



QUESTIONATING

By Corinne Miller

What's your favorite question?

Over the years we've found that the most popular answers to this question are "why," "how," and "why not" in that order. A trend we've also observed is that those who ask "why" are typically more holistic or whole-brained thinkers, those who ask "how" are typically more box thinkers, and those who ask "why not" are typically the challenging thinkers. All types, of course, are equally valuable and equally required for innovation!

Questions have been the enablers of innovation for centuries. As Albert Einstein said, "To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle requires creative imagination and marks real advances in science." Dr Ralph Gerard, a medical innovator, said "Reason can answer questions, but imagination has to ask them."

Questions stimulate the brain! Questions use verbs and words that activate key areas of the brain that, in turn, increase the volume and variety of questions. The more questions, the more creativity and innovation. We like to say that questions open the innovation pipeline.

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Did you hear? As we age, we disengage... from asking questions. Questions decrease as aging increases. Think about it. Why does the typical 5-year old ask about 65 questions a day, while the typical 40-something asks only about 6 questions a day? Why is it that the older we get, the fewer questions we ask? We've found that the most popular answers to this question have been: asking a question makes one look stupid; asking a question is a sign of weakness; and people think they know the answer so they don't feel the need to ask.

What a sad state that we have created a business culture where asking questions is seen as a weakness. Shouldn't it be the opposite, where not asking questions is a weakness?

How can we *change this*?

We can build on a currently existing strength in our business culture to change this weakness. What is that strength? Being process or procedure oriented. Why not build questioning into the business process as a standard and expected step? Then, not questioning might be seen as “not following the process,” not questioning would be seen as a weakness. That just might give us some momentum for a 180 degree turn!

How do we build Questioning into a process?

We build it through the art and science of *Questionating*. Questionating is a process to develop, use and improve *QuestionBanks*. QuestionBanks are organized collections of thought-provoking questions, conveying expert—as well as diverse—thinking on a particular topic to inspire innovative solutions. QuestionBanks can be used anywhere decisions need to be made: new products and services, leadership, meeting and event planning, sales and marketing, strategic planning, etc.

Imagine being at a key decision point in your business process. A decision, goal, problem or challenge that might set significant direction for your organization, enable funding, or expend valuable resources. Decisions can be as broadly scoped as “What new products should we introduce into our portfolio this year?” or more specifically targeted such as “What productivity improvements can we make to our xyz manufacturing line?”

Now imagine being able to make decisions by tapping into the best thinking on the topic right at your fingertips. Pull out a QuestionBank that was previously created from the thinking of experts and other smart people in the organization, external experts, historical lessons, and non-experts who are creative thinkers. This QuestionBank would be on the decision topic, have a series of thought-provoking questions to examine different perspectives, and stretch and challenge thinking.

If the use of such a QuestionBank was a standard and integrated part of the decision making process, asking questions would be seen as the norm. And perhaps asking great questions would be seen as a strength! This small but mighty change to our existing processes could change the culture, change the quality of our decisions, leverage our intellectual capital as an international community, and drive innovation to new heights. It doesn't require significant investment or major organizational changes—in fact, it leverages what already exists. It just requires someone to take it on, get it done, and drive it through.

DEVELOPING QUESTIONBANKS

There are 4 steps to developing a QuestionBank: Identify Question Sources, Collect Questions, Organize Questions, and Refine Questions.

- 1 Identifying.** The sources for questions already exist all around us. They include materials, people and websites. Think about all the PowerPoint presentations, binders, books and book summaries, white papers, journals, brochures, images, archives, competitive intelligence, market research, technical documents, and project plans that are within easy reach. Think about all the subject matter experts, industry leaders, competitors, suppliers, customers, sponsors, outsiders, speakers, field staff, teachers, and even family members that already ask questions about your workplace. With a little imagination, the sources for questions are nearly endless.
- 2 Collecting.** Questions can be collected from people. This can be done simply through email, surveys, interviews, worksheets, and online discussions. An email sent out to 30 people that asks “What questions should be asked before taking on a new project?” can prove to be extremely powerful when those 30 people are seasoned program managers.

Questions should definitely be collected at meetings. When groups of employees meet, that typically represents a significant cost to the organization. Why not expand the return on investment of that already sunk meeting cost by collecting questions, or even utilizing existing QuestionBanks, for idea generation? The intellectual capital that can be collected from such an event and incorporated into a QuestionBank could return millions to the organization if used properly.

Meetings are also prime places to start the use of QuestionBanks. Since many meetings are for the purpose of decision making, questions can be collected ahead of time to plan the meeting, used during it to increase contribution and ideas, and used afterwards to drive further dialogue and progress.

A helpful question-collecting *question* is “what are all the questions that people might answer in order to address the company’s goals, challenges or problems?” Note the use of the term “people.” Using “people” versus “you” or “we” expands the thought process to include all types of people. Perhaps it is “you” or “we,” but it can also be our competitors, our suppliers, our customers, other’s customers, academics, industry leaders, etc.

