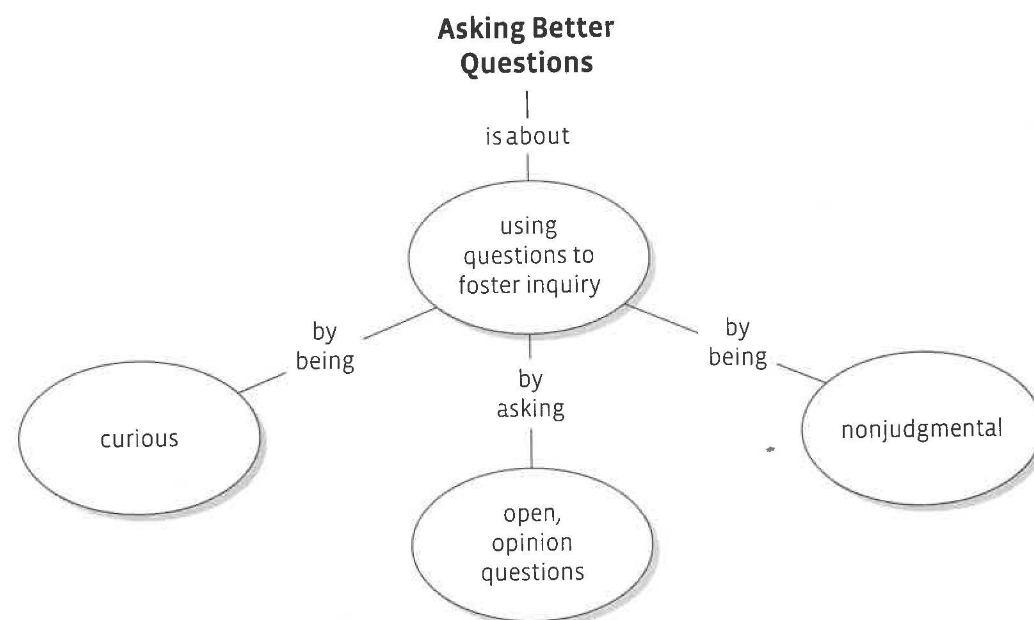

ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS

Why is it so important to learn to ask better questions that help to build positive relationships? Because in an increasingly complex, interdependent, and culturally diverse world, we cannot hope to understand and work with people from different occupational, professional, and national cultures if we do not know how to ask questions and build relationships that are based on mutual respect and the recognition that others know things that we may need to know in order to get a job done.

—Edgar Schein (2013, pp. 1–2)

A good question is like a lever used to pry open the stuck lid on a paint can.

—Frances Peavey, quoted in Warren Berger (2014, p. 15)

At the Kansas Coaching Project at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, my colleagues and I study instructional coaching by partnering with coaches to learn from them as they try out the practices or processes we develop. Taking this approach to research means we spend a lot of time sitting with coaches, watching videos of conversations, and inventing new ways to make coaching more effective, efficient, and positive.

During one of our first video sessions, we watched several conversations all of us judged to be empty and

> There's never been a better time to be a questioner—because it is so much easier now to begin a journey of inquiry, with so many places you can turn for information, help, ideas, feedback, or even to find possible collaborators who might be interested in the same question.
>
> —**Warren Berger** (2014, p. 28)

low-energy. Coaches and teachers were nice to each other, but didn't seem to talk much about anything that mattered. Then we watched an interview between a research assistant and one of the teachers in our study—a teacher we had watched earlier in the day during one of the flat conversations. Now, when she was asked her opinion, the teacher came alive, and my colleague, Mike Hock, said what we were all thinking: "We need to have our coaching conversations look like that."

The problem with the early coaching conversations was not the coaches; the problem was the way we had asked them to do coaching. Most of the time, coaches were telling teachers what they were doing right and wrong, and none of them were asking powerful questions. The videos taught us better conversations are more about asking than telling, and the energy of human interaction is usually back and forth and not one-directional. We learned that better conversations involve dialogue, and dialogue is made possible by good questions.

Better Questioning Strategies

1. Be curious.
2. Ask open, opinion questions.
3. Be nonjudgmental.

Better Questions

Dialogue is not likely going to occur unless we ask effective questions. Good questions open up conversations, generate respect, accelerate learning, and build relationships. Questions are the yang to complete the yin of listening. If we don't ask questions, we won't have the opportunity to listen. If we don't listen, our questions won't serve much purpose. When we see others as equals, we usually give them at least equal time at the center of our conversation, and that requires asking questions that allow our conversation partners to say what they wish. By asking good questions, we demonstrate what Tony Stoltzfus (2008) in *Coaching Questions* calls "conversational generosity." There are three simple and powerful strategies we can use to ask good questions.

