

# The Humble Question: Panacea for the Status Quo

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In my role as a coach, questions help me to understand why people behave as they do, to identify desired outcomes, and to inspire people to consider new possibilities. It is the tool of tools, a behavior unto itself that can widen horizons like a fish-eye lens, then narrow them with surgical precision. I have witnessed profound epiphanies triggered by a single question. My daily quest is to witness the next one.

Great questions are inherently honest and free of judgement, opinion, and emotion. They are a gauntlet across the cheek and dare to be answered. As such they come with the requisite sting of forced introspection. But with that sting comes the catharsis of casting out the demons of your own assumptions. They are open-ended and give the gentlest soul a chance to sing. They open up a world of possibilities and bestow permission.

Poor questions manipulate people. They ask about the hypothetical, and get hypothetical answers as a result. They're leading, and get exactly what they wanted to hear. They're loaded and bully people into agreement. They're closed-ended and afraid of an unexpected answer. They narrow opportunities and imply prejudice. They are the worst kind of maudlin theatre; written to indulge the actors, but leaving the audience longing for meaning and demanding a refund.

Getting to the root of why people behave as they do in our dynamic world requires a curious mind that reflexively asks questions when faced with ambiguity. Once, I asked a project team about the root cause of their customer's problem. Their response was something that sounded more like a symptom than a cause. I asked, "why?" several more times, with answers that got closer and closer to a root cause. Finally, I asked, "Solving which problem will provide your customer with lasting value?" In that moment, they courageously shifted their focus. Solving for the symptom was quick and easy. Solving the root cause problem was harder and uncomfortable. But it was a path that truly inspired the team and led to a lasting solution that improved the lives of their customers.

My favorite questions provoke action: "What is the customer outcome that you are trying to solve for?", "How could you test that assumption?", and "What evidence do you have?". Questions like these often frustrate people because, to answer them, they will have to go about their work from a different angle. That frustration melts away when their work de-risks the path forward with behavioral evidence. For most, there's no going back to waterfall work.

Critics say that all these questions slow down their work. But if the work lacks evidence, what are you working toward? What questions could have saved Kodak? Blockbuster? Sears? Or a project you're working on right now?

Questions are powerful tools of discovery and growth; and drivers of creativity and impact in the lives of others. Today, I challenge you to ask a question in a situation where you might be tempted to state a personal opinion or lean on an assumption.

