The Art of the Question

There are two basic questions types:

Closed ended - used to gather data, answer simple questions, closes off discussion, usually begins with Is, Can, How many, or Does.

Open ended – is used to stimulate thinking, requires more than a “yes” or “no” answer, usually begins with What, How, When, or Why

Strategic Questions are always open ended questions.

General thoughts about designing Strategic Questions for facilitated discussions:

- Base questions on the overall goal or purpose of the event. In other words, begin with the end in mind. What do you hope to discover - - then design questions that will uncover the desired information.
- Be cautious of asking too specific of question. One that is too narrow, or misleading, or states a problem that may not really be the root cause of the situation being discovered.
- Preparing questions beforehand is a must! However, in rare cases you may not be able to use them.
- Note that tension can form if there is too much structure or too little. A good question allows for lively, thought provoking discussion. It neither stifles creativity nor allows participants to wonder aimlessly in wasted discussion.
- Ideally, participants are asking each other good questions by the end of the discussion.

Characteristics of well-designed Strategic Questions:

- A well designed Strategic Question creates motion in the conversation verses killing the conversation or causes people to shut down or argue.
- A well designed Strategic Question fosters options and possibilities.
  - They get the participants to consider a variety of alternatives, but do not point to or suggest a single outcome or solution.
  - They void “yes” or “no” answers.
- A well designed Strategic Question avoids “Why” questions. We are not interested in the cause but rather the solution or next steps. The hidden idea is that the solution will address the cause or the “why” of the situation.
A well designed Strategic Question is empowering! Asking empowering questions is a way to motivate people and to let them know that you believe in them and makes the assumption that some sort of positive change can happen.

A well designed Strategic Question can sometimes ask the unaskable question.

**Well Designed Strategic Questions Should:**

- **Discover where participants’ interests and energy to create change is focused**
  Pay attention to the conversations to figure out what participants want to discuss. For example: “What are you most concerned about in your community?”

- **Clarify what is known**
  Try to draw out “facts” and verify or validate opinions. For example: “What effects of this situation have you noticed?”

- **Clarify what is felt**
  Recognize the emotions and the history of the situation.

- **Identify ideals, dreams and values**
  Giving the group permission to think big can bring about otherwise undiscovered solutions for once thought wicked problems. For example: “What is your vision for this situation?” (Notice we did not label it a “problem” but rather a “situation” as defining it as a problem may stifle creativity or be misleading to those that do not view is as such.)

- **Evoke personal involvement or call to action**
  The ultimate goal of a facilitated discussion is to define what “we” can do collectively about the situation at hand. Individually, that means finding a piece of the cause and taking it up to create change. For example: “What can I do in my community based on my beliefs to help address this issue?”

- **Get something started**
  A call to action that each member of the process can rally behind and fully support. For example: “What will it take to bring the current situation towards the ideal?”
Some do’s and don’ts of Strategic Questions;

Do’s

Ask clear, concise questions covering a single issue.
Ask challenging questions that will stimulate thought.
Ask reasonable questions based on what people know.
Ask honest and relevant questions.

Don’ts

Ask rambling, ambiguous questions that cover multiple issues.
Ask questions that don’t provide an opportunity for thought.
Ask questions that most people cannot answer
Ask trick questions designed to fool them.

A final word about Strategic Questioning formats

When selecting questions to ask, there is a broad range to choose from. It is important to understand how each of these question formats achieves a slightly different outcome.

Fact-Finding Questions – are targeted at verifiable data such as who, what, when, where, and how much. Use them to gather information about the current situation.

Feeling-Finding Questions – ask for subjective information that gets at the participants’ opinions, feelings, values, and beliefs. They help you understand views and they contain words like think or feel.

Tell-me-more Questions- can help you find out more about what the participants are saying. They encourage the speaker to provide more details.

Best/Least Questions – help you understand potential opportunities in the present situation. They let you test for the out limits of participants wants and needs.

Third Party Questions – help uncover thoughts in an indirect manner. They’re designed to help people express sensitive information.

“Magic Wand” Questions - let you explore people’s true desires. Also known as “crystal ball” questions, these are useful in temporarily removing obstacles from a person’s mind.
References


*Public Issues Facilitation Workshop Training Manual*, ICDD, Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS. March 4-6, 2013. Pg. 121-122