,
- integrity,
- competence,
- caring, and
- commitment.

For example: *Effort*

“Knowing how hard you always work for your students' success, what new strategies are you excited about this year?

For example: *Prior knowledge and skills* “Because you know the curriculum so well, what areas are you discovering are especially strong or weak?”

For example: *Integrity, competence, commitment, or caring*

“Because building a strong relationship with your students is important to you, what plan have you created for this new student?”

The language of positive intent offers leaders a powerful way to influence and bring forward a student or teacher's best self. Most humans rise to the level of expectation that others see in us.

Practice with Positive Presuppositions

Figure 5.3 provides an opportunity for you to practice presuming positive intent. As you change each of the questions that follow from negative to positive, you will want to frame your revised question in such a way that it encompasses the attributes of positive presuppositions and has opportunities for powerful opening statements.

Figure 5.3

Negative Presupposition	My Positive Presupposition
Have you thought about using cooperative learning to engage your students?	
Do you have any ideas for professional development?	
Are you using any technology with your instruction?	
Have you ever heard of "best practices?"	
Did you check references before you hired her?	
Have you thought about having a classroom management plan in your room?	
Do you know any grouping strategies?	

"Treat a man as he is, he will remain so. Treat a man the way he can be and ought to be, and he will become as he can be and should be."

—Goethe

Presuming Positive Intent Supports Asking Powerful Questions

Recently, an event was held in the Dallas area where more than 700 people gathered to hear Ron Hall and Denver Moore (2006), coauthors of *Same Kind of Different as Me*, speak about the development of their extraordinary friendship and their unwavering commitment to carry on the dream of the woman who brought the men together. Vicky was one of the people in attendance, and as she looked around the room, she saw faces of various ages, stages, and walks of life, including some of her personal friends and former principal associates. She felt a sense of eager anticipation in the air as people scurried to find a place to sit and have their lunch before the speakers began. It was as if the audience was preparing to hear a powerful and compelling message that would stay with them long after the meal, which was secondary to the message they'd come to receive. From Vicky's perspective, those in attendance got what they came for, a powerful message.

We use the term "power" in many different ways. We take "power walks" and "power naps." We eat "power bars" and swallow "power drinks," and sometimes, we might even deliver a "power punch," hopefully in figurative terms. Most likely, we all have a similar understanding of the meaning behind the word "power." It's about strength, action, importance, something out of the ordinary. It's as if we know it when we feel it, and as Jill Bolte Taylor (2006) says in *My Stroke of Insight*, the reality is we do feel it before we think it. By the time information reaches our cerebral cortex for higher thinking, we have already placed a feeling upon how we view the information. That same meaning of power holds true when we consider powerful questioning, those important and growth-producing questions we purposefully ask others to help them reach higher levels of understanding and insight as they think in new and different

ways.

RESULTS focused coach leaders know that asking powerful questions helps bring maximum benefits to the conversation. Powerful questions follow powerful listening and embed positive presuppositions. First, we listen fully to what the teacher or speaker is expressing through both words and emotions, and we also listen to the messages and emotions behind the words. Then, we determine our best response to help move the teacher's thinking forward. Typically, we provide a short paraphrase to show understanding and caring, and then, when appropriate, we pose a specific and powerful question framed with a positive presupposition to help move the teacher's thinking to a deeper and clearer level so that intentional action is set in motion.

To better understand what powerful questions are, let's first think about what they are not. Powerful questions are not loaded questions asked so that the teacher gives back the answer the leader wants. A loaded question sounds like, “Don't you think calling Johnnie's mother now is the best way to deal with this issue?” In this instance, the leader believes that getting Johnny's mother involved immediately is the best way to deal with a situation that happed earlier in the day and is expecting the teacher to agree with him. So, the question is really not a question asked to help the teacher think about the best action to take but is rather a personal opinion or giving of advice “disguised” as a question. What's so wrong with that? It has the potential of blocking the thinking of the teacher and moving the leader into the role of expert or know it all. That is not the avenue that leads to deep thinking.

Consider the next example. “Would you like my advice on how best to deal with Mrs. Smith?” The leader is not as much focused on helping the teacher think through how she would like to work with Mrs. Smith as he is on solving the problem for the teacher. Advice is a “road block” on the highway of deep thinking.

Powerful questions are open-ended questions with no hidden agendas and are asked for the sole purpose of providing maximum benefit to the receiver of the question. The power of the question comes from the positive impact, somewhat like a human electrical charge, to the thinking of the receiver of the question. Powerful questions have the following characteristics:

- Reflect active and powerful listening and understanding of the teacher's perspective
- Presume positive intent
- Evoke discovery, insight, commitment, or action on behalf of the teacher
- Challenge current assumptions of the teacher
- Create greater clarity, possibility or new learning
- Move the teacher towards what he or she desires
- Move the thinking forward to current and future actions and are not focused on having the teacher justify or look backwards

Consider what happens when someone asks us a powerful question around an issue, situation, or challenge we're dealing with and can't seem to resolve. We have thoughts, feelings, and ideas circulating around within our mind as it relates to the issue, situation, or challenge, but we can't seem to connect them together, to move them along, to clearly understand the implication or to bring about a resolution that leads to appropriate actions. It's as if our thinking is standing still or going in multiple directions at the same time, all within a confined space. And then, someone offers us a powerful question and “Boom!” Thoughts begin to organize, we see things from different perspectives, we get clearer on what we really want, and we begin to move forward without thinking. The powerful question served as a key to unlock the chamber that was holding our thoughts captive. And thanks to what we are

learning from the brain research, we have a clearer understanding of what is actually happening in our brains as a result of a powerful question. We are literally making new connections in our brains, new mind maps that are helping us to move forward with our thinking toward clarity of thought, and new insights that lead to action (Rock, 2006).

RESULTS coach leaders understand that powerful questions serve their staff and their school much more than powerful telling. Thus, RESULTS coach leaders ask powerful questions. They hold high expectation of their staff, and they know that results have a much greater probability of reaching extraordinary levels when everyone involved is thinking and focused on achieving greater insights, which in turn moves people toward powerful actions.

Recently, an assistant superintendent of instruction in one of our southern states shared an insight she had gained after spending three days at a leadership retreat with principals from her district. In conversations with the principals, she realized one of their biggest concerns was that they did not know “how to have productive and meaningful conversations with teachers, especially when they attempted to weave positive presuppositions into their conversations.” Because the assistant superintendent had completed a number of Coaching For Results seminars, she knew exactly how best to support them and set in motion a series of conversations with principals where they would experience firsthand the positive impact of powerful questions as they prepared to change the way they talked with their staffs.

One of the most important reasons our team of writers so strongly committed to the writing of this book is because we believe that when principals hold powerful conversations with their staff, using our set of research-based coaching skills offered around a clearly articulated set of high expectations for all, teachers will deepen and enhance their own thinking about teaching and learning, and extraordinary results will be a natural result.