BE CURIOUS

Much has been written about the techniques that good questioners should use. Technique, however, is not as important as the mindset you bring to questioning. As literacy coaching expert Cathy Toll said to me, we shouldn't ask questions to which we think we already know the answer. Rather, we should ask questions because we authentically want to hear what our partner has to say. When we are curious, when we really want to know what others think, we communicate respect for them, and that respect greatly increases the likelihood our partners will speak freely with us.

> The missing ingredients in most conversations are curiosity and willingness to ask questions to which we do not already know the answer.
>
> —**Edgar Schein** (2013, p. 4)

Curiosity is the embodiment of the principle of reciprocity. When we view conversations as reciprocal, we enter into conversations as learners instead of talkers. When we are curious, we see a conversation as a living interaction that we co-construct with our partner, not a means to tell someone something or an opportunity to control somebody. One way to demonstrate curiosity is by asking for examples. Edgar Schein, in *Humble Inquiry* (2013), writes that "asking for examples is not only one of the most powerful ways of showing curiosity, interest, and concern, but also—and even more important—it clarifies general statements" (p. 33).

William Isaacs (1999) notes many of the questions we ask do not grow out of our curious nature. Isaacs writes,

> [A]n estimated forty percent of all questions that people utter are really statements in disguise. Another forty percent are really judgments in disguise: "Do you really think she deserved that raise?" Only a small percent of "inquires" are genuine questions. (p. 149)

Many questions are used for telling, not answering.

Psychologist John Farrell-Higgins, my friend from Topeka, Kansas, identifies four kinds of unhelpful questions: demand questions, set-up questions, stump questions, and angry questions. Demand questions, he says, prompt others to give us an answer we want to hear. For example, a teacher might say after being observed by the principal, "Those kids were really engaged, weren't they?" Set-up questions are used to catch another person in doing something wrong or poorly. Set-up questions can be called "gotcha questions." Thus, a principal might ask, "Did you finish that report on the assessment data?" when she knows the other person hasn't finished the report.

John Farrell-Higgins' Unhelpful Questions

1. Demand
2. Set-up
3. Stump
4. Angry

Stump questions are ones we ask when we know the other person doesn't know an answer, but we do. We ask stump questions so we can demonstrate how smart or knowledgeable we are. For example, we might ask, "Do you know what the effect size is for growth-versus fixed-mindset feedback?" Finally, angry questions are disguised exclamations of negative emotions. A frustrated parent, for example, might ask, "Why don't you give a little thought to what is best for my daughter?"

Unlike these unhelpful questions, when we ask a question out of curiosity, we do so because we genuinely want to hear what the other person has to say. Therefore, when we ask good questions out of curiosity, we are fully present in the conversation. Good questioners give their conversation partners their undivided attention, and they genuinely empathize. Good questioners also let their partners say what they wish by honoring what Susan Scott refers to as the "sweet purity of silence." When you are curious and ask good questions, you communicate respect, build relationships, and you usually learn something important.

ASK OPEN, OPINION QUESTIONS

Much has been written about types and levels of questions, but I believe two basic distinctions are most important: (a) closed versus open questions, and (b) right-or-wrong versus opinion questions.

Closed questions elicit limited responses, and they always ask for answers to which a complete answer can be given. For example, if I ask you the closed question, "What is the new reading program?" you can give me a complete answer simply by naming the program. Closed questions usually invite short, yes or no, factual, or multiple-choice answers.

Open questions elicit unlimited responses and provide the opportunity for an expansive, extended response. For example, if I ask you the open question, "What do you think about the new reading program?" you can theoretically talk as long as you wish during your reply. Open questions usually invite longer, detailed, knowledge, opinion, or feeling answers.

Closed questions can be used effectively to assess whether or not someone has learned something, but they are not especially effective for fostering dialogue. If I want to hear what my conversation partner is thinking or feeling, then open questions are much more effective. However, if I want to confirm my own or someone else's thinking, closed questions work well. For example, Sandra Gearhart found she had to ask closed questions to "clarify my understanding as we determined levels for progress monitoring."

