

WHAT WAS YOUR QUESTION



I've been conducting an unscientific experiment when I present in different cities. The nature of the experiment is that I ask folks in the audience – Can you tell me what I should see while I'm in your city? I get answers along the lines of 'the zoo', the <fill in the blank> museum, the mall, a particular restaurant or monument.

Eventually, someone catches on and realizes that I did not ask 'What should I see while I am in your city?' I simply asked 'Can you tell me what I should see while I am in your city?' At this point I will typically get the response that I am seeking – YES!

Listen carefully to the conversations around you. Very rarely do people pose open ended questions. Yet almost always the answer is given as if an open question was asked. Additionally, they tend to add many unrelated, additional comments.

The challenge is two-fold – more often than not when we ask a closed question, we have a desire for an open answer. When I ask "Can you tell me what I should see while I'm in your city?", they understand that I want to see something while I am here or I wouldn't be asking. So, let's bypass that step and jump right to the assumed intent of my question. And finally, let's top it off with some other useful facts about this fair city.

If I really want to know what I should see – why don't I ask that? I suppose it's because before I can ask you what I should see I need to find out if you have the information. Yet if I were to ask – "What should I see?" You could just as easily respond with "I don't

know” if you didn’t have any suggestions. What I find more curious is how long an answer people can give to a closed question.



ACTION LEARNING QUESTIONS

As a Master Action Learning Coach, I hear many questions and I really listen to them. Since Action Learning only has two ground rules – 1) You can only make a statement in response to a question; and 2) the Action Learning Coach has the authority to intervene whenever there is the opportunity for learning. In explaining ground rule one, I’ll ask the participants to work very hard at just answering the question they are asked. They will agree to this request.

Interestingly, within the first couple minutes (if not with the first question) someone will ask a closed question and receive a verbose response. I’ll let the person talk a little before intervening with the question – “What question are you answering?” The response – “What he (or she) asked.” I’ll follow this with – “And what was that question?” The participant typically then answers with the question they thought they heard, not the one that was actually asked.

A sample of a typical conversation with the interventions follows:

Sam: Are 10 people involved in this project?

Chris: There’s the project manager, the program director, the

Me: Chris, what question are you answering?

Chris: The one Sam asked.

Me: Which was?

Chris: Who is on the project?

Me: Sam, what was your question?

Sam: Are there 10 people on the project?

Me: Chris, what's the answer to "Are there ...?"

Chris: Yes, but I thought the other information would be useful.

Me: If Sam, wants additional information, what will Sam do?

Chris: Sam will ask for it. But Sam may not know this is important.

Me: How can you find out if it's important to Sam?

Chris: Ask.

This kind of scenario takes place frequently in the first couple sessions that a new Action Learning team experiences. It takes lots of practice and lots of reminders from the coach before it becomes natural for the participants.

It's not to say that open questions are better. Open questions have a function as do closed questions. Open questions are useful when we are exploring and gathering lots of information. Closed questions are great when we are trying to narrow down the focus. In the previous example – the number of participants could have been a key element for determining the next questions. By asking the closed questions, we've narrowed down the scope of what we are looking at.

ANSWERING THE QUESTION

Many people have the tendency that Chris showed. Chris decided what would be useful to the other person. Chris's response is normal. Something is important to us – so we become intent on sharing it. We stop listening to the others in the group and start focusing on our own need; focusing on what we believe is best for the team. However, this lack of listening means we really don't care about the input from the other team members – we care much more showing off how much we know about the situation.

It also indicates we don't trust that the other members of the team are smart enough to ask the right question. When we get out of our own head and really listen, amazing things happen.

The first phase of an Action Learning session focuses on clarifying the problem. The tendency of most folks is to jump to a conclusion about the problem even before the problem presenter has finished presenting. To help people slow down a bit, I ask them to consider their cars for a moment. “Let’s assume it’s making a funky noise – kerchunk kerchunk kerchunk. You take it to the shop and walk up to the counter. You tell the man behind the counter – my car’s making this funky noise – kerchunk kerchunk kerchunk. He says – “LET’S PUT NEW TIRES ON IT!” What would your response be?”

We want our mechanic to understand what is really wrong with our car before we put any money into it. Yet in business we are more than willing to jump to solution without fully understanding the problem we are addressing. We have this sense that we have to be doing something to be productive at work – and taking time to understand the problem – slows us down entirely too much.

Once the team accepts the premise that we need to understand the problem first and questions will lead us to understanding, things start to move rapidly in Action Learning sessions. The team works at listening to each other – this includes answering the question that was asked – instead of just piling on more information that may or may not be relevant. A tremendous amount of time is lost in solving problems through discussing information that is not relevant to the actual problem at hand.



The Action Learning Coach uses a number of techniques for keeping the team focused. One of the key tools is through the use of questions and having the team work at answering the question they are asked. Action Learning teams discover the power of using open questions to gather information and closed to keep focused on the task at hand. They learn the power of asking process questions as well as

questions that help get to the heart of the issue. They learn that the true breakthroughs come when a truly curious great question is asked. They also discover the most powerful questions tend to be the shortest questions.

My favorite being (from a place of curiosity) – “What made you ask that question?” From a place of curiosity this question says – your question has made me realized we have very different perspectives on this issue – help me understand your perspective.

Take some time and listen to how you phrase questions. Are you asking for the information you are seeking or using closed questions? Listen to how you answer questions. Are you answering the question you were asked or are you expounding on it? In your conversations are you really listening to the other person or are you thinking about the brilliant tidbits you can use to show off how smart you are? Are you in your own head during conversations or are you truly part of the conversation? What is it that makes you part of the conversation? What helps you get out of your own head so you can be an inquisitive participant in the conversation?

Send me your answers – I am curious.

Bea Carson
Master Action Learning Coach
USA, 2022