How many times have you jumped straight to the resolution of a problem, only to realize later that, if you had first asked questions and listened, you could have come up with a far better solution?

In my experience, the answer isn't in the solution—it's in the questions. Smart questions define problems well and lead to a clear vision of the issues involved.

When that occurs, it's easier to run through multiple scenarios to their conclusion and find the best answer that leads to growth and profit.

## Are problems ever good?

A problem can be a real break, a stroke of luck, opportunity knocking, even a chance to get out of an everyday rut and make yourself or some situation better. Sometimes, problems arrive as a result of external factors or bad events—but not always.

Any new awareness that allows you to see possibilities for improvement brings a "problem" for you to solve. This is why the most creative people are "problem seekers," looking for a solution, rather than "problem avoiders." Most folks in business are people who like to solve problems.They love untying complex knots—the bigger and tougher, the better.

A problem is the difference between your current and desired conditions. It can result from new knowledge, or it might come from an unfulfilled dream. When you identify the difference between what you have and what you want, you have defined your problem and can begin to develop a plan to achieve your goal.

## Half the battle is learning to spot the problem with clarity

Developing a positive attitude toward problems will transform you into a happier, saner, more confident person who is in more control of your life. Train yourself to respond to problems with enthusiasm and eagerness—view them as an opportunity to show your stuff—and you'll be amazed at the results you will generate.

The difference between success and failure is knowing that you'll solve the "real problem." For example, most executives know when something is wrong. But few correctly perceive the actual issue that needs to be solved.

Here are several methods that will help you spot the real problem with clarity.

## Sonar helps dolphins see; questions help people discern

Dolphins use sonar to "see" in murky or dark water. They send out a click sound and wait for the echo to return. Once they have enough echo responses, they can navigate, find prey, and avoid obstacles and predators.

Questions are the business equivalent of sonar. Asking the right question will help you find your way through a problem, locate the right customers, avoid future

difficulties, and outperform your competitors.Questions also act as a filter that will help you decipher the key elements of a situation.

Tough business situations require deep assessment. To reach a solution, finding answers to the "What?" (What is broken… is working…needs improvement…must be changed…will have the biggest impact?) and the "Why?" (Why did this happen… have we been using this process… is our customer considering the competition… are we losing this market… is our product third instead of first?) is critical.

## What questions matter?

Asking a series of clear questions leads to precision.When questions are developed with this result in mind, they will generate a natural sorting and sifting during the discovery process. You will focus your research process to gather only the specific evidence you require, only those facts that illuminate the main question at hand. This focus makes it harder to get lost in the process or mistake the peripheral for what is central.

Unfortunately, most people don't take time to frame the questions beforehand or to ask questions in layers. Effective questions are powerful and thought-provoking. They are open-ended and not leading. They are more often "What?" or "How?" questions—rather than "Why?" questions. "Why?" questions are good for soliciting information, but can make people defensive—so be thoughtful in your use of them. Also, to be an effective questioner, wait for the answer—don't provide it yourself.

## It's about a shared understanding

When working with other people to solve a problem, it's not enough to describe the problem to them; they need to understand it for themselves. You can help them do this by asking questions that lead them to think about the topic. This requires you to listen. Let go of your personal biases and assumptions. Find out what the person you're interviewing knows about the problem.

A great opener to any new project is: "What do you think is the problem?" Behind effective questioning lies the ability to listen to the answer and suspend judgment. This means being intent on understanding what the person is really saying. What is behind their words? Fear? Excitement? Resistance? Let go of your preconceptions so they don't block you from learning more information. Gather the facts, then pay attention to your gut for additional data.

When you ask smart questions, you will:

- Connect with people in a more meaningful way

- Understand the problem with greater depth
- Defuse volatile situations
- Get cooperation
- Seed your own ideas
- Persuade people to work with you because you've gained their confidence

Most important, you will be able to work through and discard a series of possible solutions. They'll lead you to the one best scenario that you'll implement. Using this method, you'll increase the likelihood of developing the right answer to the problem—and increase your knowledge base at the same time.

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## Powerful questions are the path to clarity

Here are some examples of questions you can use during the inquiry phase to enhance your understanding of the situation:

"What seems to be the trouble?"

"What concerns you the most about _____?"

"What is holding you back from _____?"

"What seems to be your main obstacle to _____?"

Ask customer service: "What makes customers angry enough to contact you?"

Ask sales people: "What is contributing to lost deals?"

Ask product management: "What do you make of _____?"

Ask the channel: "How do you feel about our company's pricing for _____?"

Ask customers: "What would make this product more appealing?"

To probe deeper, ask these follow-up questions:

"What do you mean by _____?"

"Tell me more about _____."

"What else?"

"What other ways did you try so far?"

"What will you have to do to get the job done?"

"Is there something I should have asked that you need me to know?"

Engage people to solve the problem. And always, no matter what, ask people how they would solve the problem.

"How do you want _____ to turn out?"

"What do you want?"

"What is your desired outcome?"

"What benefits would you like to get out of X?"

"What do you propose?"

"What is your plan?"

"If you do this, how will it affect _____?"

"What else do you need to consider?"

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