

# Systemic Questions

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## 1. Questions...

...are the key to the world. As the saying goes: "You ask, you lead." Questions set the course for lines of thought and dialogue, asking questions means playing the ball, not dropping it. It means that you are already focussing on the next place of interaction. Asking questions causes movement and sets focus at the same time. More specifically, asking questions creates the necessary concentration to really focus on a particular issue, as well as the necessary movement to make progress in that very same matter. Only the one asking questions has the opportunity to learn. Asking questions can create new impulses and it can help you make headway at the same time - particularly when it comes to difficult situations. The way in which you ask a question is essential as well for the quality of your (joined) success. That is why some people quote the saying "Who asks questions leads" the other way around: "Who leads, asks questions." Leading can be understood as the art of asking the right questions at the right time to promote others at doing their work in an independent and motivated way.

Because one thing is certain: Questions are not only a crucial management factor, but a general instrument to make constructive progress in a problem setting, a conflict or any other kind of difficult situation. Four factors are particularly important when it comes to making progress through questions:

### **(1.) Specific Knowledge Based on Experience**

The more you know about an issue, the better you can ask specific questions. At the same time, the factor knowledge is not always decisive. Sometimes it is even an obstacle. Too much expertise sometimes blocks you from finding new approaches. Being too involved in a problem or a conflict quite often does not help you see possible solutions and actions. Frequently, someone that is much less involved in the issue is able to provide you with fruitful incentives. Often, there is something much more important than specific know-how, and that is:

## **(2.) Your Inner Attitude Towards the Issue in Question**

Things that you are interested in and that, when brought up, cause you to feel energy-charged and wide-awake, often quite automatically make you ask exciting and interesting questions. (Often, these particular things are the ones that you have already been able to gain specific knowledge and experience on.)

## **(3.) Your Inner Attitude Concerning Your Interaction Partner**

How you see someone is decisive for the way you talk to him/her. Based on experience, one could say that you communicate differently with people that you appreciate and that you want to cooperate with. However it would be different, if you think the following when addressing your interaction partner: "I have to tell this person what to do (otherwise it will not work out anyway)" or "He just wants to attack me" or either "This person is definitely not interested in anything (I care about)". Our inner attitudes towards people are like filters. The more limited a filter is, the more limited is perception (of questions and answers) from both parties. (This is also the best way to confirm your respective filter, because in any case you just get what you expected). Conversely, that means: The better you are able to see your interaction partner as an interesting and equitable partner (that means the less you have to filter), the higher is the chance that you both come up with interesting and productive ideas and questions.

## **(4.) Appropriate Question Techniques**

Question techniques are, as well as any other technique, a matter that has to be learned and practised. They are a skill that you can learn to have a fairly good or very good command of. The success of any question can be measured. For that you can use criteria such as: What information do I actually need? What helps us proceed; what makes us move on? What question creates a new setting, and what question causes us to recall things we have heard (hundreds of thousands of times) and to run in circles (once again)? What particular question type actually helps you make progress always depends on the respective setting and objectives of a coaching session. Open questions are frequently very helpful, especially when it comes to addressing an issue ("How do you evaluate this?" "How do you evaluate our collaboration?"). If you had to be more concrete, you could also always use the following questions: Who, with whom? What for? By what measures and with what instruments? How? When? How often?...) On the other hand, suggestive and implying questions ("You also think that...?"), threatening questions ("Will you

tidy up the desk now, or would you like me to get you a move on?") or also closed questions ("Do you want A or B"), frequently have a rather counter-productive effect. Which question has what effect (useful-harmful, good-bad, productive-counter-productive) will show very quickly during the course of a conversation. It is very important to always have the biggest range of questions available, especially when it comes to finding new solutions. It is sometimes recommendable to ask slightly uncommon questions, particularly if you would like to break out of your usual (but no longer very successful) thinking and action patterns.