RESULTS coach leaders are intentional in their actions and their behaviors. They understand that they don't have to be all knowing to be a great leader. It's about clear expectations, committed listening, powerful paraphrasing and presuppositions, reflective feedback, and asking powerful questions while operating from an attitude of belief that each teacher will produce extraordinary results for each of their students. As principals, it's their responsibility to lead their school based on a set of national, state, and district standards and expectations. They lead their own staffs to indentify clarity about their school's vision, mission, and core values, and they ask the powerful questions around those clearly articulated set of performance expectations to help and encourage teachers to achieve great results.

Reflection: As you review some powerful questions from *Fierce Conversations*(Scott, 2002) below, what patterns are you seeing in the questions, and how would you best articulate the attributes of powerful questions?

- Knowing how committed you are to strong results for all of your students, what has become clear since we last met?
- What is the area that, if you made an improvement, would give you and others the greatest return on time, energy, and dollars invested?
- What is currently impossible to do that, if it were possible, would change everything?
- What topics are you hoping that I won't bring up?
- Who are your strongest employees, and what are you doing to ensure that they are happy and motivated? Who are your weakest employees, and what is your plan for them?
- What conversations are you avoiding right now?
- What things are you doing that you would like to stop doing or delegate to someone else?

"The scientific mind does not so much provide the right answers as ask the right questions."

—Claude Lévi-Strauss

Skill 4: Reflective Feedback

Giving and receiving feedback is an important part of everyone's life and is a vital skill for RESULTS Coaching. After all, when we create, invite, and support an environment of dialogue, feedback is a natural component of our dialogue. It's as if a dance is going on between the participants in the conversation, and it's helpful when we all dance to the same beat. As a RESULTS coach, we listen and speak with intention, and that includes the intentional way in which we give feedback to others.

Improvements in performance depend on effective language, "feedback loops," with one speaker at the end of each loop. An air conditioning system set on 72 degrees will periodically sample the air for temperature, either coming on or turning off—a one-way feedback loop. In conversations, each utterance must be based in some way on what is said before it. The difference between the feedback loop in cooling systems and conversation feedback loops is that language flows in both directions.

Remember a time when you were talking with someone with a strong southern accent or to someone who said "like" or "okay" or "I mean" every few words. Soon, you picked up on those same sounds or habits. Or consider a time when you were in an argument that you knew was ridiculous, but everything the other person said to you was so infuriating that you just could not let it pass—only to have what you said provoke one more outrageous statement. Experiences like these demonstrate how communication, our language, is one big feedback loop. The most basic skill underlying successful communication is establishing and maintaining an interactive feedback loop through speaking and listening and by reading and interpreting body language. This is the key work of leaders and effective communicators! (Hattie & Timperley, 2007)

To use Oprah's idea of "what we know for sure," we know for sure that feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement. Feedback is fundamental to performance and learning in individual, community, and organizational situations. Numerous psychological studies in both behaviorist and cognitive traditions have demonstrated repeatedly that improvement in performance depends on feedback loops. Several Gallop surveys have reported that people who receive regular recognition and praise show increased productivity, increased engagement with colleagues, and were more likely to stay in the organization. Sadly, surveys also show that more than 60% of workers receive no recognition at all. While feedback is a major influence, the type of feedback and the way it is offered will greatly determine its effectiveness.

Through the decades, we have learned that feedback is usually given in the following forms (Costa & Garmston, 2002):

- **Judgment**—(e.g., "Important information was missing." "Great tool." "Poor job.")
- **A type of personal observation**—(e.g., "I like. …" "I was moved by the story." "I loved it.")
- **Inference**—(e.g., "It sounds as if there are many hidden agendas." "Her failure to respond is diminishing your enthusiasm.")
- **Some type of data**—(e.g., "You called on nine students." "You paraphrased four times.")

- **Questions**—(e.g., “Have you thought about using?” “Are you planning to …?”)

At one time or another, we have all been the recipient of unwanted, uninvited, and unappreciative feedback that comes with all kinds of negative presuppositions and intonations that cause our emotions to either shut down or elevate! David Perkins (2003) offers that possibly; it was the reason behind the hit song of the 50's, “*Yakety Yak! Don't Talk Back!*” In the song the parents nagging talk (Yakety Yak!) at the teenager and the teen's response are received by the parents as inappropriate (Don't talk back!”). When we fast forward to television's *Charlie Brown* specials, everyone remembers the language of the scolding teacher. “Wau wau wau,” the students were hearing. David Perkins believes that just might be the sound of most feedback! Words matter and so do relationships when it comes to feedback.

David Perkins (2003), in *King Arthur's Roundtable: How Collaborative Conversations Create Smart Organizations*, offers new ideas about feedback as well as possibilities of new responses for long standing habits. The good news about feedback is that it is essential for individuals and community reflection and growth, and the bad news is that it often flops, yielding no meaningful exchange of information and driving people apart.

How people give feedback to each other exemplifies organizational intelligence. Organizational intelligence includes maintaining relationships that are crucial for positive outcomes and results. As we consider giving feedback, it is important to simultaneously hold two things in our mind: the content of the message and the potential impact on the relationship. Our goal becomes: How do we say what needs to be said (the content) in a way that supports another's growth and maintains a positive relationship?

Perkins' research offers more effective responses that align with Coaching For Results' belief of supporting another person's thoughtful reflection and decision making. David Rock (2006) reinforces that if our commitment is to promote another's learning, feedback is essential. The reality is that feedback is usually done poorly, and we are rarely prepared for the emotional charge that comes with it. One goal as Coach Leaders is to use language that shows positive intent in another's actions, thoughts, and behaviors. Reflective feedback is the vehicle that will support and mediate another person's thinking and reflection.

Consider feedback as a two-arm approach. One of the arms contains the content of the feedback (the information to be shared), and the other carries the importance and value of the relationship. When the feedback is productive, open, and reflective, it's as if both arms are open, inviting to the listener. But when the feedback is received negatively or painfully, it's as if the arms have closed up, especially the one holding the relationship. Whether at work or in our personal lives, maintaining relationships is crucial to positive results. We want that open-armed approach when giving and receiving feedback.

Perkins (2003) has categorized feedback into three distinct groups: negative, conciliatory, and communicative, which we have renamed reflective. Let's take a look at each in the following three tables (Table 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5) and decide for ourselves within which group we choose to reside.

Table 5.3 Negative Feedback: The Yakety Yak Type: “Just Tell People What's Wrong!”

Reason For Giving This Type of Feedback	Example of Negative Feedback
Lay-it-on-the-line critical feedback	“That was not worth the time or energy!”

The most painful type of feedback because it tells people straight out what's wrong	“No, you are wrong about your plan! That will not help raise student performance!”
The most obvious to give and usually follows a natural avalanche of impulse	“Oh, good grief! Don't say that to the parent! Once again, what are you thinking? Do you ever think about the reaction you will receive?”
People need to know what's wrong, so why not tell them?	“Your presentation is way too long and will not hold the interest of the parents. It's putting me to sleep right now!”
The information can be alienating and over time can provoke defensiveness and negative attitudes.	“How many times and in how many ways do I have to tell you this! There you go again, doing it your usual wrong way.”
Negative feedback is worsened when it focuses on a person's core identity rather than a product or an idea.	“Are you stupid or what? Where is your back bone? How could such a worthless person be in this group?”

