

STRATEGIC QUESTIONING

An Approach to Creating Personal and Social Change

by Fran Peavey

edited by Vivian Hutchinson

STRATEGIC QUESTIONING is the skill of asking the questions that will make a difference. It is a powerful tool for personal and social change. It is a tool for giving service to any issue ... as it helps people discover their own strategies and ideas for change.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONING involves a special type of question and a special type of listening. We can use strategic questioning to help friends, co-workers, political allies and adversaries to create their own solutions to any problem.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONING is a process that usually changes the listener as well as the person being questioned. A strategic question opens both of us to another point of view. It invites our ideas to shift and take into account of new information and new possibilities. And it invokes that special creativity that can forge fresh strategies for resolving challenges.



A SPECIAL TYPE OF QUESTION

WHAT WE KNOW OF LIFE is only where we have decided to rest with our questioning. We can operate with what we know – and we can be sure of one thing – somewhere someone is not resting at that state of knowing. They are researching and questioning – working on a new discovery.

We approach problems within a constantly changing body of information about the issues at stake. The amount of information that is known by human beings now doubles every five years! Very few people can keep up with the overwhelming avalanche of data that is being generated in any field. And changes within any body of information are so substantial and complex, that even computer databases are out of date almost as quickly as the local library.

This rapid turn-over of knowledge in any field requires a new understanding of information, and the way that questions relate to problems. An out-moded view of information is that it is a static thing ... something that can be contained in an encyclopedia or a library. A better metaphor for today is that information is like a river. In the river of information, ideas and relationships are constantly changing. Dipping into the river one day brings up different perspectives than the next day, because the river has moved on with one more day of experience and thinking.

*the river of
information*

So it is with questioning. Asking the same question today elicits a different answer than yesterday. What we did not know yesterday, we may know today. Whether we have learned new information or have simply created a solution from our own synthesis and analysis processes, both the question and answer has changed.

Is anything ever fully known? You find one piece of information and from that piece of information new questions arise... and you dip into the river again. So it goes on - discovery, new questions, new discovery, and new questions and on and on.

There is power in approaching a problem with the feeling of “I don’t know...”. There is also power in allowing doubt into what you think you already know. It doesn’t have to be a threat to one’s status or professionalism. Such an attitude allows the questions to emerge, and new discoveries to begin. Such an attitude opens the door to new possibilities and may invite others with fresh resources and perspectives to create new solutions with you. It opens the door to the river of information that is around the issues at stake, and helps us move into a dynamic relationship with this river and with life.

*the power of
"I don't know ..."*

WHAT WOULD OUR WORLD be like if every time we were listening to a gripe session, someone would ask, “I wonder what we can do to change that situation?” and then listened carefully for the answers to emerge and then helped that group to begin to work for change? What would it be like for you to do that in your work, family or social context? Your attention and context might shift from a passive to an active one. You could become a creator, rather than a receiver, of solutions. This shift in perspective is one of the key things that people need in our world just now. And the skill of asking strategic questions is a powerful contribution to making such a shift.

*from passive
to active*

Were you ever taught how to ask questions? Have you ever been taught about asking questions that will really make a difference? Most of us who were brought up in traditional families or in a traditional education system were not. We were certainly never encouraged to ask questions where the answers are not already known.

Traditional schooling was based on asking questions to which the answers were already known: How many wives did Henry VIII have? What colour is that car? What is four times five? We learned that questions have finite and “correct” answers, and there is usually one answer for each question. The wrong answer is punished with a bad grade. The landscape of learning was divided into “right” and “wrong”.

wrong answers !

This may be a convenient way of running schools and testing people’s capacity for memory in examinations, but it has not been a very empowering learning process for students, or a good preparation for the questions that will be coming up in life.

In some families, children are taught that to ask a question where there is no known answer and is to be avoided because it makes people uncomfortable. Adults or Parents who are supposed to be in charge of things seem to hate saying “I don’t know.” It may even be true that asking embarrassing questions, or in any way threatening the power of the adults is a punishable offence. The child learns to stop questioning before the unknowns are revealed.

*transforming
fearful inquiry*

All this is unfortunate to our times, because today – in our personal, professional and public lives – we are surrounded with questions that have no immediately known answers. And if you haven’t been taught how to work with such situation and ask questions, then this can provoke fear and be intimidating.



KEY FEATURES

The key features of STRATEGIC QUESTIONING are :

- It creates knowledge by synthesising new information from that which is already known.
- It awakens the suppressed possibilities of change embedded in each person, in each institution and in each society.
- It is empowering - ownership of the new information stays with the person answering the question.
- It releases the blocks to change and new ideas.
- It facilitates people’s own responses to change.
- It generates energy to make changes happen.
- It creates answers that may not be immediately known but may emerge over time.

Learning how to ask strategic questions is a path of transforming this passive and fearful inquiry into the world into a dynamic exploration of the information around us and the solutions we need. We can “make up” answers to almost any problem.