3 Organizing. Once you have a plethora of questions for your QuestionBank, you’ll want to organize them to make the QuestionBank useful and efficient.

Store your questions in Word or Excel so you can manage and easily share them. Keep in mind that it is typical that right-brainers tend more towards the use of Word and left-brainers tend more towards Excel. If you’re using Word, be sure to take advantage of the outline feature which will allow you to collapse or expand your QuestionBank, increasing its ease of use.

Review the specific decision topic, problem, goal or challenge that your QuestionBank is to address. It’s important to keep the focus in mind because there will inevitably be questions you have collected that are outside the focus area. Keeping the QuestionBank as laser focused as possible will make it more efficient.

The questions will need to fall into some sort of category, subject, or sub-topic. If the QuestionBank is on a topic that already has an industry standard categorization scheme, then use that. For example, QuestionBanks on project management might be categorized using the elements of the Project Management Book of Knowledge (PMBOK). If an industry or organizational standard does not exist, look for patterns and sub-topics that naturally fallout from the questions.

Once questions are organized by category, duplicates can be removed. Exercise care in removing duplicates, as what you think may be a duplicate could actually be another perspective. It’s helpful to have a couple of sets of eyes when determining duplicates.

You may wind up with a significant number of questions. Sometimes it will not be possible to use them all, and in fact, too many may appear overwhelming and unusable. As such, prioritize the most important questions and annotate them accordingly. You can always change the priority as you use them and learn what works best.

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- 4 **Refining.** Despite the old adage that there is no such thing as a bad question, not all questions are good questions. Thus, you'll need to refine the wording of the questions in your QuestionBank to insure they are open-ended, not easy to answer, use enabling words, are provocative, brief and concise, grammatically correct, and use verbs that inspire action.

An example of an enabling word is the use of "should" in place of "can." When a question uses the word "can," it typically draws thoughts about what is possible in the current state. When a question uses the word "should," it typically draws thoughts about what is possible in a future state. Using "should" expands thinking beyond the current capabilities.

Verbs that inspire action include the verbs ending with “ate.” There are literally thousands of “ate” words to choose from in the English language!

Two of the most provocative questions might be:

“What or how might people change or improve _____ to _____?”

and,

“What new or different ideas might change or improve _____?”

Of course, Rudyard Kipling’s quote is always a good one to keep in mind when refining questions. “I keep six honest serving-men. They taught me all I knew; their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who.” A good QuestionBank contains a mix of these question types.

USING QUESTIONBANKS

QuestionBanks gain their power, impact, and value from use. QuestionBanks can be used by individuals as well as teams, by leaders and managers as well as practitioners, virtually as well as physically.

When you start the use of QuestionBanks, pick a decision topic, a challenge, goal or problem that will have immediate impact in the organization. Any business area is appropriate, from product development to marketing and sales—from promotion, strategic planning, customer service, outsourcing, meeting and events to manufacturing, business operations, space design, human resources and beyond.

Another strength of QuestionBanks is that they capture the intellectual capital of America's aging workforce. While nothing replaces the worker themselves, a QuestionBank left behind that captures their best thinking can be a powerful legacy and stepping stone for those who need to follow.

Think about how to measure the use of your QuestionBanks. It's helpful to track the number of uses, but even more powerful to track the users' perception of the value. One or two questions asked of participants right after use can be recorded. Identifying a couple of participants who are willing to report back after a milestone or time period on how the results drove additional value is also helpful.

IMPROVING QUESTIONBANKS

The more a QuestionBank is used, the better it will become. People will naturally want to improve the questions and the wording. Having an owner for each QuestionBank is important so that someone is accountable for periodic improvements and maintenance. Ownership should be positioned as a highly responsible and honored roll in the organization. After all, the return from the QuestionBank could be significant to the organization's success!

QUESTIONBANKS ARE PROVEN.

At SolutionPeople, our clients have used QuestionBanks for over 15 years with over 10,000 questions leading to 3,000,000 ideas that drove millions in innovation. We've found that more and better questions equal more and better solutions.

A CALL TO QUESTION!

Isn't it alarming that most business people think asking questions is a sign of weakness? Let's change this! Let's harness the unbelievable intellectual capital we have, leverage what already exists, and drive thinking, decision making, and goal achievement to a new level with a small and mighty tool—the integration of QuestionBanks into our processes!

Are you powered by questions? Where might you use QuestionBanks today to improve your business results? Imagine the possibilities. 📄

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Corinne Miller is Founder & Principal Consultant of InnovatingResults!, where she consults on innovation, product development, and learning & development. Corinne is also *Chief Questionator* at [SolutionPeople](#). She has 30 years of extensive experience and results across large-scale, cross-functional, global, complex environments spanning engineering, new product development, program management, business operations, quality, innovation, and learning & development. Corinne has held leadership positions at Rockwell International, Northrop Defense Systems, TRW and Motorola.

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