Table 5.4 Conciliatory Feedback: Focuses on Being Encouraging and Vague

Positive and vague. Avoids criticizing to be supportive and avoid conflict; comes from belief that negative feedback will be rejected and relationship harmed	“Well, uh, it is okay. Sure, it could be interesting.”
Often called “social stroking”	“You always know what needs to be done.”
Usually read as pleasant, encouraging, and nonthreatening. Not feedback at all: it's encouragement and conflict avoidance in the guise of feedback.	“Great idea!” “Keep working hard!” “You are the man!”

Table 5.5 Reflective Feedback: Clarifies Ideas or Actions Under Consideration and Offers Values, Concerns, and Suggestions

CLARIFY: One option provides the opportunity to clarify an idea or behavior under consideration (to be sure talking about the same thing)	“How much time does the district require that principals are in classrooms each week?”
VALUE POTENTIAL: Communicates positive features of actions and moves toward preserving and building upon them	“Your commitment to being in classrooms 70% of the time has the potential for dramatically impacting high levels of learning for all students in your school.”
REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR POSSIBILITIES: Vehicle for communicating concerns, considerations, or options toward improvement	“In addition to yourself, what other leadership team members are being utilized to support your goal of being in classrooms?”

The rationale for conciliatory feedback is that relationships are so important and feedback is so difficult; therefore, the person chooses relationships over information and to play it safe and nice. Sadly, the receiver learns over multiple occasions that the feedback is empty and reads it as evasive or pandering.

Reflective Feedback is the vehicle that will support and mediate another person's thinking and reflection. David Perkins (2003) offers communicative feedback (Reflective Feedback) as a

better habit and response. Reflective Feedback requires more time to consider—it truly requires thought and effort. But as with any new learning, with practice, the language patterns emerge, and somehow, it does not sound different or unusual and—the benefits—wow! The benefits are realized in the way people hear and respond to what they feel as respectful, honest, and thoughtful. Let's examine the options for Reflective Feedback:

Perkins (2003) offers these three as steps, but as we have worked with the practice and application of this language, the most useful application of them in steps is when teachers or leadership teams are using them in a protocol structure—a structure that offers a formalized sequence of speaking, responding, and offering feedback. An example of a protocol structure is provided at the end of the chapter and in Resource G of the book.

Today, with the gift of this new thinking on Reflective Feedback, we may offer or give feedback in a way that will dramatically increase the thinking, consideration, and reflection of others. Let's review the three options for reflective feedback.

1. Clarifying questions or statements for better understanding
2. Feedback statements that identify *value* or value potential
3. Feedback to mediate thinking through the use of reflective questions for possibilities

Used as a frame for conversations, reflective feedback generally evolves during the flow of conversation so that the three options become integrated, moving both the message and the relationship forward. For example, early in the conversation, there is frequently a need for *clarity*. As the conversation progresses, expressing *value* for the thought or action may present itself. Then, it may be a *reflective question of possibility* that mediates the thinking of the other person allowing him or her to go to a new place or discover a different point of view. The thinking behind options is that most typical conversation in schools using feedback are informal and not in the setting using a structured protocol. A structure and protocol can be enormously helpful when teams are learning to interact together and use new language.

A Critical Attribute of Reflective Questions

All reflective questions presume positive intent. To not presume reflective thinking on the part of educators is a huge trust withdrawal and incongruent with the work of teaching and learning. Once the language of positive presuppositions is a part of one's natural way of speaking and thinking, the use of reflective questions is as natural and easy as finding a word in a dictionary.

Some Examples of Reflective Feedback

Clarifying Questions for Understanding

- “How do you see this objective different from …?”
- “How did your students respond to the process?”
- “What costs were calculated to put this in place?”
- “Which groups provided useful input to the plan?”
- “When you checked state assessment alignment, what did you find as strengths or gaps?”
- “What input did the parents give and how was it helpful?”
- “What information from central office assisted you?”

Expressing the Value or Value Potential

- “This could offer value to students with time issues.”
- “The strength of the idea is long-term retention.”
- “The scaffolding of your design will help teachers understand and gradually embed practice.”
- “You have really thought deeply about this concept.”
- “There is clear evidence that students learned at high levels and were continually engaged.”
- “As a parent and teacher, the idea is very exciting because it supports learning.”
- “Your plan provides high engagement for students.”

Reflective Questions or Possibilities

- “What goals have your students set for individual mastery?”
- “What are you considering in regard to differentiation?”
- “I wonder what would happen if …”
- “What gaps have you noticed, if any, in student understanding?”
- “What other considerations for student engagement are you thinking about?”
- “To align more closely with high stakes assessment, what if …?”
- “What connections have you made to … (other subjects, real world, assessments)?”
- “What resources—people or things—have been the most useful, helpful, and so on?”
- “What ‘next step’ for you could be evolutionary?”
- “As you consider best practice, what strategies will you use to achieve your goal?”

Reflective Feedback: Important Issues to Keep in Mind

Be Specific

Numerous studies have shown the minimal impact of general praise. The use of “I like” is not very important, but consideration of the reason “why I like it” makes the most powerful influence. Replacing “I like” with “when you did … there was evidence of. …” Before giving reflective feedback, consider questions like the following: What made this great? What effort was put into this work? What challenge was faced to get the result? What is the impact on others? What did they do to make the difference? Examples of how it might sound include the following:

- “Your opening statement hooked my attention and interest throughout.”
- “Your idea has the potential to strongly increase our achievement goals.”
- “Your long hours of study and preparation are evident in this valuable work.”

Be Generous

Many people are not comfortable receiving positive feedback. Speak in a way that will open the person to learning. Choose words that are very sincere and authentic. Prepare reflectively so others will seriously consider your words of reflective feedback. One principal, in realizing that her campus leadership team almost always identified why something would not work or what was wrong with an idea first, created a norm that required everyone to identify first the value potential of any idea brought to this leadership team. She was amazed with the difference it made in discussion and consideration of many ideas that would have otherwise

been tossed aside.

Ask Permission

When people think about receiving feedback, they often fear the worst. It is very useful to ask permission to give feedback before beginning, letting them know what to expect. For example,

- “You asked for some reflective feedback, is this a good time to share it with you?”
- “Your actions in the parent conference are worthy of reflective feedback. Is this a good time?”

Be prepared and know that there is almost always a physical reaction to feedback even with our most trusted colleagues. It is very natural because our brains have been wired for this language and hears the feedback as a threat to status. In time and with language that is reflective, new wiring of safety and autonomy will emerge.

Remember the Goal is Self-Directed Learning

Allowing people to give themselves feedback will make powerful connections in their own mind. Before giving your feedback, you might ask the following questions:

- “What three things went really well?”
- “What two things are you learning about yourself?”
- “What two big challenges did you face and overcome?”
- “What resources did you utilize, internally and externally, to make this happen?”