## 2. The Idea of Systemic Questions

Systemic questions refer to the way specific people or groups of people see certain aspects of the world and at how they act and interact on the basis of their way of thinking. Systemic questions - in the sense of a system-theoretical approach - are systemic in two ways:

- On the one hand they address specific - psychic or social - systems (individuals or groups of individuals) by asking them what logic is the basis of the particular system in question, e.g. what **assumptions, rules and laws** form their reality.
- Contemporaneously, systematic questions make you focus on interactions. They aim at interdependent conditioning factors instead of linear chains of cause and effect.

Due to their focus on interaction, systemic questions can help you concentrate on problem patterns, because problem patterns are conditioned settings whose mechanisms start and uphold problems and conflicts (that annoy everyone). Since they are based on reality and problem constituting assumptions and rules, systemic questions also offer the opportunity to modify the before mentioned assumptions and rules to create a more successful reality. That is because systemic questions often do not just make you doubt assumptions that would have an effect on your actions; they put them into relation with all interactionally relevant perspectives as well.

Systemic questions always are problem diagnosis and intervention at the same time. They correspond to a diagnosis, because they offer the opportunity to find problem-relevant assumptions, models and hypotheses. They are interventions,

too, because they also open up new possibilities for differentiation, points of view and options. The fact that systemic questions can promote problem solving processes can sometimes easily be confirmed by observing a person that starts thinking as soon as you ask him/her a systemic question. In these cases, thinking might very well be the first step to a major change.

### **3. Basic Types of Systemic Questions**

You will find a few classical systemic questions below:

#### **(1.) Estimation Questions (Questions About the Subjective Construction of Reality)**

Estimation questions serve to ask about how people involved in a certain setting perceive and evaluate a current situation, its process, its causes and context conditions. **They are a method to specify and focus on individual perspectives.**

#### **Examples:**

- How do you find the progress of the project at the moment? What do you think has developed especially well and what is not going so well?
- What in your estimation is the principle reason for the positive results and what is the reason for the things which are still not running properly?
- Where do you see a suitable leverage point, so that the development in general can be even more positively influenced?
- Why do you think the client was dissatisfied? What made the client particularly mad or upset? What expectations did the client have regarding your services?
- How do other team members react to the tense situation between you and Mrs. Meier? Do you have the impression that others prefer to stay out of the conflict or do you perceive that they are taking sides between you and your colleague? How did the whole conflict affect the team?

## (2.) Operational Questions

**These questions aim at indicators, meaning they determine what can be perceived and observed with regard to a statement or an issue in question.** Operational questions can contribute to transfer a specific issue to a more objective level and to make it more concrete. People usually tend to make quick and unquestioned evaluations, particularly when they find themselves in conflict-charged and very emotional situations. Operational questions are a measure that allows you to come back to a descriptive level, and with that to a level on which mutual understanding, even between generally diverging parties, is much easier.

### Examples:

- What is Mr. Schulz doing, so that you are of the opinion that he is a "backstabber"?
- "What indicators do you see for your assumption that your current approach will lead to big problems?"
- How do you see that someone's evaluation is most likely inadequate?
- What reaction of a client would make you perceive that he is now making a buying decision?
- How can you find out if you have actually fulfilled other people's expectations?

## (3.) Differentiation Questions

Particularly stressed people tend to dichotomize in conflict situations: everything is either right or wrong, good or bad, black or white for them. **Differentiation questions invite your interaction partner to grade and differentiate between their ideas, beliefs, moods, concepts, etc.** Useful differentiations can be reached through questions that aim at percentages, scale factors or even classifications:

### Examples:

- What do you think; to what percentage are you currently fulfilling your client's expectations to be supplied in a quick and reliable way?
- Suppose one would ask your employees to evaluate your motivation on a scale from 0 to 10, "0" would mean "no motivation left at all" and "10" would mean you were "totally motivated", at what level would they rate you?

- You rated your current motivation as a 5. What would have to happen to make it a 6 or 7? And what would it need to get you to a 9 or 10?
- In your opinion, which one of your collaborators does your boss appreciate the most? Who is second? Who does he appreciate the least?