Take the traditional school. What would it have been like if when the teacher asked “what is four times five?” and when we had said “29”. The teacher could say “wrong!” and leave it at that, or she could ask us to explain our thought process and how we got 29. We would have learned about ourselves, our thinking process and we might have discovered mathematics in an active way. The teacher might learn something about how to increase the effectiveness of her teaching methods.

In families that don’t encourage questioning, an adult would rarely follow up an “I don’t know...” with a “How can we find out?”. They are often so absorbed by their embarrassment, that they do not show the child how to find out. But it is important for children to grow up knowing that doubt, uncertainty and unknowing exist in an adult world - a world that they will inherit and need to play their part in creating solutions for.

"How can we find out?"

SHAPING A STRATEGIC QUESTION * involves several key features :

1. *A strategic question creates motion.*

Most of the traditional questions that we’ve been taught to ask are static. Strategic questions ask how can we move? They create movement. They are dynamic rather than allowing a situation to stay stuck.

Often the way a conversation is structured creates resistance to movement. The martial art t’ai chi teaches a lot of wisdom about meeting resistance. It says that when you meet an obstacle, you only make it more firm by pushing directly on it. If you meet an object coming at you with resistance, it is not very useful at all. T’ai chi says that if you meet and move with the energy of the obstacle coming at you, taking the energy from the other, then motion in a new direction emerges. Both parties end up in a very different place than when they started, and the relationship between them is changed.

t'ai chi of questions

It is the same with asking a strategic question. As an example, suppose Sally is working on where she will live, and perhaps she has heard of some good real estate bargains in Sydney, and she’s a bit stuck on what she should do next.

I could say to her, “Why don’t you just move to Sydney?”. This question might be provocative, but not very helpful. It is really a suggestion that is pretending to be a question. For my own internal reasons I think she should move to Sydney. Perhaps I am projecting into the question my own wish to move to Sydney. Whatever. I’m leading her by the nose. And because I am asking a manipulative question, it is likely that the more I pressure Sally, the less likely she is to consider the Sydney option.

manipulative questions

* I didn’t invent the words “strategic questioning”, although I thought I did. I had been using the term for four years, when a few years ago while doing some research I came upon a small book about teaching called Strategic Questioning written by Ronald T. Hyman, a close friend of a college professor of mine. So I must have heard the words 25 years ago and the word seeds got planted way back there in my mind; then when I needed them they came blossoming up. *Thank you* Ronald T. Hyman.

A more strategic question would be to ask Sally, "What type of place would you like to move to?", or "What places come to mind when you think of living happily?", or "What is the meaning of this move in your life?". Sally is then encouraged to talk about the qualities she wants from her new home, to set new goals ... and you can better work with her to achieve these goals.

Asking questions that are *dynamic*, can help people explore how they can move on an issue. On my first working trip to India with the Friends of the Ganges project, I asked the local people, "What would you like to do to help clean up the river?"

Now, you might ask, "How did I know they wanted to clean up the river?". Well, I wanted to ask a question that assumed motion on this issue. I assumed that people are always wanting to do more appropriate behaviour. I further assumed that they wanted to move from their state of powerlessness regarding what to do about the pollution in the Ganges. Many interesting ideas emerged when I used that question - some of which we have implemented.

When we are stuck on a problem, what keeps us from acting for change is either a lack of information, or we have been wounded in our sense of personal power on an issue, or there is no system in place that enables us to move the issue forward. In our stuckness, we don't see how to make the motion.

*seeing how to
make motion*

When I ask a question like, "What would you like to do to help clean up the river?", I open up a door for the local people to move beyond their grief and guilt and powerlessness about the pollution to the active dreaming and creation of their own contributions.

2. A strategic question creates options.

If I asked Sally, "Why don't you move to Sydney?", I have asked a question that is dynamic only in one direction (Sydney) and it very much limits the options she is challenged to think about.

A more powerful strategic question opens the options up. "Where would you like to live?", or, "What are the three or four places that you feel connected to?". There are much more helpful questions to ask her at this time. Sally might have been so busy thinking about the real estate bargains in Sydney, that she has lost a sense of all the other possibilities and her real goals.

*opening
the options up*

A strategic questioner would help Sally look at the many options equally. Supposing Sally says she could move to Byron Bay or Sydney. It's not up to me to say to myself, "I think Sydney is the best, and I should encourage her down that path". If you're being ethical about it, then you could best help Sally sort out her own direction by questioning all the options even-handedly, with the same enthusiasm and interest in discussing both Sydney and Byron Bay. Not only that, but you could help by asking if there are any more options that occur to her during the questioning time (Twin Falls, Idaho ... or New Plymouth, New Zealand). Out of these questions, a brand new option may emerge.