Even with below Par or Poor Performance, Negative Feedback Has Little Impact

Understanding the cause of failure is very helpful for managing processes but not very effective in managing people. Be prepared for the emotional charge with weaker performance. Questions that focus on solutions rather than blame or problems offer potential for the most effective feedback loop and improved behavior.

- “How can I best support you in fulfilling your potential for this role?”
- “How can I be most helpful in assisting you to meet the conditions of your contract?”
- “What would be the most helpful to you in meeting the expectations and/or goals of your campus?”
- “What insights have you had from this situation?”
- “What have you learned from this experience?”
- “What skills have you identified to focus on for the results you desire?”
- “In order to meet the requirements of the district, what three things are you planning to put in place?”

Giving Effective Reflective Feedback Requires Thought and Practice

Taking a few moments to consider data and the language of reflective feedback hits the 80/20 rule. Your investment in planning and rehearsal will dramatically reduce time in the conversation and increase impact from the conversation. With each conversation, your wiring for reflective feedback language becomes stronger and more hard wired.

Feedback is Not the Answer, Rather, it is but One Powerful Answer

While leaders have much knowledge, skill, and experience, there are many ways to accomplish the goals in our work. Few things carry with them the need for the words “always” or “never.” There are many ways to “skin a cat.” We know that with adults, learning is voluntary—reflective feedback is offered for consideration. Given the parameters of job expectations, feedback will be most helpful when its intentions support the achievement of goals and the hard work of the thinking of the person doing the work.

Growth and change are very difficult because of internal “hardwiring” impacting behaviors, attitudes, and habits. The good news is that change is possible and likely when we focus on what is desired—the goal, the outcome, and the impact for success. Time, attention, repetition, and Reflective Feedback are all that is required:

- *Time* for conversation, practice, and reflection
- *Attention* or focus aimed toward the goal
- *Repetition* via practice to build confidence and sustained success
- *Reflective Feedback* to offer self-direction, self-mediation, and self-assurance as new pathways of wiring are created and supported

Reflective Feedback is a tool and a skill that holds the potential for dramatically supporting the growth of educators. It is a model of a new way of giving feedback within our educational system. This new knowledge gives us the important information and opportunity to teach more effective ways to give feedback to leaders, to teachers, and to students.

> *“To tell denies or negates another's intelligence. To ask honors it.”*
>
> —Sir John Whitmore

Reflection

- What are you teaching yourself about feedback?
- What benefits do you predict from the use of reflective feedback?
- What practice opportunities are you considering in the coming weeks?
- Where are you thinking you would like to begin internalizing reflective feedback?
- How will you share your new learning goals with others around reflective feedback?
- Who will you select as a fun partner to practice reflective feedback?

Authors' Note

Although the skills we have targeted in this chapter are not inclusive of the numerous skills required in coaching. The four mentioned in the chapter are essential to being a powerful coach leader.

Other critical skills for coaching are specified in the ICF Competencies that include or embed the following:

- The skillful use of silence and pausing
- Mindful attention to body language—verbals and nonverbals sent and received
- Attention to the emotional intelligence of self and others
- Building and maintaining trust and rapport

The Resources will offer short insights into a variety of coaching essential skills.

> *“Reexamine all that you have been told in school or in church or in any book. Dismiss whatever insults your soul.”*
>
> —Walt Whitman

- feedback
- listening
- coaching
- skills coaching
- conversation
- feedback loop
- looping

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THE ART OF POWERFUL QUESTIONS

Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action

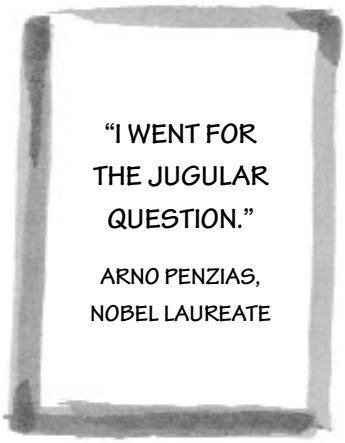
by Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs

"If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

—Albert Einstein

When was the last time you sat through a meeting and said to yourself, "This is a complete waste of time!"? Was it yesterday, or even just a few hours ago? Why did that gathering feel so tedious? Perhaps it's because the leaders posed the wrong questions at the start of the session. Or, worse yet, maybe they didn't ask *any* engaging questions, and as a result, the meeting consisted of boring reports-outs or other forms of one-way communication that failed to engage people's interest or curiosity.

The usefulness of the knowledge we acquire and the effectiveness of the actions we take depend on the quality of the questions we ask. Questions open the door to dialogue and discovery. They are an invitation to creativity and breakthrough thinking. Questions can lead to movement and action on key issues; by generating creative insights, they can ignite change.



Consider the possibility that everything we know today about our world emerged because people were curious. They formulated a question or series of questions about something that sparked their interest or deeply concerned them, which lead them to learn something new. Many Nobel laureates describe the "Eureka!" moment of their discovery as when the "right" question finally revealed itself—even if it took them considerable time to come up with the final answers. For example, Einstein's theory of relativity resulted from a question that he had wondered about when still a teenager: "What would the universe look like if I were riding on the end of a light beam at the speed of light?" Einstein regularly practiced this kind of "thought experiment," which, over time, led to significant advances in the field of physics. Many years later, an empirical demonstration showed that light from distant stars actually curved as it passed through the gravitational force of our sun. Einstein's graduate students rushed to him as he was walking through the Princeton campus and exclaimed, "Dr. Einstein, light really *does* bend!" Einstein looked at them quizzically and said, "Of course!" He had come to this conclusion through exploring the question in his own thought experiment years before.

Another Nobel-prize winner, physicist Arno Penzias, when asked what accounted for his success, replied, "I went for the jugular question." Still practicing his questioning discipline today, Penzias recently commented at a *Fast Company* Conference, "Change starts with the individual. So the first thing I do each morning is ask myself, 'Why do I strongly believe what I believe?' Constantly examine your own assumptions." It's this type of self-questioning that keeps creativity alive.

In other key examples of the importance of powerful questions, a query by James Watson and Francis Crick, "What might DNA look like in a 3D form?" led to the discovery of the double helix and forever altered the scientific landscape. During the Tylenol crisis in the early 1980s, considering the question, "What is the most ethical action we might take?" enabled Johnson & Johnson to restore consumer trust and become a leader in corporate responsibility. And asking, "Where can I get a good hamburger on the road?" motivated Ray Kroc to create McDonald's, the fast-food chain that became an international icon. Even for ordinary folks, asking a question as simple as, "What does all this mean?" or "What can we do that could help shift this situation?" or "What haven't we thought of that could make a difference?" can have a startling impact on creating new knowledge and insight.

Why Don't We Ask Better Questions?

If asking good questions is so critical, why don't most of us spend more of our time and energy on discovering and framing them? One reason may be that much of Western culture, and North American society in particular, focuses on having the "right answer" rather than discovering the "right question." Our educational system focuses more on memorization and rote answers than on the art of seeking new possibilities. We are rarely asked to discover compelling questions, nor are we taught why we should ask such questions in the first place. Quizzes, examinations, and aptitude tests all reinforce the value of correct answers. Is it any wonder that most of us are uncomfortable with not knowing?