#### **(4.) Hypothetical Questions (Possibility Constructing Questions)**

**Hypothetical questions are questions such as: What if...? This type of question helps you create new approaches and focus on causes and effects.**

##### **Examples:**

- If your current problems would persist for the next few months, how would they affect the relationship with your clients? What clients would you most likely risk to lose? And how would your other clients react?
- If you raised the successor product by 10% of the predecessor products price, what consequences would that have on sales numbers in your most important markets? And how would the expected consequences be if you raised the price by 5%?
- If you asked your head of department how s/he evaluated the team's current situation, what would s/he most likely answer?
- If you decided to articulate your expectations and wishes in a much clearer way than before, who in your team would be the most surprised? How would other involved people react? Would they respect your wishes or would they refuse them?

Very important subforms of such hypothetical questions are **Improving and Worsening Questions**.

##### **(4.1.) Improving and Miracle Questions**

**Improving questions are always based on things that already run smoothly and that have been running smoothly in the recent past. They aim at the improvement of particular issues and a general positive development of things.** By asking these questions, a coach is able to deviate people's attention from deficits to resources and positive experiences. A particularly interesting type of question in this context is the so-called '**miracle question**', that tries to inquire about how the best possible case would look: What exactly defines the best possible case? How would you be able to recognize it? How relevant other people would act in the best possible case?

What and how many different types of consequences would it have, etc.? Miracle questions can support visions and help implementing them. At the same time, using them can lead to a higher energy and motivation level when it comes to developing a new visionary mental picture.

#### **Examples:**

- What in the cooperation has worked out fine? What would you like to keep up? What would you have to do if you wanted to realize much more of that?
- What would the best possible case look like? Suppose, everything ran like clockwork, meaning as well as you could possibly imagine: What would the situation look like? What concrete actions would you take? What would the other people involved do? What would others say about this? Would you be able to perceive and experience that?
- If the problems were gone (e.g. because a good fairy godmother came and erased them all): What would you change at first the morning after? And after that? Who would be the most surprised if the problem just went away? What would you miss the most? ...

#### **(4.2.) Worsening Questions and Suicidal Questions**

**Worsening questions aim at how to dramatize a situation that is already perceived as difficult.** These questions are not aimed at actually doing what would contribute to a worsened situation; they are much more appropriate when it comes to realizing important factors and effects that are based on one's actions. The main idea is: If you can make your own situation worse, you can obviously influence it. This means, that if you wanted to, you could also improve it. A particular variant of worsening questions is **the question about "systematic suicide strategies". This question type aims at how you can personally contribute to complete failure in any given situation (e.g. the new job, the project, client relations, etc.).** At first glance, this particular question type may seem a little bizarre. It does not really aim at realizing a quick and most disastrous end. It rather helps you focus on conditions that are in any case indispensable (just like air to breathe) to a successful progress in any matter. By focussing on the worst possible case and on these so-called suicide strategies, and thus, by concentrating on the conditions that are absolutely relevant for survival, you can actually mobilise the **"positive force of negative thinking".**

### **Examples:**

- What would you have to do to sustain your problem or to actively worsen it? How could you make yourself extremely unhappy, if you wanted that?
- What would we have to do to make the shop (the team, the department, the whole organization) collapse as quickly as possible? What interactions would we have to implement to get there? Who would have to do what with whom?
- What would you have to do to escalate things with your client in a way that he would never talk to you again?

## **(5.) Circular Questions**

**Circular questions invite you to change perspective. A asks B about C's wishes, thoughts or actions; C can be either present or absent.** A in any case learns about B's hypotheses (his/her mental models) concerning C's behaviour. These hypotheses can, as all hypotheses, be more or less correct. As B's hypotheses they are nonetheless action-defining and as such they are relevant for B's behaviour towards C. In case C is present when A asks B, C also gets a feedback about B's evaluation and perception of his/her behaviour. As opposed to direct questions (e.g.: A asks C how s/he feels), circular questions always lead to the **assumption of an external perspective**. In this way, circular questions allow you to generate important new information about interaction processes within a system.

### **Examples:**

- What do you think your colleague feels about the situation?
- What do you think Mr. Müller expects from you?
- How do you think your boss evaluates his/her relationship between you and your collaborators?
- How do you think the market would react if you announced a price cut by 5%?
- From your client's perspective: Who is currently offering better service quality: You or your competitors?

