Skill Toolkit

SIDEWAYS LEARNING
QUESTION

Questions help us get "unstuck" when we need to understand a problem from multiple positions. Asking questions leads to different starting points, different people, and different sectors.

THE STORY

It is often a challenge for farmers in rural villages to get accurate and up-to-date information about weather and climate change needed to make farms sustainable. The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) uses information and communication technologies to support social and economic development around the world. In Uganda, IDRC provided funds to build a public internet center where farmers could access information to help support their farms and their families. However, they knew that it would be important for the internet center to be shared and made accessible to all community members in the village. IDRC was eager to solicit ideas from all potential users of the internet center, so they conducted informal interviews with the village chief and other community leaders – believing that it was important to get buy-in from those whose opinions tended to influence others. Their ideas informed the design of the internet café including policies such as operating hours, pricing, and management.

The community cyber café had been up and running for nine months when problems arose. Graffiti began to appear on some of the tables. Then minor vandalism to keyboards and monitors put several computers out of operation. People started using the café as a hangout with no interest in the computers and that kept potential users away. It was clear that the computer center was not living up to its potential.

It became necessary to build ongoing support for the café so the IDRC employees simply started asking questions of the farmers and other villagers whom they thought were likely users of the center. They found that since the community had not been involved in the decisions about the café policies, villagers did not feel any sense of ownership for the equipment or the space. And when the café failed to serve their needs, people's patience ran out. For example, several computers got viruses and villagers complained when café assistants didn't know how to use the software to

debug the computers. Sometimes the signal was too weak and websites wouldn't load, so farmers got tired of waiting and went home. And while many farmers were interested in the knowledge they received from internet sources, they often did not know how to act upon that information so they grumbled that the internet wasn't any help.

Better understanding of community perspectives led to new approaches to gain their support and buy-in. IDRC staff members called on tech experts from the private sector for help with technology problems. They developed a training schedule for technicians and established protocols for monitoring equipment. They also connected farmers with government agricultural workers, who helped them interpret online information for their situations. Over time, addressing ongoing problems through the process of asking questions helped to ensure that the original innovation was successful, sustainable, and used by farmers whose agricultural businesses could benefit from the resource.

DESCRIPTION

Questions are a basic and necessary part of development, change and growth. But, asking questions is not just about finding answers. Questioning is a way of being in the world that values a continual search for different perspectives and new sources of information. A mind frame that is open to investigation, contradictions, and multiple perspectives is essential.

In complex situations, there is never just one answer or approach. Healthy skepticism will always suggest that there might be other ways of understanding and other ways of doing things. Discoveries occur in the constant search for these alternatives. The point of asking questions is to understand issues from a point of view that is more challenging to access than through one's individual knowledge.
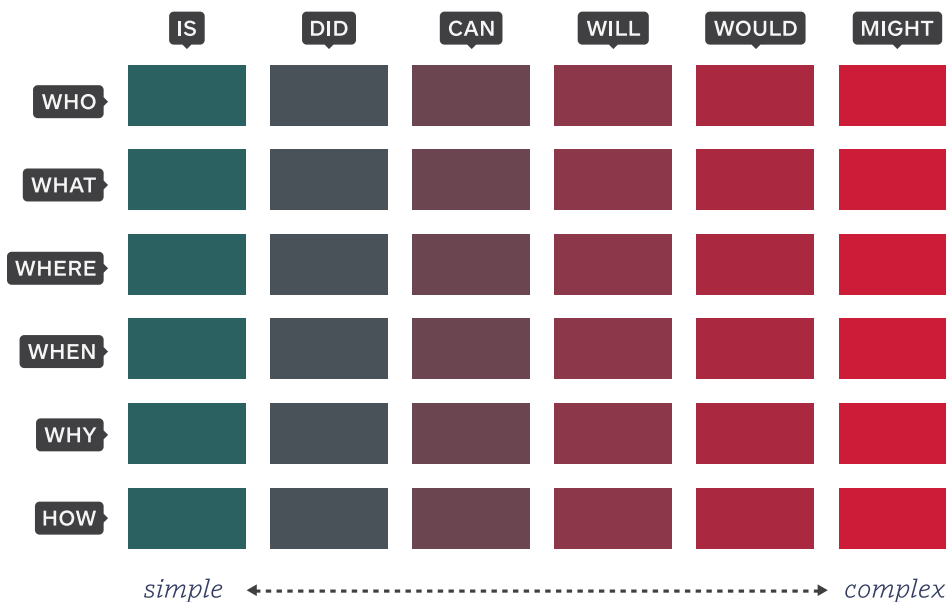
WHAT KIND OF QUESTIONS TO ASK?

It is often thought that asking "why" can get you to the core of an issue. For example, a technique called "The Five Whys" suggests that asking why repeatedly can get you beyond the surface and to the core of an issue.