It is particularly important for a strategic questioner not to focus on only two options. We are so accustomed to binary thinking, whether it's either Sydney or Byron Bay ... that Brisbane cannot emerge as a viable alternative. Usually when someone is only considering two options, they simply have not done the creative thinking to look at all the possibilities.

*don't focus on
only two options*

People are usually comfortable when they have two options and think they can make a decision at that level. This is part of the delusion of control. And since

two alternatives is already more complex than one, people stop thinking. The world is far more complex and exciting than any two options would indicate, but having two options creates the idea that a decision, however limited, is being made.

I have a friend whose daughter had got into some conflicts and had run away. My friend was fortunate in that she knew which train the daughter was probably leaving on in a few hours time. She was trying to decide whether to just let the daughter get on the train and run away, or to go to the train and insist that she come home.

I talked it over with her, and we worked on these options for a while, and then I asked, "What else could you do to help your daughter with her conflicts?". She thought. And then a new idea came up - She could run away *with* her daughter, and take the twelve hours on the train to help her sort things out.

Now, because my friend was scared and afraid for her daughter, she had been unable to think of this fine option until the door was opened through the question. It was the kind of option that she would probably have thought of a month after the event when all her anxious feelings had subsided, then she would have kicked herself for not thinking of it at the time.

3. A strategic question digs deeper.

Questions can be like a lever you use to pry open the stuck lid on a paint can. And there are long lever questions and short lever questions.

*short and long
levered
questions*

Supposing I have just a short little lever, we can only just crack open that lid on the can. But if we have a longer lever, or a more dynamic question, we can open that can up much wider and really stir things up.

Some people approach problems with their heads just like a closed paint can. If the right question is applied, and it digs deep enough, then we can stir up all the creative solutions to that problem. We can chip away a lot of the crusty sediment that is trapping the lid on that person's head. A question can be a stirrer. It can lead to synthesis, motion and energy.

4. A strategic question avoids "Whys".

When I asked Sally, "Why don't you move to Sydney?", it was a question that focused on why she doesn't do it, rather than creating a more active and forward motion on the issue.

Most "Why" questions are like that. They force you to defend an existing decision or rationalise the present. "Why" questions also have the effect of creating resistance to change.

The openness of a particular question is obvious at the gross extremes, but becomes far more subtle and subjective as you deepen your understanding of the skills of strategic questioning. For example, can you feel the difference between asking, "Why don't you work on poverty?", and, "What keeps you from working on poverty?"

Sometimes a Why? question is very powerful as you focus on values, and meaning. But in general it is a short-lever question.

5. A strategic question avoids “Yes” or “No” answers.

Again, these type of questions (“Have you considered...”) don’t really encourage people to dig deeper into their issues. A question that is answered with a “Yes” or “No” reply, almost always leaves the person being asked the question passive and in an uncreative state.

A strategic questioner needs to rephrase their queries so that they avoid the “yes and No” dead ends. It can make a huge difference to the communication taking place.

dead ends

I heard of a student who was very intrigued by the ideas behind strategic questioning. He realised that he hardly ever spoke a question to his wife without it getting simply a “Yes” or “No” in reply. A week after the class on strategic questioning, he reported that the technique had completely changed his home life! He had gone home and told his wife about these special types of questions, and they agreed to avoid asking a question that has a “Yes” or “No” answer ... for a week. He reported they had never talked so much in their lives!

6. A strategic question is empowering.

A strategic question creates the confidence that motion can actually happen, and this is certainly empowering. When I have asked people in India, “What would you like to do to clean your river?”, it assumes that they have a part in that picture of healing. It even expresses a confidence in the person being questioned that they have a contribution to designing the cleaning-up process.

expressing confidence

One of my favourite questions is, “What would it take for you to change on this issue?”. This question lets the other person create the path for change. Imagine an environmental protester going to a lumber mill owner and asking, “What would it take for you to stop cutting down the old-growth trees?”. This question is an invitation to the mill owner to co-create options for the future of his business with the community. The owner might tell the questioner the obstacles he faces in making changes to his business, and maybe they can work together to satisfy some of their mutual needs so that the old-growth trees can be preserved.

The planning that comes out of asking such a strategic question may not exactly resemble what either party wanted in the beginning ... but a new reality is born out of the dialogue, and could well work to achieve both the protester’s and the mill owner’s goals.

Empowerment is the opposite of manipulation. When you use strategic questioning, rather than putting ideas into a person’s head, you are actually allowing that person to take what’s already in their head and work with it.

I had a student who worked in the command structure of a large police force. Like many government departments, his department had been restructured and this had led to stress and disgruntlement between colleagues. They were not working together as a team. For weeks in their staff meetings, members of the department had been asking themselves, “What was wrong with the way we are working?”.

When my student took the strategic questioning methods back to his unit, his department started to approach their difficulties with different, and more empowering, questions. They asked, “What will it take for us to function as a team?”, “How do we want to work together?”, “What do each of us want to do?”,

*What will it
take ... ?*

“What support do we each need ?” They reported that after the strategic questioning session, the low morale started to move, meetings became creative and a sense of teamwork returned to the unit.

