

Using “What” Questions to Move Meetings Forward

One simple and powerful way to keep meeting participants focused and engaged is to ask focused, open-ended, curiosity-based “What” questions. These are much easier to answer than “why” questions, and they tend to move us out of judgment and into curiosity, and to provide far more concrete information to work with in moving toward agreements.

Here are some useful “what” questions to try out when you, or the group you are facilitating, feel stuck.

Seeking Clarity

- What are we/you trying to achieve?
- What are we/you trying to avoid/prevent?
- What are we/you assuming?
- What do you want us to understand?
- I wonder if we are understanding what you are saying. Could someone summarize?

Digging for Deeper Understanding of What is Driving Someone

- What are your hopes and fears regarding this (topic)?
- What is the “heart” of the matter for you?
- What experiences inform your views on this?
- What do you feel certain about? AND What do you feel uncertain about?

Building Group Understanding and Consensus

- What don’t we/you understand? or What is confusing about this?
- What do you want to understand better?
- What is your understanding of the proposal (or of what he/she/I just said)? (must be asked gently, with no judgment implied – frame as wanting to avoid misunderstandings)
- What have you heard that you agree with?

- What have you heard that you disagree with (or have a different view of)?
- What is hard about this for you?
- What part of what you just heard does/doesn't work for you?
- What other questions do we need to answer? (When you are trying to get people to participate in a process and there is not a high level of trust yet, it is often easier to get people to offer questions that need to be answered than opinions they think might get judged.)
- What impact will this have on you/your team, or the people you serve?
OR How would that idea play out from your perspective?

Moving Toward Implementation

- What would make it easy?
- What would make it fun?
- What are the next steps?
- Who is going to take care of that? (Sometimes we also need to ask, "What is coming off their plate to allow them time to do this?")
- What are our expectations about the timeline for that? (Set clear deadlines.)

What Else?

Perhaps the most powerful question is "what else?" When we invite our minds to give us information by asking a "what" question, our minds will generally start by offering us the answers they know best. These are sometimes just what we need, but they can also be quite limited. Try asking "what else?" and continuing to ask it until the group completely runs out of possible responses – let yourselves be wildly impractical at this stage; this is where the creativity comes from. Later you can go back and decide what you want to act on.