THE FIVE WHYS TECHNIQUE

1. Name a problem you're having
2. Ask WHY it's happening
3. Get an answer
4. Then ask WHY about that
5. Get an answer
6. Then ask WHY about that -- and so on, five times

Sure, asking "why" five times, will always lead to an unexpected focus. However, never assume that there is a single meaningful core to every issue that is equally important to everyone involved. Instead, a variety of questions allow people to examine assumptions about what is relevant, what is essential, and what is not. Ask a range of who, what, where, when, why and how questions coupled with the words is, did, can, will, would and might. Include complex questions that explore problems in a deeper, more thoughtful and more critical way.

	IS	DID	CAN	WILL	WOULD	MIGHT
WHO						
WHAT						
WHERE						
WHEN						
WHY						
HOW						

simple ←-------------------------------→ *complex*

DEVELOPING AN INNOVATION MINDSET

Thoughtful questioning is not about looking for answers, but trying to understand issues from multiple points of view.

HOW TO

Step 1

Know the right kind of questions

Different questions provide different types of information. It's important to frame questions to get the information you want. The wording of questions can produce different feelings depending on who is doing the asking, his or her relationship to the person being questioned, and how comfortable that person is with the information being shared. All of these factors can either facilitate new understandings of issues and situations, or interfere and make for a potentially tense situation. It's important to ask the right kind of questions – ones that begin honest dialogue, build connections, and yield different perspectives.

Two types of questions can effectively generate new information: open-ended questions and closed questions.

Use closed questions to understand the context

Closed questions usually call for a specific answer and help to verify evidence and assess situations and problems that already exist.

Ask questions such as:

- What happened?
- What are the problems?
- When do problems usually occur?
- What works? What resources exist?

◀◀ Back to the story
IDRC staff members used closed questions to learn from community members what they thought of the cyber café. They asked, "When did you go to the cyber café?" "How did you use the computers?" and "What are the biggest problems with the cyber café?"

Use open-ended questions to encourage self-reflection and understand assumptions

Open-ended questions encourage people to think more about why things occur the way they do. These questions begin a process of analysis that may lead to a discussion of how things might be different.

Ask questions such as:

- Why did this happen?
- How would you solve this problem?
- What might be done instead?

Use these related skills: Interview, Survey, Dialogue

◀◀ Back to the story
IDRC staff members used open-ended questions to get ideas about how to improve the cyber café. They asked, "How would you encourage more villagers to use the cyber café?" "How might farmers use computers to support their work?"

Step 2

Ask probing questions

Sometimes it's necessary to ask questions that clarify initial answers and further explore related issues. Questions that ask people to describe or explain their initial responses can encourage them to share their opinions and ideas.

Ask questions such as:

- Can you say more about that?
- What makes you say that?
- How do you feel about that?

Use these related skills: Interview, Survey, Dialogue

◀◀ Back to the story
Many villagers were not used to being asked their opinions so they needed prompting to talk about the failures of the cyber café. Helpful questions such as, "describe what happened when you used the computer" and "explain why that was a problem" encouraged them to share their honest views.

Step 3

Ask critical questions

Questions can also encourage deeper thinking about situations. Deep thinking challenges the foundational assumption about why things are the way they are and how things could or should be. These questions can encourage people to critique assumptions or existing practices through further discussion or even debate.

Ask questions such as:

- What are the consequences of the current actions?
- Who benefits from the way things are? Who loses?

Use these related skills: Critique

Step 4

Ask discovery questions

Ultimately, good questions encourage alternative explanations and solutions. These questions invoke the imagination to envision new possibilities that might otherwise remain unexplored if starting from the taken for granted assumptions about our beliefs what we think we already know. There are no clear questions to encourage this kind of discovery process. Instead, questioners must listen closely to people's responses and intentionally foster positive engagement so that people feel understood – like their ideas matter. In groups, questioners must pay attention to the dynamics between people and help ease power differentials and make connections between each contribution. This will help to build a sense of trust and affinity that might lead to new discoveries.

Ask questions that:

- Allow people to come up with their own explanations, in their own words and language
- Build on what people say. Use their words rather than reframing what they say into your own preferred terms.
- Reword questions so they empower people rather than assign blame. (Ex. Instead of asking, "Why did this go wrong?" rephrase the question to ask, "What do you think happened and why?"
- Encourage relationship building so that there are fewer risks for sharing

Use these related skills: Dialogue, Network, Facilitate, Stewardship

LIMITATIONS

- Unlimited questioning may prevent projects from moving forward.
- Questions rub against power and some people maintain power by refusing to ask and answer questions. Therefore, there can be repercussions when questioning challenges power.

RESOURCES

- **The Barefoot Guide**
  Through real-life stories about organizations for social change, these two guidebooks provide facilitation techniques to encourage organizational learning, self-reflection, and growth.
  http://www.barefootguide.org

◀◀ Back to the story
Issues of trust and respect were important to the villagers. They were willing to ask and answer critical questions in one-on-one conversation, but many did not want their complaints to be widely shared. However, villagers were more willing to share their opinions when they saw that their recommendations could influence the development of the cyber café. Farmers discovered that a dialogue with the IDRC staff members could lead to better policies for sharing computers and maintaining the café spaces.

References
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Westley, F., Zimmerman, B. & Patton, M. Q. (2006). Getting to maybe: How the world is changed. Vintage Canada.