

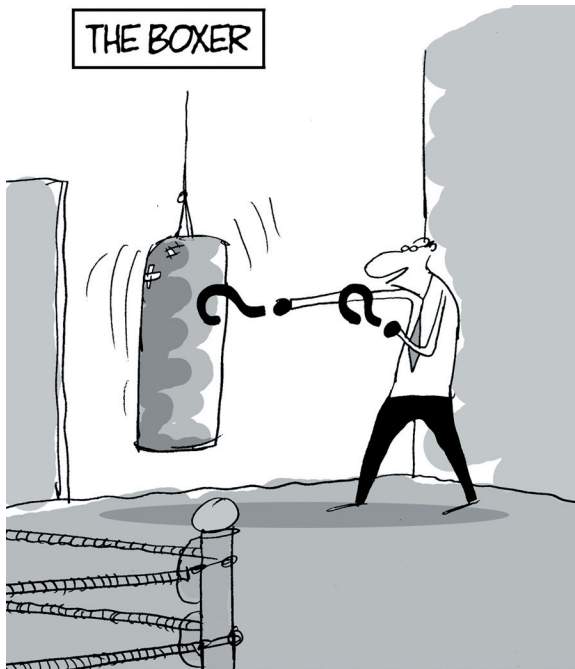
Chapter Nine - Punchy Combinations

Effective questioning involves strategic mixing and matching of question types in combinations much as a boxer will mix and match punches.

The boxer approaches an opponent with a flurry of punches coming from different angles, a mixture of jabs, uppercuts and other blows landing in quick succession.

A leadership team needs to approach a challenge, a decision or a problem with an astute mixture of question types, fully aware that each question type will accomplish different objectives and will require support from other types to get the job done.

To master the art of punchy combinations, a team needs to learn the question types and grasp the function of each. This should also include practice with effective combinations of types.



Combination Punches

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1. A Questioning Toolkit for Leaders

There are more than a dozen question types worthy of a team's attention. Earlier chapters introduced the apparently irrelevant question. Much of this book is devoted to defining other types of questions and suggesting how they might be matched up with others. Some types rank as overarching challenges while others are tools that help us to manage the underpinnings of those challenges.

“What should we do about the changing nature of our client base?” is an example of a defining question.

“How should we go about characterizing or categorizing different client types and what would be the best way to gather data to help us track changes?” is an example of questions meant to help answer the defining question.

Each team should agree upon its own list of question types, selecting from a list like the one below and adapting it to the business or mission of the organization:

- Defining Questions
- Essential Questions
- Questions of Definition
- Probing Questions
- Apparently Irrelevant Questions
- Unanswerable Questions
- Hypothetical Questions
- Planning Questions
- Inventive Questions
- Challenging Questions
- Exploring Questions
- Divergent Questions
- Irreverent Questions
- Provocative Questions
- Telling Questions
- Clarification Questions
- Strategic Questions
- Elaborating Questions
- Organizing Questions

Once there is consensus on which question types should belong in the toolkit, work can begin on defining the adult learning necessary to make the toolkit central to group process.

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2. Brief Definitions and Examples

Defining Questions

Questions that help to clarify the mission of an organization as well as the central challenges and issues facing the team as it looks as the coming year and decade.

“What are we about?”

“What do we stand for?”

“What do we care about?”

“What do we do best?”

“What are our chief assets?”

Essential Questions

Questions that focus on purpose as defining questions do but extend to the prime issues determining survival and success.

“What’s going wrong?”

“What are our biggest liabilities or weaknesses?”

“What should we be doing differently?”

“What are we missing?”

Questions of Definition

Questions that clarify the meaning of key terms and issues.

“What is quality?”

“What is service?”

“What is responsiveness?”

“What do we mean by versatility?”

Probing Questions

Questions that help the group cut past hype and fog to the heart of the matter.

“What is really going on?”

“What are the real results?”

“What are the long term consequences?”

“Where are they coming from?”

“Are there any hidden agendas?”

“Are there any hidden traps?”

“Are there any curve balls?”

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“Can we trust this data?”

Apparently Irrelevant Questions

Questions that a team might not normally ask that end up being central to survival.

“What are the rogue waves headed our way?”

“What’s operating under the surface and behind the scenes?”

“What factors and influences currently disconnected from our enterprise might collide, connect or have an impact as never before?”

What’s on our blind side?

What’s hidden in the glare of our bright side?

How might pride precede our fall?

What don’t we know we don’t know?

