

~ Thinking Skills and Actions ~

Strategic Questioning

Courtesy of Fran Peavey

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A STRATEGIC QUESTION IS A SPECIAL TYPE OF QUESTION

- ❖ Questioning is a basic tool for rebellion. It breaks open the stagnant hardened shells of the present, revealing ambiguity and opening up fresh options to be explored.
- ❖ Questioning reveals the profound uncertainty that is imbedded in all reality beyond the facades of confidence and sureness. It takes this uncertainty towards growth and new possibilities.
- ❖ Questioning can change your entire life. It can uncover hidden power and stifled dreams inside of you... things you may have denied for many years.
- ❖ Questioning can change institutions and entire cultures. It can empower people to create strategies for change.
- ❖ Asking a question that leads to a strategy for action is a powerful contribution to resolving any problem.
- ❖ Asking questions that open up more options can lead to many unexpected solutions. Asking questions that help adversaries shift from stuck positions on an issue can lead to acts of healing and reconciliation.
- ❖ Asking questions that are unaskable in our culture at the moment can lead to the transformation of our culture and its institutions.
- ❖ Asking questions and listening for the strategies and ideas embedded in people's own answers can be the greatest service a social change worker can give to a particular issue.
- ❖ Strategic questioning is the skill of asking the questions that will make a difference. It is a powerful and exciting tool for social and personal change. It is a significant service to any issue because it helps local strategies for change to emerge.
- ❖ Strategic questioning involves a special type of question and a special type of listening. Anyone can use strategic questions in their work, or in their personal lives to liberate friends, coworkers, political allies and adversaries, to create a path for change.
- ❖ Strategic questioning is a process that may change the listener as well as the person being questioned. When we open ourselves to another point of view, our own ideas will have to shift to take into account new information, new possibilities, and new strategies for resolving problems. What would our world be like if every time we were listening to a gripe session, someone would ask, "I wonder what we can do to change that situation?" and then listened carefully for the answers to emerge and helped that group to begin to work for change? What would it be like for you to do that in your work, family or social context? Your attention and context might shift from a passive to an active one. You could become a creator, rather than a receiver, of solutions. This shift in perspective is one of the key things that people need in our world just now. And the skill of asking strategic questions is a powerful contribution to making such a shift.

- ❖ Were you ever taught how to ask questions? Were you ever encouraged to ask questions where the answers are not already known? Have you ever been taught about asking questions that will really make a difference? Most of us who were brought up in traditional families or in a traditional education system were not. Traditional schooling was based on asking questions to which the answers were already known: How many wives did Henry the Eighth have? What colour is that car? What is four times five? We learned that questions have finite and "correct" answers, and there is usually one answer for each question. The wrong answer is punished with a bad grade. The landscape of learning was divided into "right" and "wrong" answers to questions. Questions divided into those which made the "authority" comfortable (the ones where he knew the answer) and those not-OK questions (those which exposed the authority's ignorance or culpability).

Learning how to ask strategic questions is a path of transforming passive and fearful inquiry into the world into a dynamic exploration of the information around us and the solutions we need. We can create answers to almost any problem.

- ❖ A strategic question creates motion.
- ❖ A strategic question creates options
- ❖ A strategic question avoids "Why".
- ❖ A strategic question avoids "Yes or No" answers
- ❖ A strategic question is empowering
- ❖ A strategic question asks the unaskable questions
- ❖ A strategic question is a simple sentence

Suspension of Judgement.

An important skill to develop is the suspension of judgement. Simon Majuro (1988)¹ claims it is far more difficult than it sounds, especially in response to ideas that may seem to be eccentric or highly unusual. Often, the first response is to flood the creator with reasons as to why they won't work.

Truly creative people do not fall into this trap. They intuitively know that the magic of the creative process can be damaged or even destroyed if an idea is 'placed in the dock' too early. They understand that every idea is innocent until the contrary is proved. They also know that sometimes half-baked ideas, the intermediate impossibles, can be the source of dramatic innovations. Consequently, instead of raising obstacles they look for positive angles that can save each idea from premature rejection.

¹ Majuro, Simon (1988); *The Creative Gap: Managing Ideas for Profit*; Longman, London