7. A strategic question asks the unaskable questions.

*challenging
values and
assumptions*

For every individual, group, or society, there are questions which are taboo. And because those questions are taboo there is tremendous power in them. A strategic question is often one of these “unaskable” questions. And it usually is unaskable because it challenges the values and assumptions that the whole issue rests upon.

I like the fairy story about the king who went on a parade without any clothes on, because he had been tricked by some unscrupulous weavers into thinking he was wearing a magnificent costume. It was a child that asked the unaskable question, “Why doesn’t the King have any clothes on?”. If that child had been a political activist, she might have asked other unaskable questions, like, “ Why do we need a King?”, or, “How can we get a wiser government?”.

In the early 1980’s, one of the unaskable questions for me was, “What shall we do if a nuclear bomb is dropped?”. You couldn’t answer that without facing our overwhelming capacity for destruction, and the senselessness of it. That question allowed many of us to move beyond terror and denial, and work politically to keep it from happening.

Some other unaskable questions might be : for the seriously ill person : “ Do you want to live or die ?” ... for those involved in sexual politics : “ Is gender a myth?” ... for the workaholic : “ What do you do for joy ?” ... for the tree activist: “ How should we have building materials ?” ... or for the politician : “ What do you like about the other parties’ platform ?”, or “ How could both parties work closer together ?”.

Questioning values is a strategic task of our times. This is because it is the values behind highly politicised issues that have usually got us into the trouble in the first place. We need to look at a value, a habit, an institutional pattern and ask, “Is this value working or not?”, “Are these values working for the common good?”, “Are these values pro-survival (pro-life) or anti-life?”

If you can ask the unaskable in a non-partisan way, not to embarrass someone but to probe for more suitable answers for the future ... then it can be a tremendous service to any “stuck” issue.



THE STRATEGIC QUESTIONING PROCESS

– Toolbox –



ALL QUESTIONS DIFFER in their power. It's not a matter of a question being labelled strategic or not, a question can be more or less dynamic, more or less strategic, more or less actioning, longer or shorter levered.

To adapt de Bono's terms there are "rock" questions, those that assume a tough truth, which focus on hard edged, permanent, unchanging reality, and then there are "water" questions which are those which flow, which work to find a way through, a reality that moves, a focus on "to" rather than "is". A water question takes the form of the container into which it is poured, but is not a form unto itself.

I like to think of these question families as increasing in fluidity, dynamic and strategic power as you go down from level to level. In any use of the strategic questioning process, we would start near the top of the family order and work our way down to the more powerful question families.

FIRST LEVEL – Describing the issue or problem

WHILE THIS LEVEL does not use strategic questions as such, describing the issue or problem is an important job. We need to gain the facts and points of view of all the main players in order to frame the strategic questions later.

1. FOCUS QUESTIONS

These questions identify the situation and the key facts necessary to an understanding of the issues at stake. When using questioning with an individual, this is the time when the facts of the situation are presented. Questions here focus on understanding the relevant parts of their story. When using Strategic questioning in a community polling process, questions focus on how they think about the particular issue at stake.

The key in framing the questions is to be open and non-partisan in the questions and in the tone of the questioner. It should be an equally valid question for a person no matter what their position is on the issue.

"What aspects of our community life concern you?"

"What do you think about the logging of old growth redwoods?"

"How has the violence in our community impacted you?"

"What are you most concerned about in your community?"

2. OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

These questions are concerned with what one sees and the information one has heard regarding the situation.

"What do you see?"

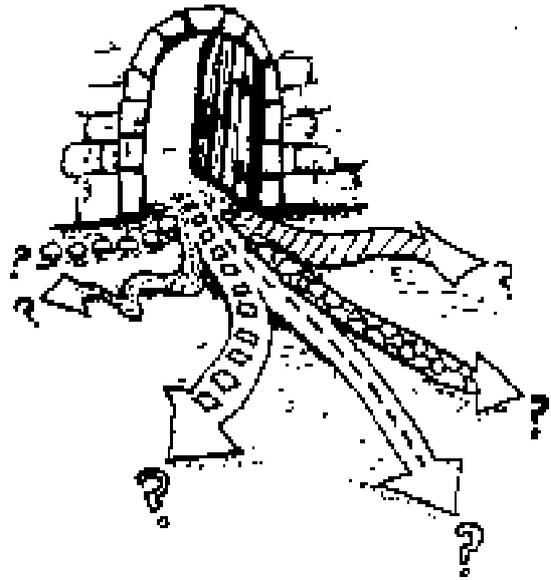
"What do you hear?"

"What have you heard and read about this situation?"

"Which sources do you trust and why?"

"What effects of this situation have you noticed in people, in the earth?"

"What do you know for sure and what are you not certain about?"



3. ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

These questions focus on the meaning given to events. Here the questioner is trying to ascertain how a person thinks about the situation, what motivation is ascribed to key participants in the story and the relation of individuals and events. "Why" questions are appropriate here. You are still gathering information and there is usually little motion in your questions - but you might be surprised. Sometimes these questions trigger strong feelings, or unanticipated motion.

"What do you think about?"

"What are the reasons for ?"

"What is the relationship ofto?"

4. FEELING QUESTIONS

These questions are concerned with body sensations, emotions and health. It is important not to skip over these questions. Feelings often interfere with thinking, trust and imagination. Listening to and honouring the personal consequences of an event or issue is important in freeing the person to think about the area.

You do not have to "fix" the feelings ... you can't. Simply listen respectfully and when you sense the person is ready, move on. They may return to this level from time to time naturally. Some people may wish to spend very little time in the feeling level, while others may get lost in feeling and need some encouragement to move into a more dynamic discussion.

"What sensations do you have in your body when you think or talk about this situation?"

"How do you feel about the situation?"

"How has the situation affected your own physical or emotional health?"

SECOND LEVEL – Strategic Questions. Digging deeper.

NOW WE START asking questions that increase the motion. The mind takes off, creating new information, synthesising, moving from what is known into the realm of what could be. Here you find more long-lever questions.

5. VISIONING QUESTIONS

These questions are concerned with identifying one's ideals, dreams, values. Articulating dreams and visions makes them a bit more real and their power is undeniable. We begin to build a bridge from the anchor of the present into midair. We stop pushing things as they are and focus on how things can develop.

"How would you like it to be?"

"What is the meaning of this situation in your own life?"

6. CHANGE QUESTIONS

These questions are concerned with how to get from the present situation towards a more ideal situation. As future alternatives take form, they are examined. Often the vision is partial but people are able to identify pieces that need to change. Later these specifics can be worked into a cohesive whole. Some people prefer a visioning process before asking specific change questions.

"How could the situation be changed for it to be as you would like it?"

"What will it take to bring the current situation towards the ideal?"

"What exactly needs to change here?"

"How might those changes come about? Name as many ways as possible"

"Who can make a difference?"

"What are changes you have seen or read about?"

"How did those changes come about?" (here you are trying to find the individual's change view which will greatly impact the strategies for change available to the person.)

7. CONSIDER ALL THE ALTERNATIVES

These questions examine the alternatives that come from the vision and ways things need to change. There are many ways to get to any goal. If a person is only examining two alternatives maybe more feeling work needs to be done.

Be sure not to give more time, enthusiasm, or focus to any one alternative even if you think it is the best. Also search out alternatives that seem on first glance to be odd or unusual. These ideas may have the seeds of other more viable alternatives, or suggest other ideas later on.

You may focus on creating alternative visions or alternative ways of achieving the changes mentioned above. Some people will get overwhelmed with questions that ask for "all the ways" but will continue to create if you simply request more ideas one at a time. Stay open to new ideas popping up throughout the process.

"What are all the ways you can think of that would accomplish these changes?"

"How could you reach that goal? What are other ways?"

"Be sure to tell me if other ideas come up ..."

8. CONSIDER THE CONSEQUENCES

Explore the consequences of each alternative. Conscientiously examine each alternative for personal, environmental, social or political consequences, giving the same amount of time and energy to each alternative. Returning to feeling questions may be beneficial here.

"How would your first alternative affect the others in your group?"

"What would be the effect of using the runoff for your garden?"

"How would you feel doing (name each alternative)?"

"What would be the political effect if you did?"

9. CONSIDER THE OBSTACLES

Each alternative has things in the way of being achieved. Identify the obstacle, and how to deal with it if the alternative were selected. Focusing on obstacles is an important first step in removing them. Obstacles may be addictions, values or needs. It is more useful to focus on what keeps a person, group, or institution from changing rather than pressuring them to change. Choices are clearest when the change and the obstacles to change are visible to both the questioner and questionee.

"What would need to change in order for alternative "a" to be done?"

"What keeps you from doing?"

"What prevents you from getting involved?"



10. PERSONAL INVENTORY and SUPPORT QUESTIONS

These questions are concerned with identifying one's interests, potential contribution and the support necessary to act. An important aspect of encouraging change is identifying the support needed to make the change. It may be financial, verbal, or emotional support that is needed.

"How can I support you?"

"What would it take for you to participate in the change?"

"What do you like to do that might be useful in bringing about these changes?"

"Tell me what is special about you."

"What aspects of the situation interest you the most?"

"What support would you need to work for this change?"

At this point in the questioning a decision may begin to emerge. Check to see if the person you are questioning perceives the decision arriving. If the decision is not apparent, do not force it. Often several days of pondering and several nights of dreaming are needed before clarity comes.