## (6.) Solution Questions

Such questions aim at finding out what strategies and solutions have been tried out in current or past problem settings and what experiences have been had during their application. On the one hand, you can find out about important information about the actual course of a problem. On the other hand, you gain the idea of what old and new strategies and ideas might lead to thinkable and possible actions.

### Examples:

- What possible solutions did you already try out? What did you experience while doing it? In your eyes, what did work out? What did you perceive to be difficult?"
- How would another involved person evaluate the tried-out solutions? Whose and what points of view would be similar or differ completely from yours?
- Have you already lived through similarly difficult situations together?
- On which (of your own and other people's) resources can you absolutely rely on - no matter what?

## 4. When to Apply Systemic Questions

Systemic questions can be generally used whenever you have to solve complex problems. Systemic questions are particularly suited in **coaching and consultation settings**, i.e. when it comes to supporting single people, teams and organisations and to helping them find solutions for difficult problems. Possible fields of application: **supervision sessions, management training (the manager as a coach), collegial coaching, team development processes, conflict moderation and other types of moderation**. Systemically oriented consultation types always include **auto-consultation elements (self-reflection)**.

Systemic questions cannot only be very successfully applied in various consulting contexts, but also when it comes to creating joined **problem solution strategies in meetings, group sessions, vision and strategy sessions, creative sessions, etc.**

A prerequisite for the effective application of a systemic question is (apart from knowing all the different question types) the willingness to assume and to make use of **an external position** while assessing a subject of interest, as well as the willingness to go through different points of view in regard to the concerned thematic field. By applying systemic questions that demonstrate the efficiency of

the external effect, a coachee's willingness to assume an external position can be promoted even further. But if you should ever find yourself in a situation in which you are an opponent involved in a conflict and you are in a rage (again), you should better restrain from systemic questions. In such highly-tense settings, people generally tend to stick to their own point of view. Systemic questions, such as "What do you think your boss would say to what you are doing here?" may be considered a provocation. But one does not necessarily have to always ask systemic questions.

## Overview Table: Systemic Questions

Type of Question	Characteristic	Example
(1.) Estimation Questions (Questions with regard to the subjective construction of reality)	A asks B about his/her view on a situation, about his/her evaluation of circumstances, causes and consequences etc.	"How do you find the progress in the project at the moment? What, do you think has developed very well, what is not going so well?"
(2.) Operational Questions	These questions aim at indicators, they investigate what is observable with regard to a maintained fact or a fact in question.	"If our aim is: more customer orientation, how would our customers notice then, that we are even more intensively orientated around their wishes?"
(3.) Differentiation Questions	Enquire about more exact differentiations, for example, through scales, percentage evaluations or classifications.	"What do you think, to what percentage you are fulfilling the expectations of your customers at the moment, in supplying them in a quick and reliable way?"
(4.) Hypothetical Questions (Questions with regard to the construction of possibilities)	Going into possibilities, operations and scenarios: "What would happen, if ....? – "Assuming that....?"	"If the quality problems stay as they are in the next few months, what effects will that probably have on the relationship with our customers?"
(4.1.) Miracle Questions	Examine what the best possible situation would look like.	"Assuming a good fairy were to come to us and we could wish for the best possible situation for our team, what would the world look like with regard to our team?"
(4.2.) Suicide Questions	Questions about how one can bring about the "worst case scenario".	"What do you think we would have to do to put this important customer off for once and for all, who has been complaining continually about our bad products and quality of service recently?"
(5.) Circular Questions	Invitation to change of perspective: A asks B, what B thinks about what C thinks, wants, intends, feels etc.	"What do you think is especially important to this customer? What does he probably expect from us and what does he hold in high regard?"
(6.) Solution Questions	Investigate which solution strategies are being tried out in the actual problem and also which have already been tried out in comparable earlier problem situations, and what experience has been learned in this way.	"Which solution attempts have you already undertaken up to now? Which experience have you gathered in the course of this? What proved worthwhile in your eyes? What proved to be difficult or damaging?"