



Seeing tomorrow's ideas...Today

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## Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

Looking for an answer to a tough challenge you are facing? Need to shake people out of their usual ways of thinking? Want to unlock your team's creativity? Read below to learn more about how to unlock innovation through powerful questions.

### Unlock Innovation through Powerful Questions

*"The important thing is to never stop questioning." - Albert Einstein*

Today's challenging environment requires leaders to engage people's best thinking about complex issues without easy answers. Solutions to tough challenges start with powerful questions. A powerful question can shake people out of their stale ways of thinking and have them critically reflect on faulty assumptions. The purpose of a powerful question is to get clarity or produce action around a challenge not to provide the "right" answer. So what are powerful questions?

Powerful questions are questions that are thought provoking. They are open-ended questions that cause the person to stop and think before responding; they typically start with "what" or "how". It is recommended to avoid "why" questions since they tend to invite a long account about the past, rather than possibilities for the future. The most powerful questions...

- Stimulate reflective thinking
- Challenge assumptions
- Are thought-provoking
- Generate energy and a vector to explore
- Channel inquiry, promises insight
- Are broad and enduring
- Touch deeper meaning
- Evoke more questions
- Are short, usually seven words or less

Any question that you ask that stimulates, inspires and provokes creativity, insight, learning or problem solving is a "powerful question." Good leaders know that it is best not to give people the answers but to challenge them to reflect on evocative questions so that they can find the best answers on their own.

Try this out:

1. Pick a powerful question you'd like yourself or your team to reflect on. Some examples include:
  - Powerful questions for focusing attention include:
    - What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of (your situation)?
    - What's important to you about (your situation) and why do you care?
    - What opportunities do you see in (your situation)?
  - Powerful questions for connecting ideas and finding deeper insight include:
    - What's emerging here for you? What new connections are you making?
    - What's been your/our major learning, insight, or discovery so far?
    - What's the next level of thinking we need to do?
  - Powerful questions that create forward movement include:
    - What is holding us back the most right now from moving forward?
    - What could happen that would enable you/us to feel fully engaged and energized about (your situation)?
    - If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we take?
  - Powerful questions for yourself include:
    - What do I want right now?
    - Is saying this getting me closer to what I want?
    - Is what I'm doing working?
2. Be willing to be open to all ideas/thoughts that come up and to discuss those issues that may be sensitive or "undiscussible". If necessary have an objective person facilitate the discussion.
3. Realize that fostering critical reflection is one of the most important things a leader can do and that it may take time to for your team to feel comfortable using and responding to powerful questions.

### What's the Bottom line

"Powerful questions result in powerful answers (Grace McGartland, from Thunderbolt Thinking)." They can be a powerful vehicle to unlocking innovation in your organization.

Adapted from: Vogt, E., Brown, J. and Issacs, D. *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation and Action*, 2003 and Vogt, E. *The Art and Architecture of Powerful questions* (<http://www.javeriana.edu.co/decisiones/PowerfulQuestions.PDF>).



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If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at [jlaws@foursightconsulting.com](mailto:jlaws@foursightconsulting.com).

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