Tea and The Law of Raspberry of Jam

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Asking Better Questions - How Different Structures Of Questions Function

For the most part, we've learned how to ask questions from the way people have asked us questions, but also through observing and imitating our parents, teachers, and other people in authoritative positions. Very often the question we are asked in school have a right answer, they are closed or multiple choice which is a variation of a closed question. As a result, our questions are often not nearly as effective as they can be. Structure and scope are two factors that greatly impact the effectiveness of a question.

The Scope of a Question

It's important not only to be aware of how the words we choose influence the effectiveness of our query but also to match the scope of a question to our needs. For example, take a look at the following three questions:

• How can we best manage our workgroup?
• How can we best manage our company?
• How can we best manage our supply chain?

In this example, the questions progressively broaden the domain of inquiry as they consider larger and larger aspects of the system; that is, they expand in scope. As you work to make your questions powerful, tailor and clarify the scope as precisely as possible to keep them within the realistic boundaries and needs of the situation you are working with. Avoid stretching the scope of your question too far.

The effectiveness of different types of questions

More effective

How
What

Who, When, Where
Which, Yes/No Questions

Less effective

Types of questions

How	What	Who
How-questions explore the way something happens, happened, or how they work today. For example: How does this work today? How do you address this when it comes up? How do other people respond?	What-questions reveal events and considerations. They help you discover that which can be observed. For example: What event do you notice first? What happens next? What factors are involved?	Who-questions reveal other relevant points of view. For example: Who does this effect? Who are some other people who may be interested in this?
When	**Where**	**Why**
When-questions are about sequencing and exploring circumstances. For example: When does this event occur? When do you see the first indications? When do things come to a head?	Where-questions explore the implications across the system. For example: Where does this cause friction? Where else in the organization do people know about this?	Why-questions often make people feel defensive. They may make up a coherent story to explain actions and decisions--which may obscure relevant information.. For example: "Why do you do it this way?" (Although with a predetermined structure it may be useful at times, and feel like less of an inquisition e.g. through Five Whys.)
Yes/No Questions	**Which**	**Why without why**
Yes/No-questions are binary. While they may be helpful to quickly get confirmation they're prone to bias and provide limited insights into the system. For example: Did the build fail because you were asked to commit code you knew was not ready?	Which-questions are multiple option questions and a variation of a closed yes/no question. For example: Which of the following reasons caused the build to fail? X, Y, or Z?	Sometimes why questions are really about exploring reasons, workarounds, and chains of events leading to the current state. Understanding the why without asking why is done through a combination of the other questions described here.