

The Dangerous Art of the Right Question

In the Hercule Poirot mystery *Lord Edgeware Dies*, Poirot and his sidekick Hastings (the narrator) are discussing the case.

"Eh bien." Poirot threw his head back, his eyes narrowed. He puffed out smoke.

"Je me pose des questions," he said.

"Yes?" I said eagerly.

"You too, doubtless?"

"Certainly," I said. And also leaning back and narrowing my own eyes, I threw out:

Who killed Lord Edgeware?

Poirot immediately sat up and shook his head vigorously.

"No no. Not at all. Is it a question, that?"

After impatiently dismissing Hastings' questions as useless, Poirot offers his own:

Why did Lord Edgeware change his mind about the divorce?

What happened to the letter?

Do Poirot's questions confuse you? They should. Hastings' question is clear even if you know nothing about the book. *Every* murder mystery is about who the murderer is. Hell, the whole genre is called "whodunits." Poirot's questions, on the other hand, only makes sense if you know something about the story. Hastings' question is useless. In Poirot's approach lies the secret to asking the right questions. It is the second most important career and life skill in the digital age.

Some Awful Questions

Here are some terrible questions from the world of business:

1. Who is our customer?
2. What is our market?

3. What is our goal?
4. What problem does our product solve for the customer?

They are terrible not because they are unimportant. Quite the contrary. They are *crucially* important in a *pro forma* sense. A sign that you've succeeded is that you will be able to fill out a form that asks these questions. Poirot *does* find the murderer every time, after all.

They are terrible because they are useless. Asking them doesn't help you answer them. They won't help you create a successful business. If anyone tells you they won by asking such questions they are either lying, got lucky, paid too high a cost for their victory, or simply lack self-awareness about how they *really* won. They are great 20/20 hindsight questions, and may help you answer survey questions and do basic sanity checks, but those are bureaucratic, paperwork uses. The fact that you can understand and ask them without knowing anything about the situation tells you why they are useless: they are absolutely devoid of any information.

This is a point that surprises some people. Surely *questions* don't need to contain information? Aren't answers supposed to do that job? Not so.

Real questions, useful questions, questions with promising attacks, are always motivated by the specific situation at hand. They are often about situational anomalies and unusual patterns in data that you cannot explain based on your current mental model of the situation, like Poirot's letter. Real questions *frame* things in a way that creates a restless tension, by highlighting the potentially important stuff that you don't know. You cannot frame a painting without knowing its dimensions. You cannot frame a problem without knowing *something* about it. Frames must contain situational information.

The same dynamic occurs at personal and global levels. Here are terrible personal questions:

1. How can I be happy?
2. What career do I want?
3. How can I lose weight?

Here are examples of corresponding questions that *are* useful:

1. Are people with strong friendships happier than loners? (Answer: yes)
2. What is the top reason people leave jobs? (Answer: they dislike their immediate manager)

3. What causes food addiction? (Answer: carefully-engineered concoctions of salt, sugar and fat)

Here are terrible global questions:

1. How can we create peace in the Middle East?
2. What can we do about global warming?
3. How can we reform Wall Street?

Here are potentially useful corresponding questions:

1. Do Israelis and Arabs communicate in different ways (Answer: yes)
2. Why are summers getting warmer and wetter, while winters are getting colder and snowier? (Answer: I don't know; climatologists might)
3. Is the principle of [limited liability](#) a necessary condition for a free market economy? (Answer: I don't know)

Formulas versus Insight

Here's why things work this way. There are two types of questions. Formulaic questions and insight questions.

Formulaic questions can be asked without knowing much. If they can be answered at all, they can be answered via a formulaic process. It could be a messy, complicated formula (like "dig into all of last year's invoices and tabulate our enterprise versus consumer sales") but in principle, the answer just takes doable grunt work. In the business world, markets driven by formulaic questions tend to create brutal, exhausting competitions over grim margins, where nobody wins big. They encourage you to waste time in [Pyrrhic](#) struggles. By the time you are able to answer them, they may have ceased to matter.

Most often though, for complex challenges, the formulaic questions entirely lack answer-formulas that are sound even on paper. You have to be especially wary of time-wasting snake oil formulas that don't work. For disruptive products, "focus group" is often a snake oil formulaic answer for the formulaic question "What problem does our product solve for the customer?" If you actually knew who to put in the groups, your top few questions would *already* have been answered. Focus groups for disruptive products are a double jeopardy money-waster: you are asking the wrong people the wrong questions.

