

Questions

by Bob Larcher

This article is less about a tool of the trade and more about the "raison d'être" of facilitators of experiential learning – asking questions! The use of questions is probably one of the oldest learning techniques known to man, as far as I am aware the whole of Socrates' (no less) reputation is based around his ability to ask questions, it was his only tool of the trade!

I learned the real power of asking questions when I first started running development training courses back in 1986 (with Development Training Ltd.). In those days during debriefs all we did was ask questions, there were no handouts, no participant work books, no slides (certainly no PowerPoint) and very little theoretical input. We did have a paperboard in the corner of the room upon which one of us would occasionally draw John Adair's three circles, or the Communication Ladder – the dizzy heights of our theory. It was only in 1989 when I bought "The Management of Organisational Behaviour" (still my "Bible" in terms of management) and discovered Tannenbaum's Continuum of Leader Behaviour, Maslow's Pyramid of Needs, Blake's Management Grid, Lewin's Force Field Analysis etc, that theory started to creep into what we were doing.

However, models and theory are for teachers and trainers (no disrespect meant to either profession), questions are for those helping people to learn, especially those helping people to learn from experience. I can remember spending many late nights with colleagues, discussing everything we had seen, heard and felt in order to formulate "the question" for the following morning that would enable us to really open up the key issue(s) facing a group and help them to learn.

Of course, there is no "one" question that will miraculously get all the answers needed to move a group on, it's more about asking different types of questions to help move people along their personal road of discovery

For me, the ability to ask questions, good questions, is the key to making experiential learning effective. Especially as, in the main, experiential learning is about people's behaviour and not whether the snow was too deep to get to the top of the mountain or whether one extra barrel on the raft would have made all the difference!

Good questions come from listening (and watching) carefully to every contribution and intervention that takes place, and this means being present and "thinking" (not judging) along with the group – it's not about handing out an exercise and coming back an hour later with a debriefing sheet of standard questions.

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Questions are everywhere: Did you achieve your objectives? How did you use your resources? How did you manage your time? Etc. So, what makes a good question?

Good questions help to analyse, compare, contrast, interpret and make connections between pieces of information. In terms of experiential learning, good questions lead to a greater understanding of the assumptions or foundations of what is said or believed.

There are many classifications or categories of questions (see references); the following is based on the 6 questions of Socrates: questions of clarification, questions that probe assumptions, questions that probe reasons and evidence, questions about viewpoints or perspectives, questions that probe implications and consequences, and even questions about the question. Here are some examples of generic questions in each of these categories:



Questions for aiding clarification

- ⊙ Could you put that another way?
- ⊙ Let me see if I understand you: do you mean _____ or _____?
- ⊙ How does this relate to our discussion/problem/issue?
- ⊙ What do you think John meant by his remark? What did you take John to mean?
- ⊙ Jane, would you summarize in your own words what Richard has said? ... Richard, is that what you meant?

Questions that probe assumptions

- ⊙ What are you assuming?
- ⊙ What is Karen assuming?
- ⊙ What could we assume instead?
- ⊙ You seem to be assuming _____. Do I understand you correctly?
- ⊙ Is it always the case? Why do you think the assumption holds here?

Questions that probe reasons and evidence

- ⊙ Could you explain your reasons to us?
- ⊙ But is that good evidence to believe that?
- ⊙ Is there reason to doubt that evidence?
- ⊙ Can someone else give evidence to support that response?
- ⊙ Why do you think that is true?
- ⊙ What led you to that belief?
- ⊙ What would convince you otherwise?

Questions about viewpoints or perspectives

- ⊙ How would other groups/types of people respond? Why? What would influence them?
- ⊙ Can/did anyone see this another way?
- ⊙ What would someone who disagrees say?
- ⊙ What is an alternative?
- ⊙ How are Ken's and Roxanne's ideas alike? Different?

Questions that probe implications and consequences

- ⊙ What are you implying by that?
- ⊙ But that happened, what else would also happen as a result? Why?
- ⊙ What effect would that have?
- ⊙ Would that necessarily happen or only probably happen?
- ⊙ What is an alternative?

Questions about the question

- ⊙ Is the question clear? Do we understand it?
- ⊙ Do we all agree that this is the question?
- ⊙ To answer this question, what questions would we have to answer first?
- ⊙ I'm not sure I understand how you are interpreting the main question at issue.
- ⊙ Can we break this question down at all?
- ⊙ What does this question assume?
- ⊙ Why is this question important?

Of course, questions alone (as powerful as they can be) are not sufficient on their own. They need to be supported by regular summaries. Debriefings often cover many angles and a large variety of remarks are made along the way, participants will need help in seeing what the debriefing has and has not accomplished. They will need help in seeing what has been discussed and what still needs to be discussed.

There is no standard way of running a debriefing session. It is difficult to make a mental list of the questions that you want to ask and then mechanically follow the list, although that's not to say that you may have some prepared questions that you feel need to be answered. As the leader of the debriefing, you are a bit like the conductor of an orchestra. You are there to ensuring that melody and not cacophony results. You ensuring that everyone is following the score, that no-one is drowning out anyone else and that the debriefing arrives at a conclusion. Your questions bring structure and order to the debriefing.

Conclusions

Facilitators of experiential learning (learning coaches) are there to have "all the questions" as opposed to "all the answers". We do not have the answer as to why someone behaved as they did in a given situation – however we should have the questions that will enable that person to learn or understand why they behaved the way they did! ■

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