The aversion in our culture to asking creative questions is linked to an emphasis on finding quick fixes and an attachment to black/white, either/or thinking. In addition, the rapid pace of our lives and work doesn't often provide us with opportunities to participate in reflective conversations in which we can explore catalytic questions and innovative possibilities before reaching key decisions. These factors, coupled with a prevailing belief that "real work" consists primarily of detailed analysis, immediate decisions, and decisive action, contradict the perspective that effective "knowledge work" consists of asking profound questions and hosting wide-ranging strategic conversations on issues of substance.

The reward systems in our organizations further reinforce this dilemma. Leaders believe that they are being paid for fixing problems rather than for fostering breakthrough thinking. Between our deep attachment to *the* answer—any answer—and our anxiety about not knowing, we have inadvertently thwarted our collective capacity for deep creativity and fresh perspectives. Unfortunately, given the unprecedented challenges we face both in our own organizations and as a global community, we need these skills now more than ever.

Are there organizations that do place a high value on questions? Consider this: In Germany, the job title *Direktor Grundsatzfragen* translates as "Director of Fundamental Questions." As a German colleague said:

> "Yes, there's a job title of *Direktor Grundsatzfragen*. Some of the larger German companies have an entire department of *Grundsatzfragen*. These are the people who are always thinking about what the next questions will be. Of course, these people are only in the German companies headquartered in Germany, such as Daimler, Bayer, Siemens, or SAP. If the German company is acquired by a U.S. company, they usually eliminate the *Grundsatzfragen* positions."

The German understanding and appreciation of *Grundsatzfragen* may stem from a culture that highly values philosophy and the ongoing questioning of priorities and the meaning of life. Even today, this focus is reflected in some unique aspects of high-school education. In the German *Gymnasium*, from the ages of 14 to 17, students are typically assigned to study groups with 30 of their peers. In the words of one graduate, "We work intensely together in every subject, and then in the second year, we meet Goethe (the famous 19th-century German philosopher), and we question our entire world for two years. We emerge with a greater appreciation for the power of questions and the power of conversation."

As we enter an era in which systemic issues often lie at the root of critical challenges, in which diverse perspectives are required for sustainable solutions, and in which cause-and-effect relationships are not immediately apparent, the capacity to raise penetrating questions that challenge current operating

POWERFUL QUESTIONS AND KEY OUTCOMES

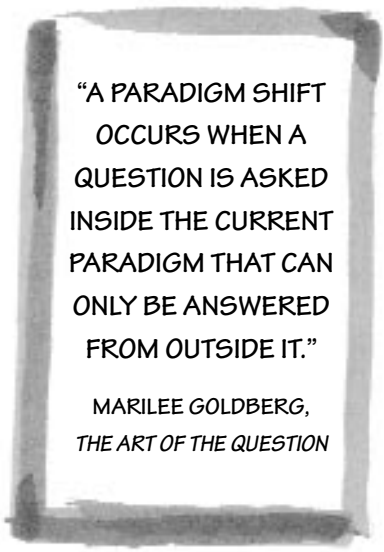
Who	Question	Outcome
Watson and Crick	"What might DNA look like in 3D form?"	Discovery of the double helix
James Burke, CEO, Johnson & Johnson	"What is the most ethical action we might take?"	Restoration of consumer confidence
Ray Kroc	"Where can I get a good hamburger on the road?"	Creation of McDonald's

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."



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.

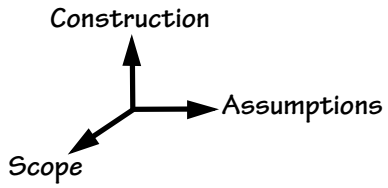
Thus, a powerful question:

- 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.



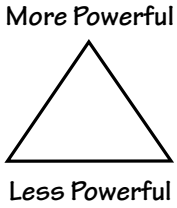
THE FIRST DIMENSION:

The Construction of a Question

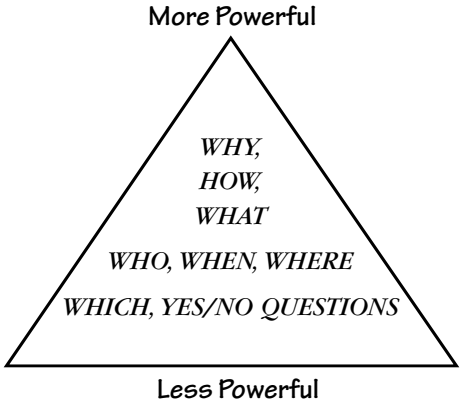
The linguistic *construction* of a question can make a critical difference in either opening our minds or narrowing the possibilities we can consider. Is it a yes/no question? Is it an either/or question? Does it begin with an interrogative, such as Who, What, or How?

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.

> "A VITAL QUESTION, A CREATIVE QUESTION, RIVETS OUR ATTENTION. ALL THE CREATIVE POWER OF OUR MINDS IS FOCUSED ON THE QUESTION. KNOWLEDGE EMERGES IN RESPONSE TO THESE COMPELLING QUESTIONS. THEY OPEN US TO NEW WORLDS."
>
> VERNA ALLEE, *THE KNOWLEDGE EVOLUTION*

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

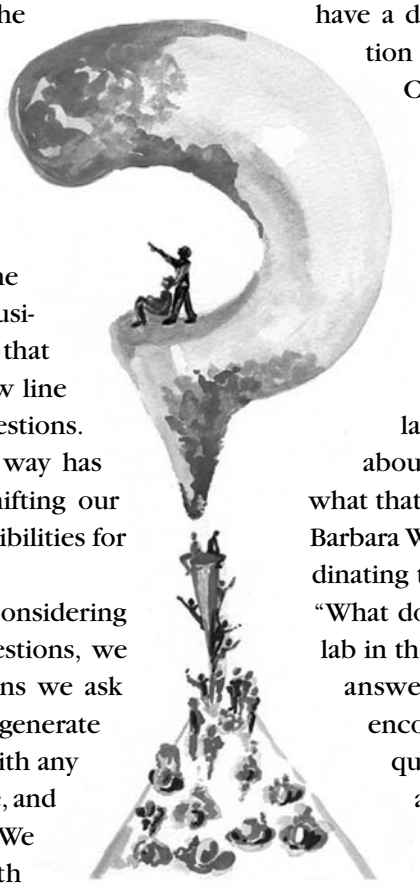
Because of the nature of language, almost all of the questions we pose have assumptions built into them, either explicit or implicit. These assumptions may or may not be shared by the group involved in the exploration; for instance the question, "How should we create a bilingual educational system in 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-

ly altered the context of the inquiry—to become the best *for* the world as the larger context for becoming the best *in* the world. This question obviously "traveled well"—it was no longer just the Lab's question, but something that many others at HP began to ask themselves as well. Employees at HP Labs and throughout the whole company responded to this new focus with a tremendous surge of collective energy.

