

Strategic Questioning

Excerpted from Fran Peavey's book, *By Life's Grace: Musing on the Essence of Social Change*, published by New Society Publishers in 1994.

Strategic questioning is the skill of asking the questions that will make a difference and unearth new knowledge. Shaping a strategic question involves creating motion, creating options, digging deeper, empowering and it avoids reinforcing the 'stuckness' of old ways of thinking and acting.

A strategic question creates motion by asking, "How can we move?" Strategic questions are dynamic and don't allow a situation to remain stuck.

For example, Sally is having a hard time deciding whether to move to Sydney. I could say to her, "Why don't you just move to Sydney?" This question is really a suggestion pretending to be a question. A more strategic question would be, "What places come to mind when you think of living happily?" or "What is the meaning of this move in your life?" Sally is then encouraged to talk about the qualities she wants from her new home, to set goals.

A strategic question creates options. If I ask, "Why don't you move to Sydney?" I have asked a question that is dynamic in one direction (Sydney). A strategic question opens the options up, such as 'Where would you like to live? or "What are three places that you feel connected to?"

A strategic question digs deeper. 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 that lid.

But if we have a longer lever, or a more dynamic question, we can pry off the lid and really stir things up. Some people approach

problems with their heads like a closed paint can. If the right question is applied and it digs deep enough, we can stir up creative solutions. A long-lever question can stir up synthesis, motion, and energy: What needs to be changed? What is the meaning of this situation in your life? What aspects of it interest you most?

A strategic question avoids "Why". Most "Why" questions force you to defend an existing decision or rationalise the present. "Why" questions can create resistance to change.

A strategic question avoids "Yes" or "No" answers because these leave the person being asked in an uncreative and passive state.

A strategic question empowers. When I ask people in India, "What would you like to do to honour this mother God, the river?" there is a confidence expressed that they can contribute to designing the clean-up process.

A strategic question asks the unaskable questions. For every individual, group, or society, some questions are taboo. A strategic question often challenges the values that an issue rests upon. Asking taboo questions in a non-partisan way can be a great service to anyone with an issue on which she or he appears "stuck".

For example, a question for the politician would be: What do you like about the other party's platform? For a workaholic: What do you do for joy? For the tree activist: How should we make building materials?



TWO LEVELS OF INQUIRY

LEVEL ONE

Describe the Issue or Problem

1. Focus Questions gathers information that is already known. When you look at the river, what do you see that concerns you?

2. Observation Questions. What do you see? What do you read about this situation? What information do you need to gather about this situation?

3. Analysis Questions (Thinking Questions) What is the relationship of..to...? What are the main economic, political, cultural, social structures that affect this situation?

4. Feeling Questions. How has this situation affected your body? Your feelings? How has it affected feelings about your family, community, the world? What has disturbed or excited you about this process?

LEVEL TWO

Digging deeper : Strategic questions

Now we start asking questions that increase the motion. The mind takes off, creating new information, synthesizing, moving from what is known to the realm of what could be. What is the meaning of this situation in your life?

5. Visioning Questions are concerned with identifying one's ideals, values and dreams. How would you like it to be?

If things were optimal what would it look like? Feel like?

6. Change questions address how to get to a more ideal situation. How might changes you would like to see actually come about? Name as many ways as possible. What are changes you have seen or read about? Here you are trying to find the person's change view, which will greatly impact their strategies for change.

7. Considering All the Alternatives. What are all the possible ways you could accomplish these changes? How could you reach that goal? What are other ways? What would it take for you to do so...?

8. Consider The Consequences. How would your first alternative affect the others in the situation? What would be the effect on the environment? What political effect would you anticipate from each alternative? What unintended consequences could there be?

9. Consider the Obstacles. What would need to change in order for alternative "A" to be acceptable? What keeps you from getting started on this? Decisions become clear around this point. Are you getting a sense of what you want to do?

10. Personal Inventory and Support Questions. What support do you need to do...? What support would you need to work for this change?

11. Personal Action Questions. Who do you need to talk to about your vision? How can you get others together to work on this? What must be done to reach the first key milestone?