

HOW TO CRAFT QUESTIONS



Powerful questions are at the heart of Conversation Cafés.

What makes a good question? One that is:

1. **Open.** There are no embedded cultural, political, or ideological assumptions.
2. **Inviting.** It involves both head and heart. People can respond with their feelings and their thoughts.
3. **Honest.** It has not already been answered conclusively—yet finding an answer is crucial to moving forward.
4. **Experiential.** If they choose, people can tell a story or recall an experience that relates to the question.
5. **Inclusive.** Anyone at the table could have something valuable to say—whatever their age, race, gender, or level of education may be.
6. **Generative.** Can't be answered with a "yes" or "no", or a platitude.
7. **Relevant.** Even though broad, the question applies to many of the real issues we each and all face.
8. **Inspiring.** Makes you want to find an answer and do something about it.

A *Conversation Café* topic could be as simple as an issue (*peace on earth*) or a theme (*love*) with three questions after it:

- What do you think about it?
- What do you feel about it?
- What are you inspired to do about it?

This was precisely the topic in cafes throughout Seattle in the months after 9/11. During the first *Conversation Week* in Seattle (2002), all cafés touched on the following set of questions:

- How is 9/11 changing your life? (thinking)
- Where do you see reason for hope? (feeling)
- What are you now called to do? (doing)

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Questions for Connecting Ideas and Finding Deeper Insight

- What's taking shape? What are you hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed? What's in the center of the table?
- What's emerging here for you? What new connections are you making?
- What had real meaning for you from what you've heard? What surprised you? What challenged you?
- What's missing from this picture so far? What is it we're not seeing? What do we need more clarity about?
- What's been your/our major learning, insight, or discovery so far?
- What's the next level of thinking we need to do?
- If there was one thing that hasn't yet been said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?

Questions That Create Forward Movement

- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- What could happen that would enable you/us to feel fully engaged and energized about (your situation)?
- What's possible here and who cares? (rather than "What's wrong here and who's responsible?")
- What needs our immediate attention going forward?
- If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose?
- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?
- What challenges might come our way and how might we meet them?
- What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that created new possibilities for the future of (your situation)?
- What seed might we plant together today that could make the most difference to the future of (your situation)?

Resources:

Vogt, E., Brown, J., and Issacs, D. (2003). *The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action*.

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On Crafting a Good Question

By Susan Partnow, Co-Founder, Conversation Café

One of the key ingredients for a lively and deep conversation is the quality of the question. How we frame an issue is fateful and sets us on a vector that can become divisive and polarizing, or inviting and expansive in our thinking. The key is to develop a question that calls for reflection and personal sharing and avoids embedded assumptions. Consider the difference in these examples offered by the *Public Conversation Project*:

What thoughts and feelings are stirred in you when you see a flag on a car or a house or a lapel? If and when you display one, what does it mean to you? (Yes!)

OR

What do you think of all the flag-waving that is going on out there? (No!)

Personal sharing encourages people to speak from their own experience and reveals the underlying values and needs that lead them to their perspective, opening the conversation to a deeper level where we can all find ways to relate. Sweeping generalizations or abstractions often polarize, stereotype, and separate us. It's also important to avoid jargon, judgments, or red flag words. Let's consider more examples:

How can businesses become more socially responsible? (No!)

This question assumes everyone agrees that businesses should be socially responsible, and that they are not sufficiently responsible now. Also, the phrase "socially responsible" may not be familiar to, or have the same meaning for everyone. Perhaps a better place to begin would be something like:

Think of those businesses whose practices you admire. What is most encouraging, reassuring, or inspiring for you about how they are run? How is your life affected by the role that businesses play in the world? (Yes!)

These lessons are adapted from resources available from *The Public Conversations Project*, www.publicconversations.org.