I've been more conscious of being a listener, not interrupting, and asking fat, open-ended questions that really encourage elaborate responses. I find myself really listening for things I can follow up on with questions that will get the speaker to give more information and get the other person to be more passionate about the topic of the dialogue.

—**Molly Edelen,** Special Education Teacher, Mathias, West Virginia, describing what she learned about questioning while talking with her daughter about the Disney Channel

Right-or-wrong questions, as the name implies, are questions for which there are correct or incorrect answers. On the other hand, opinion questions are questions to which there are no specific correct answers since they prompt people to give their own opinion. The question, "Who is the president?" is both a closed and a right-or-wrong question because there is only one correct answer to it. Similarly, our example of an open question, "What do you think about the president?" is also an example of an opinion question. I may not agree with your answer, but when you tell me what you think, your answer is your opinion, not an attempt to give a correct reply.

Right-or-wrong questions, like closed questions, can be used effectively to confirm understanding, but they are rarely successful during open conversations. When asked right-or-wrong questions, people are often hesitant to respond for fear of being wrong. However, when asked opinion questions, they are much more forthcoming.

In *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* (2011), Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana write that "open-ended questions start with *Why* and *How?* Close-ended questions start with *Is? Do?* and *Can?* [and] words that could be used for both types of questions [include] *What?*, *Who?*, *Where?*, and *When?*" (p. 81).

This work, asking questions, is hard work. I've had to do more thinking than I've ever done . . Can we do this again tomorrow?

—**An adult education student,** quoted in Rothstein & Santana (2011, p. 7)

These distinctions between open and closed questions and right-or-wrong and opinion questions may seem obvious, but in my experience, the most common mistake people make during questioning is to use closed or right-or-wrong questions as vehicles for conversation. When a workshop leader or a meeting facilitator asks a question that falls dead, the reason is almost always that the question was not an opinion question.

Why . . .

1. Why are students dropping out?
2. Why does student engagement decrease the longer students are in school?
3. Why aren't students motivated to learn?
4. Why don't students feel psychologically safe?
5. Why are teacher evaluations usually done in the last months of school?

What if . . .

6. What if students had more voice in what they are learning?
7. What if I change my questions from closed to open questions?
8. What if our school commits to implementing the Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits across the school to create a psychologically safe environment for students and teachers?
9. What if teachers evaluate themselves using video at several points during the year?

How . . .

10. How can I teach to the standards while still giving students an authentic voice?
11. How can I use video to monitor my questions?
12. How often and in what kind of groups should we meet to study the Better Conversations Beliefs and Habits?
13. How can we support teachers so their own evaluations of their teaching are reliable and based on objective standards of teaching excellence?

In his book *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas* (2014), Warren Berger argues that questioning is an essential habit for people to unlock creativity and purpose in their daily lives and for businesses to unlock growth and innovation. Berger supports his claim by quoting Stuart Firestein:

> One good question can give rise to several layers of answers, can inspire decades-long searches for solutions, can generate whole new fields of inquiry, and can prompt changes in entrenched thinking . . . Answers, on the other hand, often end the process. (p. 16)

Berger writes that "open questions . . . tend to encourage creative thinking more than closed yes-or-no questions" (p. 18), and based on his research, he suggests three essential questions: "Why, What If, and How." Berger shows that these three questions stand at the heart of many game-changing innovations, including the invention of the microwave oven, Gatorade, Netflix, windshield wipers, the World Wide Web, and many other innovations.

The "Why, What If, and How" questions could be used in schools. For example, students engaged in project-based authentic learning could structure their projects around the questions. Instructional coaches could use the questions to give focus to coaching interactions with teachers. In the box on page 96, I suggest how the questions might be used to address issues in schools.

BE NONJUDGMENTAL

If we want people to engage in a conversation around questions, we need to ensure that they feel psychologically safe. This means that we do not judge them when they answer. This, of course, is simply living out the Better Conversations Belief that I don't judge my conversation partners.

There are two simple things you can do to not be judgmental when asking questions. First, after you ask a question, you need to listen without assumptions and without prejudging your conversation partner. If you jump to conclusions about what your partner says, chances are he or she will notice and then be less open.

Second, to remain nonjudgmental when you ask questions, let go of the desire to give advice. For some reason most of us have an almost uncontrollable desire to tell others how they should go about their business. However, in almost all cases, our partners don't want advice unless they explicitly ask for it. What people want is someone who listens, values their ideas, and is empathetic and nonjudgmental.