8. PERSONAL ACTION QUESTIONS

These questions are those which get down to the specifics of what to do, and how and when to do it. The actual plan begins to emerge. A questioning relationship may use several time periods to advantage. Sleeping and dreaming help the inner sense "true" the vision and plan. Action questions can also focus on alternative plans and possible outcomes in both the long and short term. Feel free to play with the planning process — remembering that the future is always changing.

"Who do you need to talk to?"

"How can you join a group that is working on this?"

"How can you get others together to work on this?"



A SPECIAL TYPE OF LISTENING

AN IMPORTANT TASK OF strategic questioning is to create the environment where people can see the solutions that are within themselves. You listen deep into the moving heart of the person opposite you. A strategic questioner listens for the latent solutions hidden in every problem. And this involves a special type of listening.

A strategic questioner listens for the latent solutions that are hidden within every problem. And this involves a special type of listening. You are not merely passively listening ... you are creating an action path with your attention.

*listening for solutions
that are hidden within
the problem*

This dynamic listening is in itself a special type of communication. It involves immersing yourself within the sea of “transactions” that surround an issue. You are not just listening to this information in a static or passive way. Your attention is focused on the reality of now ... and also paying attention to the clues of what it could be.

It is this dynamic listening that opens doorways within the issues being discussed. Your attention creates space around the speaker - space within which they can explore their own options.

Dynamic listening is more like *looking* than listening. Usually when you listen you hear everything around you in one total “hearing”. But this kind of listening is listening in only one direction — your ears are turned only toward the deepest part of the person or people opposite you. You are listening to their thinking, to their feeling, to their dreams, and to their essence. Your ears wander in between their words, their sighs, and their questions, searching out meaning, resolve, motion and need.

dynamic listening

You look for the obstacles to caring, the blocks to action.

You look for what is pushing people, and why they feel compelled to do something about the issue.

You look for the group’s ideas of how they want things to be — how they see things could or should change.

You look for how they think about change and how change happens in their lives.

You look for the path to change that the group sees — however dimly and timidly they see it. Sometimes you explore the path together, asking questions which allow you both to think freshly and creatively.

You look for the dreams and goals planted deep in the group or person’s heart.

You look for how to remove the resistance which is found on the path of change.

You look for feelings as they anticipate each possible choice or option in front of them.

You look for what support each person would need to move on any path of change.

wandering minds

WHAT DOES IT TAKE for us to really listen deeply to each other ? Usually our minds are not full of attention while we are hearing the other person speaking, our thoughts are full of reactions, distraction, fantasies and judgments.

The musician Karen Hagberg has written eloquently about the importance of dynamic listening. She writes * :

“ Without careful listening, a pianist cannot understand the various ways a single note can be played ... It seems impossible that we do not listen to ourselves, what else is there to do while we are practicing?

“ What else are we doing? ... There are many things, actually, that I am able to do instead of listening. I can hear an imaginary pianist, Horowitz for example, and imagine his sound as mine. I can feel the music instead of listening to it and move around a lot as I play, imagining that my feelings must be coming out as sound.

“ Possibly I am daydreaming, half asleep, not concentrating ... Usually, though, I am merely thinking about something. Thinking is not listening, nor is judging the performance as it evolves. Listening is listening ... “

listening as if
your life
depended on it

There are times when we truly listen — usually when we sense ourselves to be in danger. We stop in our tracks, our ears prick up, and we listen as if our lives depend on it. The listening required for strategic questioning is like that ... we need to listen as if someone’s life depends on it - because it does.

Through this dynamic listening to ourselves, to the earth and to our fellow citizens - even those we might consider our adversaries - we may create the space where people can discover themselves saying great ideas, or finding the energy and will to make changes happen in their lives.

STRATEGIC QUESTIONING IS POLITICAL because it is a process that encourages people to find their own way through the rapids of change. It is political because it leads to strategies for change. It is political because it can take political debates beyond dogma and ideology ... into fresh perspectives on common problems. It is political because it is a way of transforming your attachment to your own goals and opening up options that are common goals.

questioning and social
change

It is funny how we resist change, resist participating in the changes necessary in our time ... I know I do. But when we get involved with change, we can tap into a surprising stream of aliveness and creativity and inner wisdom which is our contribution to the process of social change.

There are many things that keep us from acting on what we know :

We don’t know any alternatives, as we have a lack of good information on the situation.

We may lack leadership or the confidence to pursue our goals as leaders ourselves.

We may subscribe to a kind of fatalism which does not encourage thinking about alternatives.

We may have taken in the often frightening information about the problem in a passive and alienating way. (Television is one of the prime example of passive information transfer). And we are stuck in inactivity until our feelings about the information are dealt with.

* From Karen Hagberg's *Matsumoto News*, from the forthcoming book *When the Teacher is Ready the Student Appears*.

Strategic questioning helps us break through this sort of gridlock. In dynamic dialogue there is a focus on how change can happen and with it comes the potential for new “will” to arise also.

