

Questions Leaders Should Be Asking Now

Leading with questions...at
this moment of sustained
disturbance

What
question
will you ask
now?

Hosted by garyhubbell  consulting



Overview – The Power of Questions

It's hard to know what's the best course of action right now. So often, we view ACTION as the preferred response. Maybe we're being called to sit still and reflect at a deeper level. Maybe we're being asked to take note that our actions as an individual have consequences on all others.

Maybe this is a moment to sit with questions. Sit still...but not sit alone. Sit connected with others undergoing similar reflection.

And then connect together for shared learning and teaching.

Our questions precede action.

[David Cooperrider](#) says questions that look for the true, the good, and the possible are what enable us and others to consistently flourish.

At this time when it seems like each of us have nothing BUT questions, getting to the "right" question may foster more flourishing for more people in your life and in your organization.

[Gary Hubbell Consulting](#) offered to hold space for a dialogue about the power of questions as we attempt to lead our way through the present widespread uncertainty – questions that might propel us to the true, the good, and the possible.

On Tuesday, April 21, 2020, leaders from education, health care, consulting, human services, community, culture, religion, philanthropy, and business came together to contribute to our mutual teaching and learning about leadership during this moment. They connected virtually from across Canada and the US (including Hawaii and Alaska), Singapore, and India.

Framing Comments

Gary Hubbell offered a perspective to frame and seed the discussion to follow.

- Questions arise from the lenses through which you view the world. During unprecedented disturbances, there's value in adopting multiple lenses which avoid locking your thinking into the same ol' perspective. Gary pointed to three that serve well:
 1. Scenario thinking/mapping – intersecting variables of key uncertainty and importance in order to tell stories of – and rehearse your responses in – different future scenarios
 2. Theory U – acting from the future as it arises. A growing conscious awareness to avoid linear thinking, letting go of the judgement, cynicism, and fear that blocks us seeing what is trying to emerge...and then welcoming that with curiosity, compassion, courage, and wonder.
 3. Whole systems thinking and panarchy – understanding the resilience of complex human and natural systems and the cyclical “clearances” that must occur.
- Questions precede action. Even during the life and death survival response played out in emergency rooms around the world, some doctors, nurses, and respiratory techs looked at ventilators and asked, “What else is possible from this one machine because we have to serve

multiple patients?" Rapid prototyping ensued and four patients could have simultaneous access to the one vent. Amazing!

- The questions we ask set the stage for what we "find" ... and what we find becomes the knowledge out of which the future is constructed.
- Our default mindset may be to first "fix" a problem; "find" solution; protection; fear; scarcity; etc.
 - "Without ___x___, how can we achieve ___y___?"
 - "When will we get back to 'normal'?"
- While this approach may be somewhat helpful, it can also be unnecessarily limiting. Approached this way, solutions stem from the familiar, perhaps producing only incremental gain—which unprecedented conditions may quickly overwhelm.
- Alternatively, a generative mindset embraces the present as a mystery; welcomes curiosity; acknowledges risk/pain while choosing to focus on what's available/what's working. This type of cultivated mindset enables you to:
 - Disrupt current beliefs (e.g., "What's the positive opposite?;" "What do you want more of?")
 - Create reflective space ("how might we reimagine what we have?")
 - Foster openness/vulnerability ("what if we could...")
 - Look for the true, the good, and the possible
 - Leverage solutions that stem from the reimagined possible
- The questions you develop shape conversations...which...deepen relationships...which...align intention...which...propels common action and reinforces collaborative resolve.
- Three of appreciative inquiry's key principles are important to remember—especially now:
 1. Our expectations inform what we look for, what we see, and what we hear.
 2. Our questions inspire images, and imagery compels action.
 3. What we believe to be true is informed by and evolves through conversation.
- Just as some of our assumptions (aka, blind spots) are dissolving right now, others—yet unclear and precise—are just emerging, especially around:
 - Colocation and connection
 - Value proposition
 - Competitor universe
 - Nature's ever-present lessons
 - The long-available but little attended wisdom of indigenous peoples (true resilient teachers)
 - Systems collapse yet people rise
 - Other

Wisdom Exchange – Responses to Our Two Discussion Questions

Participants had the opportunity to go deeper in small breakout groups. Half the groups were asked to consider one question; the other half considered the second question. Below is a sampling of what was reported back to the plenary, including some resulting commentary:

1. What assumption about your work / environment has been illuminated (and, potentially, jettisoned) by this pandemic?

- Effective relationships, trust, and learning happen among people when they are face-to-face.
- Use this moment to step back and examine potential transformational opportunities.
- What is no longer truly needed? What's the purpose beneath it proposed action – is it clear and still relevant?
- Identity and roles are being upended. We as human beings need to build a new connection—no longer divided by perceptions of “superior” and “inferior.” At this time we are all in “the middle.” Generative conversations are the most beneficial.
- The spiritual and the “self-dividers” must come together. There is an ecological divide—between humans and nature—that is beginning to shift. Hope, abundance, and compassion are beginning to be seen in both the individual and the community levels.
- We take personal touch for granted.
- The new normal is forcing us to experiment with new ways of forming and sustaining relationships.
- We are noticing the dichotomy of being together but not together.
- We are conflating mission and our historic means (which are being thwarted right now).