When formulaic questions either lack formulaic answers, or have formulaic answers that are too expensive to compute, you need insight questions. Cheat questions.

Insight questions can only be asked after you develop situation awareness. They are *necessarily* local and unique to the situation. When you are faced with a difficult situation, you *will* start as a prisoner of the unanswerable/too expensive formulaic questions, and your first job is to break out. The reason the weird “right questions” work is that they expose cracks in your default, formulaic mental model. By attacking those cracks, you force the useless default mental model to collapse, creating room for a new one.

As Einstein said, “The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them.”

Asking Good Insight Questions

I hope the main point is clear: the questions that can help you win are not the questions that people think you should ask. So how do you ask these questions? Here are three ways:

1. **The Poirot Method:** This is the basic trail-of-clues method of focusing on an anomaly that your current mental model *cannot* account for. Since my colleague Dave and I often argue about Poirot vs. Holmes, let me throw the Holmes camp a bone (heh!): the classic Holmes’ question of the “dog that *didn’t* bark in the night” is an excellent insight question.
2. **The Jack Welch Method:** Also known as the “stretch.” You ask ridiculously extreme versions of ordinary formulaic questions. Instead of asking “How do we grow market share 3% in the next year?” You ask, “How do we grow our market 10x in the next 3 months?” The question so clearly strains and breaks the existing mental model that you are forced to think in weirder ways (the question is situation-driven because numbers like 3%, 1 year, 10x and 3 months will need to come from actual knowledge).
3. **The 42 Method:** Sometimes the right *answer* is more easy to find than the right question. Entrepreneurs are often in this boat. They don’t know who will use their product or why, but they just *know* that their product is the answer to some important question somewhere. They are often wrong, but at least they are productively wrong. If you don’t get the “42” reference, don’t worry about it.

There are several more, but I’ll stop at three, otherwise I might tempt you into thinking that there is a formulaic way to ask good insight questions, which would defeat the whole purpose of this post.

The “Right Questions” for Trailmeme

[Trailmeme](#) began with a classic bad question: “How do we print-enable the Web?” It is a question of obvious importance to a printer company like Xerox. It is also a remarkably stupid question because it goes precisely nowhere. We twisted and turned, looking for good insight questions. Today, we are in the “42” mode and it took us some Deep Thought to get there. My team and I are just gut-convinced that Trailmeme *is* the right answer to a very important right question. We just have to figure out what that is.

Three bad questions that I am currently trying to turn into good ones are these:

“What should the social architecture of Trailmeme look like?”

“What should our mobile-device strategy be?”

“Who is our customer?”

They are important questions in the sense that people ask us about them all the time, and also because if we succeed we *will* have answered them. But I know from experience that they are just stubs. Until we find better substitutes, progress will be painful and slow.

Why the Right Questions are Dangerous

The right questions set you up for real success or failure. You never know whether a clue leads down a bunny trail or to genuine insight. Agatha Christie novels often involve the detective painstakingly sweeping aside red herrings.

They are also dangerous by comparison to formulaic questions. Formulaic questions are *safe* questions. Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM. Nobody ever got fired for running a focus group. Even smart people who recognize the uselessness of formulaic questions often hedge for safety by going through the motions anyway (it is often called “due diligence” or “laying a paper trail” which reveals the bureaucratic/grunt work/insurance motivation behind them).

Why Right Questions Are Career-Makers

The Internet makes information spread ridiculously fast and cheaply. Computers can crunch through formulas at mind-blowing speeds. The formula game is getting faster and less rewarding by the nanosecond. Formulas are at least slightly useful if you can keep them (or the input

data) secret or legally protected (via patents). Today even all those formula defenses are crumbling.

It didn't used to be this way. People used to be able to make money buying, selling, distributing and stealing even commodity information. People spent lifetimes doing pen-and-paper math, and got paid for it. Patents or secrecy could actually protect your formulas well.

If you are hoping privileged information will stay privileged long enough for you to win, or that you can win big by being formula-faster, you're delusional. You'll barely keep your head above water that way. If you're lucky.

Unique insight that buys you time is really the last competitive advantage.

And by the way, I just said "second most important career and life skill" to intrigue you and make you read the article. If you are really looking for somebody to hand you a ranked list of "10 most important career skills," you are trapped deep in the middle of formula-land. Ask yourself this insight question: "Why did the fake 'second most important' teaser hook me?" Maybe that will help you break out.