"THE QUESTION NEVER FAILED US."

MIKE PFEIL, CORPORATE EXECUTIVE

Once they reworded the original question, Barbara and her colleagues could change the scope of related questions depending on the situation. For example, shifting the scope downward meant focusing on "What does HP for the World mean for me? What does it mean in my life, in my own work?" HP employees could also scale up the scope by asking, "What does HP for the World mean for my work group? For my department? For HP as a company? And what might it mean for the world itself?"

HP's E-Inclusion effort, a major project to enable the world's poor to enter the new economy while providing critical medical and other information to communities in the third world, stemmed in large measure from the HP for the World exploration. The question has now traveled far beyond the company: "What does it mean for us to be 'for the world'?" was a key question explored at a State of the World Forum with a group of more than 1,000 global leaders from every continent.

Creating a Sales "Community." Another case in which a catalytic question empowered leaders in new ways occurred in the sales organization of a major U.S. corporation. Mike Pfeil, the area director of sales, wondered how a *community*, rather than a traditional company, might deal with the challenges it confronted. As a learning experiment, he began to host conversations with employees from all levels in his organization to explore the meaning of community at work and how they might apply community principles to enhance performance.

To depart from the group's traditional focus on problems, the sales director framed questions that shifted the context within which workers normally look at their organization. He asked people to examine their best experiences of community and to reflect on times they had participated in a community experience that really worked, using queries such as, "What allowed that positive experience to happen? What kinds of activities were taking place? How did you fit into that?" As members shared what they knew from their own best community experiences, they began to see the analogies to business life. They posed follow-up questions, such as, "How does a community deal with adversity and adapting to change? What happens with members who don't uphold the community's standards?"

As the conversations evolved, important values that people really

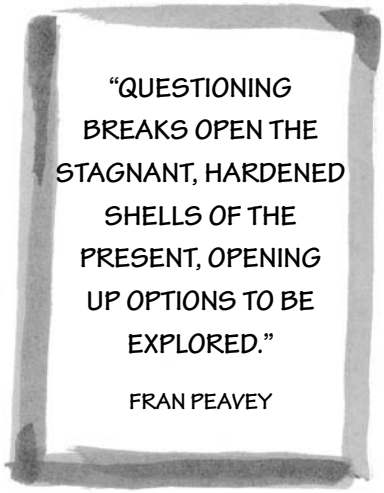
HOW CAN I FRAME BETTER QUESTIONS?

Here are some questions you might ask yourself as you begin to explore the art and architecture of powerful questions. They are based on pioneering work with questions being done by the Public Conversations Project, a group that helps create constructive dialogue on divisive public issues.

- Is this question relevant to the real life and real work of the people who will be exploring it?
- Is this a genuine question—a question to which I/we really don't know the answer?
- What "work" do I want this question to do? That is, what kind of conversation, meanings, and feelings do I imagine this question will evoke in those who will be exploring it?
- Is this question likely to invite fresh thinking/feeling? Is it familiar enough to be recognizable and relevant—and different enough to call forward a new response?
- What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?
- Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, creative action, and new possibilities or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?
- Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored?

Adapted from Sally Ann Roth
Public Conversations Project c. 1998

cared about started to come forward—values like learning, mutual respect, contribution, and sharing with others. Another simple but powerful question emerged from those early dialogues: "How can we create a community at work that enables each person to contribute our best, inspires us to keep learning, and produces valued results?" This simple shift of lens led other leaders in the company to look how it functioned *within* the larger communities in which it operates. The learnings from this project informed subsequent work in the area of corporate responsibility and in the creation of mission goals that include the perspectives of both internal and external stakeholders in creating the company's future.



The local leader who launched this effort is now a corporate vice president. In looking back on his experience with engaging powerful questions to shift the context for exploring business realities, he shared the following:

> "As we learned more, the meaning of the question continued to evolve. We asked ourselves, "How can we go out and plant this seed? How do we frame it as we bring other people into the conversation?" The question always worked in stimulating the dialogue. Sometimes as leaders it's important not to collectively work on what the answer is but to work on what the question is. That was a big insight for me as we did this work. *The question never failed us.*"

Improving Questions at Pfizer. In another recent case, professionals at Pfizer, the world-renowned pharmaceutical firm, are experimenting with a systematic method of improving the quality of their questions. Through a custom-designed workshop, marketing and finance professionals in Pfizer's European business unit have been learning to articulate powerful questions. These executives have discovered that meetings have more energy and creative ideas flow more quickly when they place attention on formulating catalytic questions. With this discipline in place, new ideas are more easily finding their way into key products and services.

From these examples, it's clear that improving the quality of the questions you ask and creating a framework of engagement that encourages their exploration can create business value. Because learning to engage thoughtful questions can lead to insight, innovation, and action, doing so will become an essential strategic capability for leaders of organizations who want to create sustainable results in the face of both short- and longer-term challenges and opportunities.

Fostering Strategic Inquiry

Beyond building the capacity of individual employees to ask powerful questions, an organization can design processes that use such queries to enhance the emergence of knowledge creation and strategic thinking. As the chairman and CEO of a major multinational corporation says, "Discovering strategic questions is like panning for gold. You have to care about finding it, you have to be curious, and you have to create an anticipation of discovering gold, even though none of us may know ahead of time where we'll find it. You head toward the general territory where you think the gold may be located, with your best tools, your experience, and your instincts. And then you begin a disciplined search for the gold." We've partnered with this leader to create a set of tools for fostering strategic inquiry and working with powerful questions in the service of positive futures called the "Game Plan" process. The following steps may not apply to all situations and they may not always play out in the same sequence. However, the Game Plan suggests ways that organizations can create both formal and informal processes to support individuals as well as teams in discovering the "gold" for themselves.

The Game Plan Process

The steps in the Game Plan can be used both as a process discipline by individuals looking at a particular situation, as well as by functional and cross-functional groups and leadership teams charged with the responsibility for key decisions regarding future courses of action. The Game Plan can also involve diverse stakeholders to provide important perspectives both on the current situation and on possible future actions.

THE GAME PLAN PROCESS

- Assess Your Current Situation
- Discover the "Big Questions"
- Create Images of Possibility
- Evolve Workable Strategies

Assess Your Current Situation. Get a feel for the larger context in which you are operating. Scan the internal and external business and organizational environments that may affect the future of the system or project you are working with. This situation analysis might include the assessment of critical results data, meetings with key stakeholders, and the mapping of your strengths, opportunities, and threats. It might also involve looking for "signals"—internal and external events, developments, and trends that can affect the future of your situation. Like trackers in the mountains, look for both obvious and subtle indicators that point to storms as well as sunny skies. Allow your curiosity and imagination to take the lead as you begin to identify the many questions that the broader landscape within which you're operating reveals.

It will be challenging, but important, to frame your findings as questions rather than as problems or concerns—questions that end with a question mark, not with a period or an exclamation point. To help in designing these queries, ask yourself, "How does *A* affect *C* and what questions does that suggest? If *X* were at play here, what question would we be asking? What's the real question underneath all this data?"