In Hindi there is a special word, *sunculp* for this determination. Sunculp is the process of tapping into the strength and collective will of the whole. It is a will that is not individual but is part of the will of the entire context. It is a resolve and commitment which we experience for the whole society.

Sunculp can be found in any timid person through strategic questioning. Some years ago the prevalent view in social change work was that if we only got the information to the “people” about what was wrong, then they would make the changes necessary. Now we realise that information is simply not enough. We actually have to facilitate the motion on the issue and create and sustain the sunculp to make the change required by the information.

*tapping into
the collective
will*

HERE ARE SEVERAL THINGS TO CONSIDER when shaping your questions for social change work :

1. *Let the ideas emerge from the people affected.*

Where will great social change ideas come from? One of the basic assumptions of the strategic questioning process is that knowledge resides and is alive in all people ... that they see and know intimately the problems that are facing them, and they are probably in the best position to collectively design alternatives for themselves. The point here is to ask questions in such a way that it lets the ideas and energy come from the individual or system itself rather than the social change worker.

*let the ideas
emerge from
the system itself*

It's not my job to figure out in my mind what a person should do and then somehow get her to do it. I need to stay out of the way. My opinions will not serve. My opinions will not be empowering to the person being questioned, and will not be useful.

The person being questioned needs to figure out where they need to move and the greatest service that I can be is simply to dynamically listen, ask good questions, rephrase and reflect what they are saying back to them, and generally help them see their own pathway through the problems.

For years we have had the image of the social change worker standing in front of the crowd “Here's what we have to do.” I am not suggesting that we replace leadership, but that the leaders of the group spend a significant amount of time listening to the members, the citizens they are trying to serve, and to their “adversaries” ... and then distil what has been heard before strategy is determined. Ideas are synthesised from the listening work rather than coming solely from the leader's own mind or from one's own immediate circle.

We all know of many people who are perfectly content to tell you what you should do. They are people who love to dispense “solutions”. And we all know of experts who go from one country to another country or from one society from within a country to another society, telling people what to do. I call it the “consultancy disease”.

A change that happens as a result of the “this is what I think you should do ...” school of consultancy is often too shallow and too fast for it to have a long lasting effect. It is not empowering for the people who are trapped within the issues at stake. The people involved might look as if they have changed, but because the change strategy has not come from them, they don't own it, they

have not invested themselves in the change. Most people, maybe you, have had the experience of going to a friend for advice and found yourself saying things that surprised you. You were saying things with a wisdom you didn't know you possessed, putting ideas together in a fresh way that seemed clear, coherent and profound.

Without giving advice, the questioner-friend helped you think freshly and come up with a plan of action that felt clear and uncluttered with all the upset and confusion that beset you before the conversation. If advice was offered it was probably in an empowering way, "I personally think you might consider(an option) but whatever you decide I will love and respect you. I know you will know best what to do ..."

When using strategic questioning in a social change campaign, you might similarly say, "I think but I surely don't see the picture through your eyes. Let us work to find an alternative that meets both of our needs. Even if we differ in our opinions, I respect you and will work with you to find the best way to deal with our common situation ..."

Strategic questioning does not require that the practitioner forget about their own opinions. That would be dis-respectful to yourself ! It only means that you carry your opinions in a way that does not interfere with dialogue, the respect and the exploration of alternatives that you are trying to achieve.

2. Look for the "change view" of the people affected.

Individuals and societies have discrete and hidden views of how change happens. The strategic questioner needs to find out how the major players on an issue explain the social changes they have seen. The strategies they are willing to use to create change in their lives, institutions and communities, will predominantly come from their "change view".

For instance, if you ask people in the United States to tell you what changes they have seen in their society they will give a whole list. One of their frequent observations is that people's smoking habits have changed significantly, and that smoking in public buildings has become minimal.

When asked how this change came about people mention: changes in laws allowing smoking, the lobbying of anti-smoking groups, research showing that even passive smoking was dangerous for health, educational articles promoting anti-smoking, law suits against cigarette companies, etc. All these represent different strategies for making the social change happen.

It is my experience that the people who mentioned educational campaigns are the most likely to put their money and energy into future educational campaigns concerning some other social change issue. Those mentioning law suits will support challenges in court or might be lawyers themselves. Writers often credit change as coming from popular articles ... and so forth. Understanding the "change views" of individuals gives us clues about the strategies which these people will support in future campaigns in their community or society.

3. Create a neutral, common ground.

When a questioner is perceived as committed to an impartial stance, and they enter into a highly charged political problem, then people on all sides of the issue are given a safe space to let off steam and then explore alternatives.

A team testing this theory in the early 1980's questioned many people in the Middle East about the conflicts within the region. To the PLO they asked, " Why doesn't the PLO recognise Israel ?". To the Israelis they asked, " What is keeping Israel from creating self rule for Palestine ?".

