

STACKING QUESTIONS

FINDING THE SPARK TO LIGHT THE CONVERSATION ON FIRE

GREAT QUESTIONS

"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 5 minutes."

—Albert Einstein

QUESTIONS OPEN

What Makes a Question Powerful?

In a wonderfully evocative description, Fran Peavey observed: *"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."*

THE JUGULAR

"I went for the jugular question." stated Arno Penzias, when asked of the path that led to his Nobel Peace Prize in astrophysics.

Which question gets to the heart of the matter? What is the question that is pumping blood through your community? Can you find the question that is central to everyone's concern? What is that universal question that hits each person personally?

HOW TO FIND THE QUESTION?

This practice arose when a small team was trying to figure out the *central question* that would catalyze their invited guests. The large group who was arriving had very diverse needs, wide experience and seemed to be joining for different reasons. Their task was to bring people together – so they started asking questions.

What's the topic? Why are they joining? What makes joining valuable? What is the value in joining? What is the value of participation? What value do the participants bring? What does valuable participation look like? What questions do you bring to this forum? How are the questions you are asking impacting you? How could this forum answer your questions? Which questions do you need to explore with your peers?

THE FLOW OF QUESTIONS

Each person in the small team added a new question – listening to the previous one and offering a slightly more profound one. They did not critique the questions, they simply added new questions until the questions began to be more meaningful. After a dozen questions, they started writing down the most relevant ones. They tested out them out with peers and made adjustments to make the questions more personal *and* universal – making an invitation for conversation.

SHAPING A CONVERSATION STARTER

Here are some of the questions they asked themselves to shape their question into a conversation starter:

- 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? (What conversation, meanings and feelings may this question evoke for people?)
- Is this question likely to invite fresh thinking/feeling? Is it **familiar** enough to be relevant—and **unique** enough to be special?
- What **assumptions** or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?
- Will this question **generate** hope, imagination, engagement, action, and new possibilities? Or will it focus on old stale issues?
- Does this question leave room for new and **different questions** to be raised as the initial question is explored?

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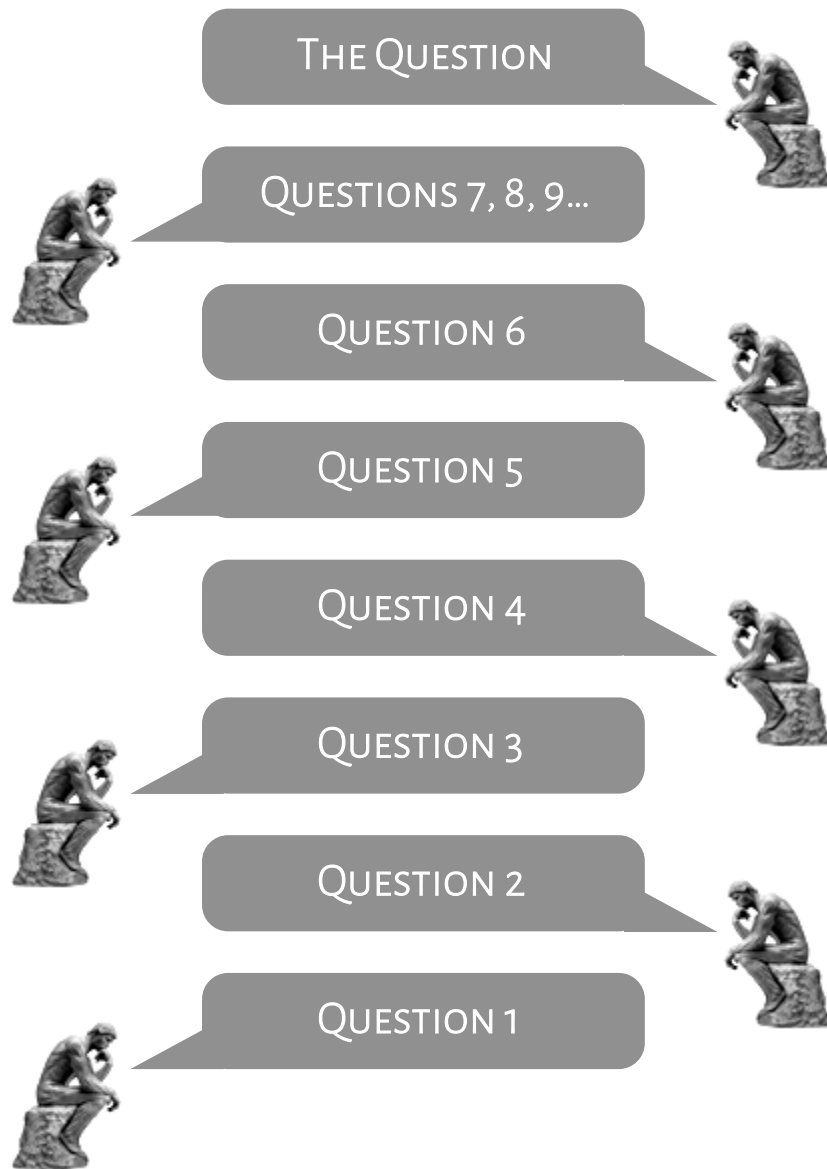
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STIMULATING IDEAS & BUILDING FUTURES

STACKING QUESTIONS: FINDING CONVERSATION STARTERS



THE STACKING OF QUESTIONS

Try this technique to identify the *Jugular Question* in your project.

1. Find a quiet place for 3-4 people to talk,
2. Have 2 people face each other, perhaps in the 'thinker pose',
3. The other 1-2 people stand back, ready to *scribe* the questions,
4. The first thinker offers the a question,
5. The second thinker offers a responding question,
6. The 1st & 2nd thinkers keep offering questions until one dries up,
7. One of the scribes taps their shoulder and becomes a thinker,
8. The new pair, keep delving deeper, until a new scribe steps in,
9. Keep on until you get the 'aha question' or converge on a theme,
10. Move to your written notes to refine it and test the question.



THINKER

Tries to find
The Question, by:
Hearing a question,
Offering a question,
Hearing a question,
Offering a question...



SCRIBE

Writes questions
as they stack, and
switches roles with
the thinker when
they feel they can
energise the process.

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