Discover the "Big Questions." Once you think you've posed most of the relevant questions (and there may be many of them), look for patterns and themes. This is not a mechanical process, even though it should be disciplined and systematic. You are on a treasure hunt, seeking the core questions—usually three to five—that, if answered, would make the most difference to the future of the project or situation you are exploring. Cluster related questions, and consider the relationships among them. Begin to clarify the "big questions" that the initial clusters reveal. Frame these as clear and concise queries, not as problems. Something fundamental changes when people begin to ask questions together—they go beyond the normal stale debate about problems that passes for strategy in many organizations.

Create Images of Possibility. Ask yourself, "What would our situation look like or be like if the 'big questions' were answered?" Creating vivid images of possibility differs from pie-in-the-sky visioning, especially if people with a variety of perspectives have participated in the earlier stages of your analysis. This part of the conversation can also provide clues for refining or reframing your big questions as well as inventing creative strategies. Developing scenarios—stories of the future based on different ways your big questions might be answered—can also be useful. These often reveal new territory and opportunities for action that are grounded in real life.

> "STRATEGIC QUESTIONS CREATE A RESONANT FIELD INTO WHICH YOUR OWN THINKING IS MAGNIFIED, CLARIFIED, AND NEW MOTION CAN BE CREATED."
>
> FRAN PEAVEY, *STRATEGIC QUESTIONING*

Evolve Workable Strategies. Workable strategies begin to emerge in response to compelling questions and to the images of possibility that these questions evoke. In a sense, such strategies are the "big answers"—the key initiatives you invent to address your "big questions." Once you clarify key initiatives, you can formulate and implement specific action plans.

Of course, the cycle is never complete. You need continuous "sensing" based on relevant business and organizational data, ongoing conversations with internal and external stakeholders, informal conversations among employees, and feedback from the organizational environment. This input enables you to continually reassess the landscape you're operating in—revealing new questions for exploration.

The innovative leader with whom we developed the Game Plan process has shared this tool with the entire organization. People from throughout the company have found that it provides a way to discover questions that matter to the future of individual units and to the firm as a whole. The company has also used the Game Plan as part of refining the corporation's

IS YOUR ORGANIZATION AN INQUIRING SYSTEM? ASSESSING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S CAPABILITIES

- To what degree do leaders in your organization foster an environment in which discovering the "big questions" is encouraged as much as coming up with workable solutions?
- Does your organization have rewards or incentives for members to work across functional boundaries to find challenging questions that create common focus and forward movement for knowledge creation?
- Do your leadership development programs contain as much of a focus on the art and architecture of framing powerful questions as they do on techniques for solving problems?
- Do your organization's strategic planning processes include structured ways to discover the "big questions" that, if answered, would have real strategic leverage?
- What enabling tools or technologies does your organization employ to "seed" itself with strategic questions that "travel well" and catalyze learning conversations both within and across functions?
- Does your organization use collaborative technology tools to enable people on the frontlines to ask each other questions related to their daily work (i.e. customer service, equipment maintenance) and receive help with these questions from colleagues in other locations?
- Do senior leaders in your organization see the process of strategy evolution as one that engages multiple voices and perspectives in networks of conversation?

mission and values in the midst of a volatile and changing external climate. By moving from a problem orientation toward a more rigorous and disciplined focus on essential questions, the organization is slowly shifting from a "fix-it" mode to an inquiry model for business and organizational strategy evolution.This company has found that maintaining a rigorous focus on "questions that matter" and hosting strategic conversations on the organization's "big questions" is a core competence for leaders at all levels.

How Can Leaders Engage Powerful Questions?

For all organizations, in today's turbulent times, engaging people's best thinking about complex issues without easy answers will be the key to creating the futures we want rather than being forced to live with the futures we get. Leaders will need to develop capacity in the design of "inquiring systems" in order to learn, adapt, and create new knowledge to meet emerging opportunities and challenges in the more fluid organizational structures of the future. For example, the leadership challenges of the next 20 years are likely to revolve around the art of engaging and energizing networks rather than solely managing hierarchies as in the past. Successful leaders will be those who see organizations as living networks of conversation and collective meaning-making through which members create new knowledge and bring forth the future.They will understand how to operate in networks that are both internal and external to their organization.

In particular, we believe the following core capabilities, rarely taught in today's MBA or corporate leadership programs, will help define leadership excellence in a networked world where knowledge and learning are keys to success:

Engaging Strategic Questions. How many leaders today know how to frame strategic questions that open the space for thinking about possibilities rather than solving problems? How many leaders are comfortable with not knowing and can constructively help others bring forth their collective knowledge? How many leaders can engage their workers in discovering the "big questions" that lie at the heart of their organization's future?

In a volatile and uncertain environment, one of the strongest steps leaders can take is to assist their organizations in discovering the right questions at the right time. One of their key responsibilities is creating infrastructures for dialogue and engagement that encourage others at all levels to develop insightful questions and to search for innovative paths forward. Leaders also need to consider reward systems that provide incentives for members to work across organizational boundaries to discover those challenging lines of inquiry that create common focus and new knowledge.

Convening and Hosting Learning Conversations. A core aspect of the leader's new work involves creating multiple opportunities for learning conversations around challenging questions.

However, authentic conversation is less likely to occur in a climate of fear, mistrust, and hierarchical control. When the human mind and heart are fully engaged in authentic conversation and listening for core questions, new knowledge often begins to surface. Thus, the ability to facilitate working conversations that enhance trust and reduce fear is an important leadership capability.

To succeed in this pursuit, it's essential for leaders to strengthen their skills in the use of dialogue and other engagement approaches that deepen mutual inquiry and foster collective intelligence. These capabilities include:

- Creating a climate of discovery
- Suspending premature judgment
- Exploring underlying assumptions and beliefs
- Listening for connections between ideas
- Encouraging diverse perspectives
- Honoring everyone's contributions
- Articulating shared understanding
- Harvesting and sharing collective discoveries

These skills are especially important in situations in which there are no simple answers and finding creative paths forward can make a positive difference.

Including Diverse Perspectives. Leaders must become connectors—of both people and ideas. Diverse voices and new perspectives that aren't limited by traditional boundaries of function, hierarchy, discipline, technology, tenure, and geographic region play an increasingly important role in a company's strategizing. As Gary Hamel of the London School of Economics points out, "Strategizing depends on creating a rich and complex web of conversations that cuts across previously isolated pockets of knowledge and creates new and unexpected combinations of insight."

"A QUESTION NOT ASKED IS A DOOR NOT OPENED."

MARILEE GOLDBERG, *THE ART OF THE QUESTION*

The connections among these diverse voices and perspectives allow employees to fruitfully explore critical strategic questions. Building and encouraging personal relationships through networks of collaborative conversations across traditional boundaries helps critical strategic questions travel well. In this way, workers enhance their collective intelligence and their capacity to nurture creative futures together.

