

## Whoa! What Question Do I Ask Now?

Working with people is about communicating effectively. Part of this art is timing—asking the question that is right for the progression of the other person’s thinking. And part of the art is asking the right question—the question that will get the other person to reflect but not respond defensively. Effective communicators are good at predicting what the right question to ask is and when to hold a question for later. Here are some guidelines for making these predictions.

The key success principle is to know what new mental place you want the other person to move toward (i.e., the objective for your question). When I say, “know your objective”, I am thinking of things like. . .

If you want to build a sense of community to support your issue, ask a discovery question so they can see the common aspirations that are shared inside that community (usually something about values like why their work matters, the legacy they wish to leave, the obligations they have that are larger than personal gain, etc.). Perhaps a question like, “What is important to you about your [relationship] [work on this topic] [benefits you want for your children] etc.?”

If you want to discover something new about the challenges and opportunities in your issue, ask an analysis question (usually something about chunking their issue or process into understandable, manageable-sized pieces). Perhaps a question like, “Can you name the sequence of steps it will take to achieve what you both say is important?”

If you want to heal old wounds between one another, ask a support-one-another-despite-our-differences question (usually exploring higher-order values they share and then offering peace-making comments around this new way of seeing each other). Perhaps a question like, “If you both say \_\_\_\_\_ is important, what are good ways to make that happen working together, despite your current differences?”

If you want people to heal old wounds in themselves, ask a disclosure question in a safe environment (usually around revealing their biggest fears). Perhaps a question like, “Now that we can have a private conversation, tell me about the fears do you have about coming to agreement with them?”

If you want people to teach themselves new information, ask a sharing question (usually around sharing experiences, knowledge,

skills, and abilities that they already possess). Perhaps a question like, “What did you learn from the [expert resource person] [the field trip] [your research] [etc.] that will make all of us more successful in planning for the future?”

If you want people to re-teach themselves what they just learned together, ask a teach-one-another question (usually structured around what just happened in their conversation). Perhaps a question like, “We’ve just had a constructive conversation about \_\_\_\_\_; would you summarize for me the things we just learned that most support our next steps?”

If you want to have something stick with the people we are working with that they will implement later, ask a commitment question (usually around listing tasks combined with a date-certain vow to complete and report back on implementation success). Perhaps a question like . . . “Who?” “What?” “When?” “Where?” “and How?” questions.

Tailor your questions to the objective you have for the communication and you will effectively communicate by having others provide the content because you are providing the guidance.