What don’t we understand we don’t understand?

Unanswerable Questions

Questions that elude, mystify and frustrate, many of which rank very high in terms of importance.

“How can we make all our clients happy?”

“How can we anticipate all surprises so there are none?”

“What’s the best that can happen?”

“What’s the best way to handle X?”

“What’s real?”

“What’s reliable?”

“Who and what can we trust?”

“What can we count on as constants?”

Hypothetical Questions

Questions that help determine possibilities and likely consequences.

“What might happen if we do X or Y or Z?”

“How much would outcomes improve if we changed the mix so that X was bigger than Y?”

“What do you suppose matters more, X or Y?”

Planning Questions

Questions that explore ways to proceed with an inquiry.

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- “Where should we be looking?”
- “Who should we be speaking to?”
- “How should we carve up the work?”
- “What should we do if we hit the wall?”

Inventive Questions

Questions that drive the creation of novel approaches.

- “What needs to change?”
- “How could we make this better?”
- “What have other folks tried?”
- “What haven’t they tried?”

Challenging Questions

Questions that dispute the validity or worth of a plan, a procedure, an idea or a long established way of doing something.

- “Why are we doing this?”
- “What’s wrong here?”
- “How are we vulnerable?”
- “What did we forget?”
- “Does he (or she) know what he is doing?”

Exploring Questions

Questions that develop the context and the important background information surrounding any issue or problem.

- “What do we need to know in order to get a clear picture of what is going on?”
- “How and where can we find that information?”
- “How will we know whether we can trust what we find?”
- “Who might point us in the right direction?”

Divergent Questions

Questions that help a group move away from conventional thinking to consider unusual possibilities.

- “How do we escape the obvious?”
- “What’s the least likely avenue of exploration?”
- “What has everybody else neglected to ask?”

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Irreverent Questions

Questions that might come into conflict with the powers that be and the preferred rituals and ways of doing things.

“What would happen if we changed the way things are spozed to be?”

“Who says that’s the best way?”

“What gave him (or her) a corner on truth?”

“How could they know back then what we would be facing now?”

Provocative Questions

Questions that delve into topics and issues that will evoke a strong response and feelings of resentment.

“What’s part of our business or operation we could we live without?”

“What member of our team is doing us the least good?”

“What current practice is doing us the most harm?”

“What should we be doing that we are not doing?”

“Are we prepared for the 4-5 disasters most likely to strike?”

Telling Questions

Questions that are carefully aimed at finding just the right information to help make a smart decision.

“Who is the best in the business?”

“What are the main cues or signs we should heed?”

“What are the prime indicators?”

“What are the key elements?”

Clarification Questions

Questions that bring decisions and issues into sharp focus.

“What does quality mean, exactly, in this context?”

“What do they mean by ‘net profit?’”

“What is success or failure?”

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Strategic Questions

Questions that help decide how to approach and issue or problem.

“What comes first in our review?”

“How should we approach the client?”

“What questions are least likely to offend but give us what we need to know?”

Elaborating Questions

Questions that extend an inquiry to consider all important aspects and elements.

“How much further should we dig?”

“Beyond what we have, what else do we need?”

“How can we break that down further in components?”

“What other aspects should we consider?”

Organizing Questions

Questions that help to shape and categorize the inquiry.

“How should we group what we are finding?”

“How do we conduct our inquiry to match the structure we designed?”

“How should we modify our structures as we proceed?”

3. Smart Combinations

As the opening of this chapter suggested, the team must learn how to mix and match question types while the inquiry proceeds since each type is effective at different tasks.

In order to avoid plunging prematurely, the team must move forward deliberately, first devoting attention to clarification, planning and strategic questions.

“What is going on?”

“What does this mean to us and our future?”

“What is the real problem or challenge?”

“How can we best approach this challenge?”

“What do we need to know?”

“How are we going to find out what we need to know?”

“Where should we start?”

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The first attempts to organize an inquiry will almost always require revision once the group begins exploring the challenge since the discovery process usually turns up issues and aspects of the problem that the group did not anticipate.

It helps if one member of the team is assigned the role of reminding the group to reflect on the process being employed.

“What types of questions should we be using now and what combinations make sense now?”

“Have we found the best approach?”

“What should we do differently?”

This kind of exploration cannot proceed by recipe, ritual or standard procedure. Most of the time, the questioning sequence and the combinations must be invented to match the particular test at hand. Over time a team that works together in reflective practice should be able to develop and extend management of the questioning process.