

Powerful questioning

How a question is worded directly affects the answer you get and can make a big difference to the quality and usefulness of information you gather. There are three key considerations when framing any question but particularly powerful ones.

1. Construction – Most of us are familiar with the concept of closed questions and open ended questions. Closed questions are most likely to get a simple yes or no answer. Often these start Did you...? , Can you...? Have you...? Will you...? An open-ended question should achieve a more detailed answer. These ask for the who, what, where, when, and how.

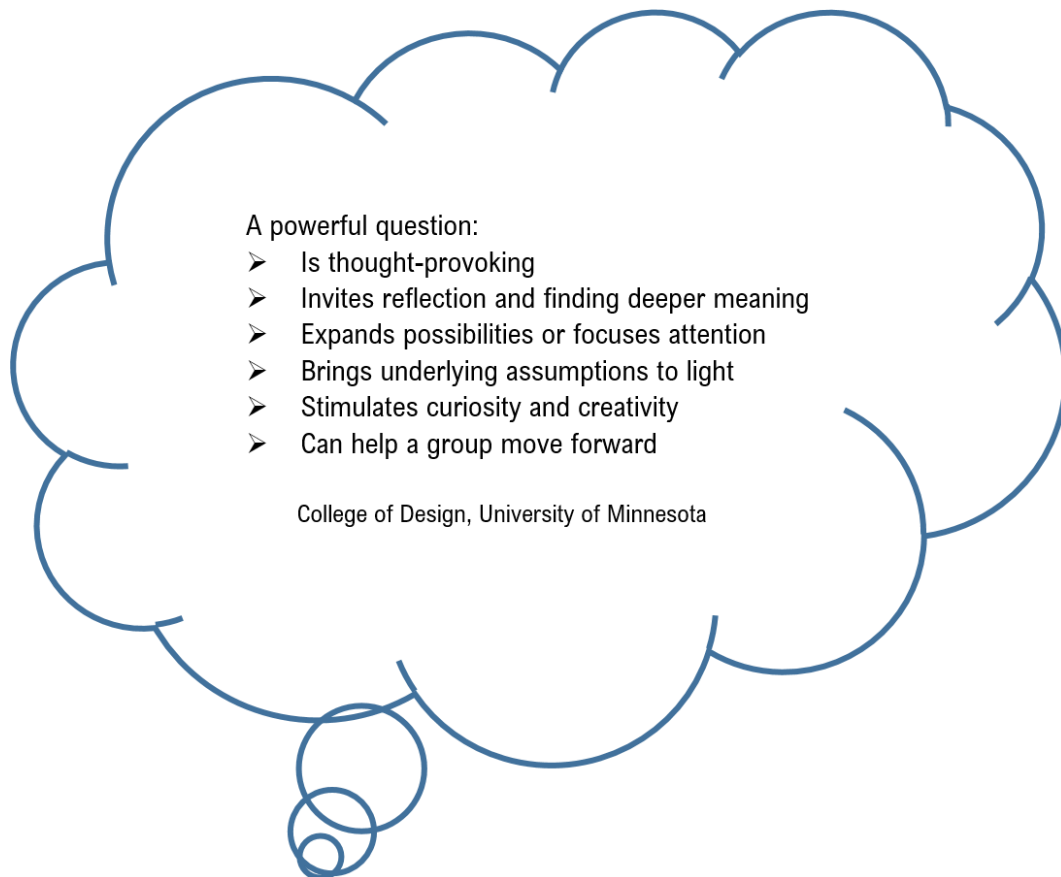
The diagram below provides an illustration of how to construct your questions in order to make them more powerful.



* Take care when using why questions – these can put people on the defensive and make them feel they need to justify themselves e.g. asking ‘Why have you contacted us?’ or ‘Why can’t you make your own meals?’ as opposed to asking ‘What was the reason for your contact?’ or ‘How are you managing with making meals?’

2. Scope— It is really important to think about what it is you need to know and the extent of the information you want to gather so that you can make sure the wording of a question is appropriate. For example; What would support you? What would support your family? What would support the community?
3. Assumptions – it is difficult to avoid including assumptions in questions to some extent. However, it is really important to minimise this and ensure questions are not ‘leading’ the person to, or away from, a particular answer. Assumptions can also narrow discussion, introduce bias, presuppose error or seek to allocate blame causing people to become defensive. A simple example might be asking “What has happened?” as opposed to “What has gone wrong?”

Whilst you can argue that all questions have some power, in that they elicit a certain amount of information, some are more powerful than others. So what makes a question a powerful question?



Think about the following series of questions and the differences in the type of information they allow you to collect.

1. Have you eaten lunch today?
2. When do you normally have lunch?
3. What is your favourite thing to have for lunch?
4. How would it feel not to be able to have lunch because you have no money for food?

When asking powerful questions be prepared for the person to potentially be 'stopped in their tracks'. As the purpose of powerful questions is to make people think and reflect there is likely to be a pause. Listen and give them time to think through their feelings about why the question has triggers and to frame their response. Avoid jumping in to try and fill the void or assuming that the person didn't understand the question and repeating it or rephrasing it. (Kimsey-House H, Kimsey-House K, Sandhal P, and Whitworth L (2012) *Changing Business Transforming Lives* – 3rd Ed. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing)

Here are some example powerful questions:

- What would success look like; i.e. what measurable outcomes are we seeking for this adult or family?

- What do I know from research is most likely to work for someone in this situation?
- What have I learned from previous experiences in similar cases?
- What evidence do we have about what people want or find helpful in these situations?
- What impact can I expect the locally available interventions to have?
- Which of the alternative courses of action is likely to be more effective, and how do you know? (be wary of making assumption about what outcomes people would have and pre-empting support packages).

(Adapted from RIPFA Supervision Workshop)

Designing a powerful question

Think about a case you have been working on where you feel you are not getting engagement from or with the person or their support network. Perhaps where you feel they are in denial of their situation, needs or where their aspirations are not realistic.

Construct three powerful questions using the tool above that you could use to:

- Focus attention
- Promote further insight
- Create forward movement.

Asking Powerful Questions

This exercise can be done in groups or pairs. One person identifies a dilemma they have, either at work or in their personal life and spends 5 minutes explaining this to the other person or group.

The next step is to spend ten minutes having a conversation about the dilemma. The person with the dilemma responds to questions from the other person or the group. However, the questions must only be powerful questions!

The other person or group must not:

- Make statements
- Summarise what has been said
- Offer personal experiences or say how things would feel for them
- Give advice or solutions.

If doing the exercise as a group, it may be helpful to nominate a facilitator to time keep and ensure only powerful questions are asked.

Following the ten minute exercises reflect on:

- a) How it felt to be asked powerful questions?
- b) How it felt to only ask powerful questions?

References and further reading

College of Design, University of Minnesota (Undated) *Appreciative Inquiry Asking Powerful Questions* [Accessible online at <https://design.umn.edu/about/intranet/documents/AppreciativeInquiry-Asking%20Powerful%20Questions.pdf>. Accessed 03/06/2016]

Kimsey-House H, Kimsey-House K, Sandhal P, and Whitworth L (2012) *Changing Business Transforming Lives – 3rd Ed.* London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.