

ABOUT ONIONS AND QUESTIONS

When a team experiences Action Learning through a first discovery session, the questions they ask can be a bit haphazard. It sometimes feels like there is a competition for asking as many questions as possible. This can frustrate the problem presenter who might think that this “great tool” that would help with the problem feels more like an inquisition ! And indeed, not all questions are created equal. Team members do notice during the session what questions are really powerful and helped the problem presenter, and which ones were not really helping that much. So after debriefing about what they learned about asking questions, they sometimes ask me “But how should we ask more of these great questions ?”.

Asking questions that make people think



I prefer to avoid any attempt to “teach” which questions are great and which questions are average. After all, it is the person who receives the question who determines whether that question helped to open up new thoughts, or whether it felt more like a burden to answer. There is no such thing as “the one great question” that works in any situation !



I try to explain that it is not really a matter of great questions versus average ones, but more about the extent to which the questions help the problem presenter think. And I use the metaphor of an onion (see the picture) before we start the session. I explain that there is no harm in asking the questions that are at the level of the outer peel of the onion. When exploring a new issue, team members need to get basic information. And I explain that these questions are useful for the team members to start to know about the problem, but they will not really help the problem presenter develop new ideas. For new ideas to be explored, team members need to try and move “towards the center of the onion”.

And the team typically gets this concept very well. In a recent session, I intervened and asked the team what they thought about the kind of questions that were asked in the preceding 10 minutes. One team member replied “We are asking questions at peel of the onion !”. The team immediately picked this up and confirmed that they would have to try and move to the center of the onion if they wanted to help the problem presenter. A similar intervention when I feel a team is asking rather superficial questions is “Team, from the questions we have been asking so far, have you seen the problem presenter having to think a lot or not ?”. The metaphor of the onion comes up almost immediately.

Avoid to teach what a great question looks like. Invite the team to think about questions that help the problem presenter ... think !

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