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Focus

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Smart Questions

A smart question is a query phrased to gain *appropriate* knowledge and wisdom.

You get better answers when you ask smart questions because they help you zero-in on important issues. Moreover, thoughtful (as opposed to habitual or reflexive) questions require smart answers. The researchers Gerald Nadler and William Chandon had this to say about thoughtful inquiries:

Smart questioning creates mindfulness. Mindful questions develop the mind-set that innovation and creativity can be continuing parts of an organization's culture. They motivate ongoing change and arouse the curiosity of people to seek out what's new.

I recommend a three-stage approach to using the smart question approach, beginning with lead-in questions to help frame the issues and ending with high-gain questions to identify specific opportunities for action.

Stage 1 – Lead-in Questions

Lead-in questions begin the exploration of what lies beneath the obvious. Good questioners and problem-solvers begin with the surface layer but continue to probe deeper. This is analogous to peeling an onion. Good lead-in questions begin with:

- Describe your experience with ...
- Where do you see ...
- What's most important to you about ...

The initial line of questioning should be expansive and holistic, not limiting (the focus comes in Stage 3). Good holistic questioners seek to understand within a broad context, are concerned about people, tolerate ambiguity, and incorporate many ideas into their thinking.

Stage 2 – Follow-up Questions

Answers to lead-in questions provide insight that guides more probing questions, like:

- Exactly how will you do that?
- How could you take advantage of that opportunity?
- How will your toughest competitor react to that?

Stage 3 – High-gain Questions

Using a smart question to set up a "high-gain" question further increases the value of the answers you receive. At this stage you need focus to reveal information that leads to a clear understanding so that

- The actual (underlying, directly causative, real, etc.) problem may be solved, or

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- The actual (underlying, directly causative, real, etc.) problem may be solved, or

- A specific course of action can be undertaken to get to the desired end result. It's the "clear understanding" that's important here. Fuzzy or incomplete understanding, often caused by limiting the scope of inquiry, leads to useless work, frustrated people, and a "solution" that either doesn't work or becomes ineffective as time passes. Who needs that?

For example, "What do you like best about Acme Company?" is a high-gain question because the answer specifically identifies a competitive strength. An even more focused question might be, "On a scale of 1 to 10, rate your satisfaction with the services you receive from Acme Company." Be careful in using this more focused question because it requires more effort to answer, and could be viewed as overly intrusive without the proper lead-in and set up discussions.

I'll summarize with another quote from Nadler and Chandon.
"Briefly, then, smart questions

- Stimulate thinking,
- Require smart answers,
- Provide purposeful information,
- Get people to be open and empower themselves,
- Let you lead the process, and
- Make you be a good listener and coach for others."

Tom Wagner

We help clarify options so our clients
identify the Right Questions
and solve the Right Problems.

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