

What is the Question?

When uncertain, define an answerable question. Then answer it and take action.

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Introduction

When faced with ambiguity and uncertainty, we seek solid ground for making decisions. For novel and contentious issues, following our “gut” or simple frameworks may prove insufficient. What can we do to filter distraction and organize thinking in ways that move us forward?

In difficult situations, I often start by clearly defining the question. Good questions clarify our context, risks and options. Through shaping “positive” questions we build a process for developing new information and next steps. These questions help us distinguish the important, relevant and actionable from the unsubstantiated and uncontrollable, while balancing the desire for insight with the need for action.

As a first step, I turn to questions such as:

- *What is the question? What is the issue?* Focusing the group on defining the question clears a path for identifying the root cause of a situation.
- *What is the objective or desired outcome?* Begin with the end in mind. Understand how the current issue affects our direction and goals.
- *How do we know this?* Understanding the source of information, and whether something is accepted fact or an uncorroborated assertion, offers context and opportunity to clarify. Test if the view is consistent with experience and observation.

Example: Business Planning

Recessions and pandemics affect employees, businesses and families. People are anxious and unmoored. We have no idea what the next day brings. And no matter how good our strategy or financing or capabilities, we have an opaque view of policy, markets and competitors. This is uncertainty defined.

In early 2020, our management team focused on defining questions to help us prioritize. We asked, “**how do we best position our business today to survive in 2020 and prosper in 2021 given unreliable information on policy and markets?**” This focused our minds and resources on (1) taking care of our team, clients and cash flow and then (2) adjusting spend and offerings strategically for next year. Everything else: set it aside.

Ballooning corporate and public debt entered our discussions, but everything beyond our own balance sheet was outside of our control. While immigration and trade policies affected our industry and clients, we dealt with our own hiring and training plans to address the immediate need of supporting clients.

Example: Public Policy

Nobody chose COVID-19, but it did and does present public policy choices. Consider our collective response on behalf of school age children and their teachers. What is the question? In mid-2020, when most parents and businesses wanted the stability and benefits of safe in-person instruction, the question seemed to be, “**How do we safely open schools in a way that keeps them safe and open?**”

Opening a school is easy: unlock the doors and turn on the lights. Keeping a school open offers a bigger challenge when faced with a spreading coronavirus. Observation and experience highlight the risks. Of all the places where anyone might sit near others for more than 15 minutes, classrooms rank high. Building design and square footage are constraining factors for social distancing. Schools lack the space to keep students six feet apart all day. They were not designed for this.

For a typical school science project, we might review what we know: coronavirus “eruptions” often occur after bringing together big groups for long periods of time. For each positive COVID case, the U.S. likely has five to ten undetected. Masks reduce spread by 70% plus. Using masks effectively offsets limited distancing and improves the chances of keeping schools open. Big upside; low downside.

Complication: Agree on the Question

Good questions consolidate effort around controllables and how we manage them. Then we look in the mirror and ask, “Do we have the courage and skills to make that change?”

Years ago, a forester taught me that “problems are technical, solutions are practical, and decisions are political.” The question on masks followed this pattern.

- Problem: cannot space students out per social distancing guidelines.
- Solution: wear masks.
- Decision: varied locally based on ideas and ideologies unrelated to the problem.

While an objectionable inconvenience to some, requiring the use of face masks felt like a no-brainer for public health. And it helped answer, “How do we safely open schools in a way that keeps them safe and open?” However, the heat and resistance to this solution showed how others saw different problems and preferred different questions.

Conclusion

What is the question we are trying to answer? To engage respectfully with the aim of directly understanding a situation and finding a better path forward, start by working together to phrase positive, clear questions. Developing these questions up front offers singular opportunities for practical consensus and leveraging urgency.

Good questions do not guarantee insight or agreement or compromise; rather, they focus the mind on solutions and the relevant “brutal facts,” and away from the personal.¹ This provides a path for working through disagreements and making decisions, which positions us and our teams for action and progress.

¹ My Dad, a Vietnam Veteran, often quotes the Jim Collins story from “Good to Great” about Admiral Stockdale, who survived as a POW in Vietnam. He observed the importance of acknowledging “the brutal facts” in order to maintain a positive expectation for a better future and outcome.

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