QUESTIONING

- Stimulates creativity
- Motivates fresh thinking
- Surfaces underlying assumptions
- Focuses intention, attention, and energy
- Opens the door to change
- Leads us into the future

Supporting Appreciative Inquiry. Opening spaces of possibility in our organizations requires a shift in leadership orientation from focusing primarily on what *is not* working and how to fix it, to also discovering and appreciating what *is* working and how to leverage it. Appreciative Inquiry (AI), developed by David Cooperrider and his colleagues at Case Western University, is a process for leveraging emerging possibilities rather than just fixing past mistakes. When used in a disciplined way, this kind of inquiry stimulates lively conversations that use the best of what is as the foundation for what might be.

Leaders who ask, "What's possible here and who cares?" have a much easier time gaining the cooperation and best thinking of their constituents than those who ask, "What's wrong here and who is to blame?" In assessing the results of more than a decade of research and practice in the area of Appreciative Inquiry, Cooperrider has stated unequivocally that "the most important insight we have learned with AI to date is that human systems grow toward what they persistently ask questions about." By asking positive questions, organizations have the opportunity to grow in new directions and tap innovative sources of knowledge, vitality, and energy.

Fostering Shared Meaning. We make meaning of our experiences through stories, images, and metaphors. To tap into this pool of shared meaning, which is the ground from which both powerful questions and innovative solutions emerge, network leaders need to put time and attention into framing common language and developing shared images and metaphors. They can do so by constructing compelling scenarios—stories of the future—that provide a context for working on today's "big questions," as in the case of the Game Plan process described earlier. In addition, leaders must

QUESTIONS FOR ALL SEASONS

Here is a series of generative questions that we and other colleagues have found useful to stimulate new knowledge and creative thinking in a wide variety of situations around the world. Look at these questions to stimulate your own thinking about questions related to your own specific situation. Play. Use your imagination.

Questions for Focusing Collective Attention on Your Situation

- What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of (your specific situation)?
- What's important to you about (your specific situation) and why do you care?
- What draws you/us to this inquiry?
- What's our intention here? What's the deeper purpose (the big "why") that is really worthy of our best effort?
- What opportunities can you see in (your specific situation)?
- What do we know so far/still need to learn about (your specific situation)?
- What are the dilemmas/opportunities in (your specific situation)?
- What assumptions do we need to test or challenge here in thinking about (your specific situation)?
- What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about (your specific situation)?

Questions for Connecting Ideas and Finding Deeper Insight

- What's taking shape? What are you hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed? What's in the center of the table?
- What's emerging here for you? What new connections are you making?
- What had real meaning for you from what you've heard? What surprised you? What challenged you?
- What's missing from this picture so far? What is it we're not seeing? What do we need more clarity about?
- What's been your/our major learning, insight, or discover so far?
- What's the next level of thinking we need to do?
- If there was one thing that hasn't yet been said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?

Questions That Create Forward Movement

- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- What could happen that would enable you/us to feel fully engaged and energized about (your specific situation)?
- What's possible here and who cares? (rather than "What's wrong here and who's responsible?")
- What needs our immediate attention going forward?
- If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose?
- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?
- What challenges might come our way and how might we meet them?
- What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that created new possibilities for the future of (your situation)?
- What seed might we plant together today that could make the most difference to the future of (your situation)?

incorporate time for systemwide reflection in order to enable members to share insights and emerging questions. Collective reflection provides opportunities for the shared meaning-making that is essential in times of turbulence and change.

Nurturing Communities of Practice. Many of the most provocative questions that are vital to an organization's future are first discovered on the front lines, in the middle of the action of everyday life. But these key strategic questions are often lost because few of today's leaders have been trained to notice, honor, and utilize the social fabric of learning that occurs through informal "communities of practice" that exist throughout the organization.A community of practice is made of up people who share a common interest and who work together to expand their individual and collective capacity to solve problems over time.

Nurturing these learning networks and honoring the questions they care about is another core aspect of the leader's new work. It is important to understand how these communities deal with the questions and learning needs that arise in the course of the daily life of the organization. These understandings can provide clues about how the knowledge that resides in such communities might be engaged in the service of critical strategic questions. Leaders who take communities of practice into account as important strategic assets help assure that new work processes or organizational structures do not destroy the fabric of collective knowledge that is woven into these informal groups.

Using Collaborative Technologies. Intranet and groupware technologies are now making it possible for widely dispersed work groups to participate in learning conversations and team projects across time and space. As these tools become even more widely available, the notion of "network leadership" will expand to include supporting widespread online conversations where members throughout the organization can contribute their own questions and best thinking to critical strategic issues. The HP case shows how important enabling technology infrastructures are for strategic innovation. Several forward-looking companies, including Hallmark, Kodak, Discover Card, and General Motors, are now using an innovative online conversational technology, Communispace (www.communispace.com), to listen to their customers' concerns and questions at a deep level and generate insights about new products at a faster rate than was previously possible.

Such collaborative tools will be a critical factor in how well strategic questions can travel both within the organization and among customers and other stakeholders who are key to success. These technologies of engagement create possibilities for individuals and groups to connect with each other and to the larger whole in ways that were previously unimaginable. Leaders who are not skilled in their use or who do not recognize their strategic importance and support their use throughout their organizations will be at a significant disadvantage.

Co-Evolving the Future

It is quite easy to learn the basics of crafting powerful questions. However, once you understand the importance of inquiry, it's hard to turn back. As your questions become broader and deeper than before, so does your experience of life. There is no telling where a powerful question might lead you. Transformative conversations can result from posing a simple question such as, "What questions are we not asking ourselves about the situation in the Middle East?" Tantalizing possibilities emerge from the simple act of changing an article from "in" to "for," as in the HP example. Profound systemic change can emerge from creating a process discipline such as the Game Plan for discovering and acting on the "big questions" within a business setting.

For organizations that need collaborative learning and breakthrough thinking in order to create a sustainable future, asking "questions that matter" and engaging diverse constituencies in learning conversations are a core process for value creation. Because questions are inherently related to action, they are at the heart of an organization's capacity to mobilize the resources required to create a positive future. Seeing the organization as a dynamic network of conversations through which the enterprise develops encourages members at every level to search for questions related to real work that can catalyze collective energy and momentum. For all of us, thoughtful participation in discovering and exploring powerful questions can make a difference—to our team, to our organization, and to the larger communities of which we are a part.

Living systems evolve by developing a coherent identity, creating connections in complex webs of relationships, and distributing information widely throughout the organization. At the same time, human systems naturally evolve toward the questions that they ask. Seeing the ways in which the art and architecture of powerful questions can help an organization create its path into the future, and utilizing process principles, tools, and technologies that support this evolution, is everyone's job. For it is only in this way that organizations are able to cultivate both the knowledge required to thrive economically today as well as the wisdom needed to ensure a sustainable future.

For Further Exploration

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www.communispace.com provides software and services to support creative work conversations and large-scale corporate communities.

www.interclass.com is a high-trust community of experienced practitioners in large organizations exploring innovations in learning and human performance.

www.theworldcafe.com is a global resource for hosting conversations around questions that matter in both for-profit and nonprofit settings.

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