When we ask better questions, we do not use questions to make a statement or direct the conversation to the destination we have chosen. We ask the question because we are genuinely interested. Edgar Schein refers to this dialogical approach as humble inquiry. "Humble inquiry," Schein

writes, "is the skill and art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in people" (2013, p. 21).

Getting Better at Questioning

When Susan Hope experimented with the habit of better questions for our global communication study, she found that focusing on the three simple questioning strategies (be curious, ask open, opinion questions, and be nonjudgmental) made it easier for her to improve. "Sometimes as a coach, I feel like I have so much thinking going on in my head that I miss out on the conversation. I especially liked the three simple steps and being able to focus on the parts I needed."

The volunteers who studied their questioning found that video helped them better understand the kind of questions and how they asked questions. Susan Hope wrote, "While I was pleased with my actual questions, I heard myself making judgments about their ideas, so that will be something I need to work on." Joellen Killion's experiences also suggest people should monitor their habits carefully as they experiment. Joellen found when she was doing the research project, she "asked more questions rather than fewer," and she wrote, "I feel if I had just listened, I would have gotten everything the person wanted to say without working so hard." When we implement the Better Conversations Habits, we need to monitor how well the habits fit with our personality and learning approach and modify their use as necessary.

To help people learn and implement the habit of better questions, three forms are included at the end of this chapter.

The *Looking Back: Asking Better Questions* form can be used by people to analyze whether their questions are open or closed, right or wrong, or opinion.

The *Looking At: Asking Better Questions* form can be used by people to record the effective and ineffective questions they hear in conversations each day.

The *Looking Ahead: Asking Better Questions* form lists many questions that have been suggested by questioning experts so people can plan to ask better questions in the future.

> Being nonjudgmental was not difficult for me. I understand the importance of teachers trusting me, and feeling they can be open, and express their opinions.
>
> **—Sandra Gearhart,** Instructional Support Coach, St. Charles, Illinois

TO SUM UP

When we adopt Habit 4, Asking Better Questions, we communicate respect for others because (a) we don't know the answer to our questions, and (b) we really want to hear what others have to say.

Three strategies are a part of Habit 4, Asking Better Questions—(a) be curious, (b) ask open, opinion questions, and (c) be nonjudgmental.

- **Be curious:** We can demonstrate curiosity by only asking questions we don't know the answer to and by asking for examples. We should avoid asking the unhelpful questions identified by John Farrell-Higgins—demand, set-up, stump, or angry questions—and avoid asking questions that are really statements in disguise.
- **Ask open, opinion questions:** To promote inquiry and dialogue, we should ask open questions (which elicit unlimited responses and provide the opportunity for expansive, extended responses) and opinion questions (which have no specific, correct answer).
- **Be nonjudgmental:** We can ensure people feel psychologically safe by being certain not to judge them when they answer questions.

Warren Berger's (2014) *why, what if, how* questioning framework can be applied in many settings, including personal planning, coaching, and teaching.

GOING DEEPER

Edgar Schein's *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling* (2013) is my favorite book about questioning. Schein simply explains why we should listen with respect and ask with humility if we want to lead effectively—or for that matter, if we want to experience healthy relationships. Schein is especially helpful at clarifying how status and questioning are interwoven.

Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana's *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* (2011) describes an elegant and powerful process for increasing student

engagement and learning by giving them the opportunity to create, analyze, and explore their own questions about learning. Rothstein and Santana's book is persuasive, and I think anyone interested in increasing student engagement or learning should consider reading it and experimenting with their ideas. The book also contains excellent definitions of different types of questions.

Warren Berger's *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas* (2014) is a passionate argument for the importance of questioning. Berger makes the case that questioning should be at the heart of K–12 education, innovation in organizations, and personal planning. I especially found Berger's anecdotes to be interesting. For example, he explains that Bette Nesmith Graham invented what eventually became Whiteout after asking the question, "What if we could paint over our mistakes?" Graham eventually sold her invention for approximately $50,000,000.00 and gave half of it to her son Michael Nesmith, the song writer, executive producer, and former lead guitarist of The Monkees.

LOOKING BACK:

Asking Better Questions

Audio or video record a conversation. The conversation could be at work, home, or in the community, but pick an important one (for example, a goal-setting conversation, if you are a coach). Make sure your conversation partner is OK with your recording it. Afterward, listen to your conversation and code your questions.

QUESTION	OPEN	CLOSED	OPINION	RIGHT/WRONG
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
	○	○	○	○
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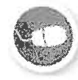

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