

## Questions as Catalysts

In the traditional view of leadership, a leader is one who has a vision and motivates others to plan and implement it.



In the emerging view of leadership, a leader creates the context to enable a group to collectively decide the vision, course of action, and continually learn together and adjust course over time.

### Start with Questions not Answers

The fundamental orientation for this participatory style of leadership is **open inquiry**. As a leader, we focus on clarifying and asking powerful questions rather than promoting one answer. Our intention is to spark people's intrinsic motivation to learn, contribute and create positive change.

A well-framed question creates a container or "sets the table" for people to explore and discover the answers themselves. Questions can serve as a catalyst to inspire movement, reflection, and creative thinking. They open up a space of possibilities, helping people see beyond limiting beliefs and assumptions. Good questions enable people, organizations, and communities to move from the known (present) to the unknown (future) – adapting to new contexts and exploring possibilities.

*"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

### The Art of Framing Strategic Questions

Strategic questions are framed in a way that is truly open, meaning not a yes/no question or a question that contains or suggests a solution. Examples of framing are:

- What would it take to...
- How could we...
- Who might you...
- When has...
- What have we learned about...
- What might be...

Crafting a good question for hosting group meetings, such as a World Cafe, starts by clarifying the context for the meeting. People come into a meeting from all different places, literally and figuratively. Key things to define are:

- What is the current context and recent history?
- What is changing or challenging? → and what strategic question does that lead to?

This clarity of thinking becomes the initial framing for the meeting's invites and/or introductory remarks.

## Examples of Strategic Questions

- What is the most important conversation we are not having?
- What can we do together that none of us can do alone?
- Share a story of a time when this organization/community was at its best. What were the conditions that enabled this?
- What are gifts and assets in this community that you feel could be better connected, utilized and shared?
- What things that we could do to achieve the worst result imaginable with respect to our top strategy or objective?
  - What, if anything, are we currently doing that in any way, shape, or form resembles the things we just listed? If so, what first steps will us stop what we know creates undesirable results?

## Categories of Questions

- **Focus questions:** What is the most important issue to address? How do you see this issue playing out in your experience (for yourself, and/ or people around you?) What is the simplest and most compelling question we could keep at the core of our work?
- **Appreciative inquiry questions:** What do you most appreciate about working with this group/organization? When has this group/community implemented a successful change in the past? What were the characteristics that enabled that to succeed?
- **Visioning questions:** Imagine it is three years from now and our work has been hugely successful, what would things look like? What would we like to become? What will success look like?
- **Strategy questions:** Who are the key people we need to collaborate with to make this happen? What culture and values do we need to embody to ensure this initiative succeeds?
- **Self-reflection questions:** How do we need to “show up” to ensure that this effort yields more by working together than we could achieve on our own? What will keep you/me motivated to participate?
- **Reflective learning questions:** Given what you now know, what would you do differently next time? What have you/we learned from this experience? What was new or surprising?