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Proper questioning has become a lost art. The curious four-year-old asks a lot of questions — incessant streams of "Why?" and "Why not?" might sound familiar — but as we grow older, our questioning decreases. In a recent poll of more than 200 of our clients, we found that those with children estimated that 70-80% of their kids' dialogues with others were comprised of questions. But those same clients said that only 15-25% of their own interactions consisted of questions. Why the drop off?

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Think back to your time growing up and in school. Chances are you received the most recognition or reward when you got the correct answers. Later in life, that incentive continues. At work, we often reward those who answer questions, not those who ask them. Questioning conventional wisdom can even lead to being sidelined, isolated, or considered a threat.

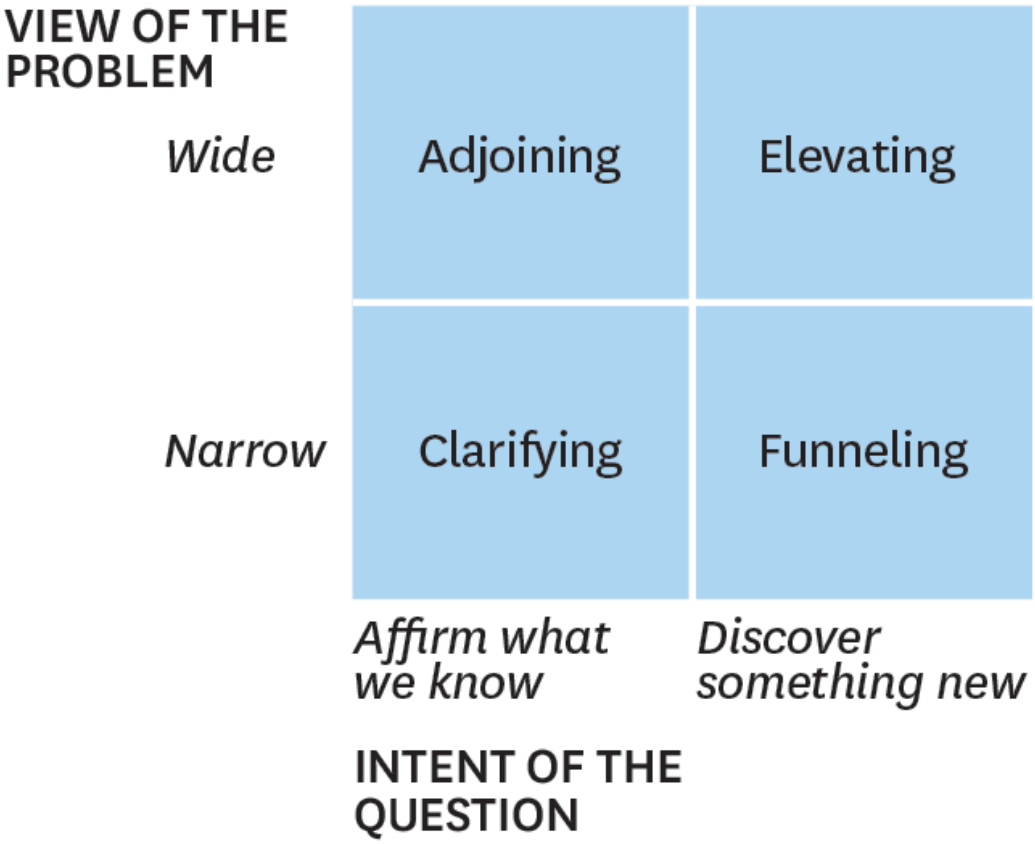
Because expectations for decision-making have gone from “get it done soon” to “get it done now” to “it should have been done yesterday,” we tend to jump to conclusions instead of asking more questions. And the unfortunate side effect of not asking enough questions is poor decision-making. That’s why it’s imperative that we slow down and take the time to ask more — and better — questions. At best, we’ll arrive at better conclusions. At worst, we’ll avoid a lot of rework later on.

Aside from not speaking up enough, many professionals don’t think about how different types of questions can lead to different outcomes. You should steer a conversation by asking the right kinds of questions, based on the problem you’re trying to solve. In some cases, you’ll want to expand your view of the problem, rather than keeping it narrowly focused. In others, you may want to challenge basic assumptions or affirm your understanding in order to feel more confident in your conclusions.

Consider these four types of questions — Clarifying, Adjoining, Funneling, and Elevating — each aimed at achieving a different goal:

Four Types of Questions Achieve Four Different Goals

Choose the right one to steer the conversation where you want it to go.



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Clarifying questions help us better understand what has been said. In many conversations, people speak past one another. Asking clarifying questions can help uncover the real intent behind what is said. These help us understand each other better and lead us toward relevant follow-up questions. "Can you tell me more?" and "Why do you say so?" both fall into this category. People often don't ask these questions, because they tend to make assumptions and complete any missing parts themselves.

Adjoining questions are used to explore related aspects of the problem that are ignored in the conversation. Questions such as, "How would this concept apply in a different context?" or "What are the related uses of this technology?" fall into this category. For example, asking "How would these insights apply in Canada?" during a discussion on customer life-time value in the U.S. can open a useful discussion on behavioral differences between customers in the U.S. and Canada. Our laser-like focus on immediate tasks often inhibits our asking more of these exploratory questions, but taking time to ask them can help us gain a broader understanding of something.

Funneling questions are used to dive deeper. We ask these to understand how an answer was derived, to challenge assumptions, and to understand the root causes of problems. Examples include: "How did you do the analysis?" and "Why did you not include this step?" Funneling can naturally follow the design of an organization and its offerings, such as, "Can we take this analysis of outdoor products and drive it down to a certain brand of lawn furniture?" Most analytical teams – especially those embedded in business operations – do an excellent job of using these questions.

Elevating questions raise broader issues and highlight the bigger picture. They help you zoom out. Being too immersed in an immediate problem makes it harder to see the overall context behind it. So you can ask, "Taking a step back, what are the larger issues?" or "Are we even addressing the right question?" For example, a discussion on issues like margin decline and decreasing customer satisfaction could turn into a broader discussion of corporate strategy with an elevating question: "Instead of talking about these issues separately, what are the larger trends we should be concerned about? How do they all tie together?" These questions take us to a higher playing field where we can better see connections between individual problems.

In today's "always on" world, there's a rush to answer. Ubiquitous access to data and volatile business demands are accelerating this sense of urgency. But we must slow down and understand each other better in order to avoid poor decisions and succeed in this environment. Because asking questions requires a certain amount of vulnerability, corporate cultures must shift to promote this behavior. Leaders should encourage people to ask more questions, based on the goals they're trying to achieve, instead of having them rush to deliver answers. In order to make the right decisions, people need to start asking the questions that really matter.

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