2. What question about your work / environment is most important for you to consider now?

- In this crucible of the pandemic, inequity is being magnified. The inequities that have been there to challenge us all along are now challenging us even more.
- What is our leadership role to be translators of hope? How can we build the creativity and collaboration fostered by a shared hope?
- The question of our value proposition....At this time it is in all of our best interests to take care of everyone. How do we do that at a variety of levels? Simplistically, look for those who can help; from a communications perspective, how can we advance the notion of the common good as we understand it?; being an observer in order to see who and how people can contribute in new ways.
- How do we avoid the inexorable pressure to “go back to the way things were?”
- What will it take for us to dissolve limiting assumptions before we find ourselves having to adapt in crisis?
- We're all being exposed BY the virus; some are exposed TO it. What system, opportunity, gaps have been exposed...and now how to leverage that going forward?
- What is core to the “sanctity” of our mission, and what is “means” that we have used in the past that are contextual, cultural, or unexamined?
- Are we moving beyond the assumption of our own institutional viability and survivability, and more to the overriding (bigger than us) position of the importance of our mission?
- How do we notice, accelerate, learn from, and solidify the new learnings that we have, and not back-slide?
- While I’m looking for the opportunity that this new reality offers I find myself feeling guilty a bit with the ongoing suffering. I have nurses and docs working with patients, so it’s hard to be focusing on the concept of “opportunity.”
- That makes me think about entrepreneurial thinkers (the “*abnormal ones*” who have made this world and will likely save this world). So maybe a drive to return to the “new normal” actually might rely on the *abnormal* and the good and the true that emerges out of creativity and caring, and the opportunity to bring new voices to the table.
- I agree with the need to return to living in harmony with the natural environment. Our relationship to nature is foundational to individual and collective health and well-being.
- What does a “merciful” future look like vs. a “sacrificial” one?
- Seeing cooperation and collaboration work across the globe, in ways never before seen/imagined. This sense that we are “all in this together” is real. How will this change our approach to things going forward?
- The amount of “real estate” that organizations thought was essential in the past, is proving to be totally unnecessary.

- Fear of working remotely is fading--but personal connection remains essential.
- Technology is central to our creation and operations, when we are at a distance. What will emerge as new technology standards/capabilities?
- Is this a dress rehearsal for an altered future? (Yes!) What will emerge? If what we're seeing is a level of unsurpassed cooperation and collaboration, then what might be possible for us as we enter this new reality—for instance, on global climate change?
- Are we having to come to terms with the viability of our organizations? Perhaps we're having to honor an overriding need to institutionally "step out of line" because others are better equipped?
- From an indigenous perspective, man has lost his ability to live and understand and be in relationship with the natural environment. The pandemic, climate change, the value system underpinning capitalism, are about extraction—excess, wasting resources—which surfaces questions about our espoused values and quality of life. What is the type of life we *should* be thinking about and aspiring to *for everyone*? We may just be at the beginning of a true tipping point. We're at a point of needing a reset.
- The irony of this pandemic (a breathing disease) is that, because of the shelter at home directive, we're seeing clearer skies, hearing nature's call, in ways we may have never before. These are all signs for us to open our eyes and pay new attention.
- What and who is "essential" is being made very clear now, but is not properly rewarded/compensated. It's been obscene to see the pro athletes signing multi-million dollar contracts at the same time grocery store workers and health care aides are making sub-minimum wage.
- What is regenerative?--this applies to every system, product, energy source, construction project, technology, etc. that is created from this point on. The "pirate" culture will no longer stand. What determines a regenerative system? Is it essential? Is it sustainable? Is it just?

Emerging Direction and Leadership Considerations

Leaders are embracing the power of questions—often reframing them on the fly. [Whitney and Trosten-Bloom](#) remind us that, “Inquiry is the most direct, simplest, and fastest way to foster engagement and generate responsibility for the future. Asking a question is an act of engagement.”

Listening to people’s ideas and opinions validates them, supporting the only real kind of empowerment—self-empowerment.

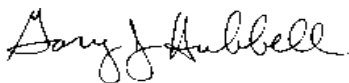
In the felt need to lurch forward with action, we are being called to embrace the long-overdue reflective pause (perhaps through conversations like this one) to illuminate the blind spots (unspoken assumptions) among our teams. If all our conversations, relationships, and—ultimately—collaborative action—stems from the questions we ask, now is the time to be sure we’re asking the right ones.

Questions of strategy follow mindset shifts from “me” to “we” - and curiosity about the possibilities at the intersections.

Additional Resources

1. McKinsey’s [Getting Ahead of the Next Stage of the Coronavirus Crisis](#)
2. McKinsey’s [A leader’s guide: Communicating with teams, stakeholders, and communities during COVID-19](#)
3. Bain & Company’s [A CEO Plan for Coronavirus: Actions You Can Take Now](#)
4. Deloitte’s [The World Remade by COVID-19: Scenarios for Resilient Leaders](#)
5. USA Today’s [How Experts See the World After Coronavirus](#)
6. McKinsey’s [COVID-19: Implications for Business](#)
7. McKinsey’s [How to rebuild and reimagine jobs amid the coronavirus crisis](#)
8. Otto Scharmer’s [A New Superpower in the Making: Awareness-Based Collective Action](#)

Thanks for all you’re doing in service of a new, better future that is trying to emerge.



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