The pat answers of course came out first. Everyone knows the answers that are available from the strong ideologies that surround the issues of the Middle East. But with more questioning in a neutral way, we can help each of the parties think freshly in an as-yet undiscovered place for them.

When Barbara Walters, the ABC-TV interviewer, asked Anwar Sadat, "What would it take for you to go to Jerusalem and meet with Menachim Begin?", suddenly Sadat was examining the obstacles to this goal in a new way. Barbara Walters was identified as a neutral party to the conflict, and she asked a strategic question at just the right moment. She enabled Sadat to think freshly about the political realities and envision a different reality of his own making. As he talked, he found his own way to break through those obstacles, and move the issues forward towards greater peace in the Middle East.

4. Create respect.

The strategic questioning process is a way of talking with people with whom you have differences without abandoning your own beliefs and yet looking for the common ground between you. This requires a basic sense of respect for the person being questioned. In every heart there is ambiguity ... in every ideology there are parts which don't fit. Your job is not to judge the responses to your questions, but to look for the potential for this person to make their own movement on the issue at stake.

Strategic questioning assumes that both I and my "adversary" want to do better than we are presently doing. That starts with creating a basic feeling of respect between us. For example, take a developer, such as a sand miner, timber logger or multi-national corporation. There is probably a hidden ambivalence in the developer's heart about what they are doing, and at least a part of them wants to be doing better for the earth, better for all its creatures.

Strategic questions assume that the common ground is "findable" by both of us in dialogue. We explore alternatives together - with respect.- that is the key. Here, we can discover a real commitment to pluralism of ideas and world-views. And we learn to not only cope with the differences between us, but also how to make it work for us institutionally and socially as well.

Within a world being torn apart by seemingly irreconcilable differences, creating such respect is really a key task for these times.

5. Listen to pain.

Listening to suffering is one of the most important things a social change worker can do. The job is not only to listen, but to let the suffering fully into your heart without denying its reality. This takes both courage and vulnerability on the part of the questioner. You may find yourself confronting your own limitations of heart, your own sense of helplessness surrounding the issues at stake. You may find yourself considering radical alternatives to this suffering as well as the many levels of meaning it may have.

When you ask questions about the important things in life you're going to touch sores. People are so scared, so hurt by their own powerlessness that opening up a subject like poverty and homelessness, the threat of nuclear war, the oppression of racial and ethnic groups, a sick river, the oppression of gays and lesbians, violence or any other politically hot topic may be overwhelming to the people being questioned.

When faced with the pain of others, it is important to give it your fullest attention - attention as if someone's life depended on it. There is a temptation here to think that the pain you may be witnessing is only an individual suffering, yet all individual suffering is tied to our collective suffering. And there are institutional and community ways of addressing or ignoring the issue that gives rise to individual pain.

Empathy is the skill of saints ... it might take you a bit longer to deal with suffering. Don't expect to be in the presence of pain and not be profoundly affected by it. When we are at the edge of what we feel to be comfortable with, we may feel a kind of vertigo which threatens to pull us into a void and join the pain and the rage that goes with it. Will you go over the edge or stay here? Be patient with yourself and the people you are questioning.

Listening is caring. Allowing change to ripen is caring. Caring is healing. By bringing strategic questions into a world of suffering, you can become part of that world learning to heal itself, looking for ways that the pain can move.



GO FORTH AND QUESTION !

STRATEGIC QUESTIONING CAN BE a personal process if used between two people for their own growth and change, or it can be a political process when considering changes amongst groups and institutions working for the common good.

You can practice strategic questioning through every day conversation. I would urge people to learn by practicing these processes in twos and threes, as it is often very difficult to think of long lever questions while listening one on one in a conversation. Listening is challenging, thinking of long lever questions is challenging, and living in the world is hard, so I think it is easier to learn to ask strategic questions where you can sit back a bit. You need to observe and get enough distance to examine the unexamined assumptions, look for movement and think of the unaskable.

The process of strategic questioning brings up in people their most deeply personal visions of the future. Even subjects like sex and money pale in contrast to our deeper feelings about our dreams and fears for the health of the earth and our own society.

The current political system is characterised by static and cynical thinking which only barely masks our fears and dreams about our collective lives. I do not see apathy in our citizenry, I see a deep fear of caring too much and a fear of being disappointed. I see a passive people who are being fed information about the world in passive and isolating ways and who are afraid they will loose what they have if they challenge that passivity. I see a people who have fallen out of touch with the habits of liberation. I see people longing for a way to move to a better relationship with themselves, with their families and with their society. I also see a people who are experiencing change. And I see the shock that accompanies change, as people try to figure out the implications of these changes on their lives and institutions.

So few ways remain for us to show our caring in the world without risking being ripped off or manipulated into some ego driven or sectarian campaign. We have learned to suspect political double-talk and group-think ... which has left us unable to acknowledge our longings for real political change.

But we can act. We must accept the responsibility that whatever we do - or don't do - impacts on the ways of life we all share. We are always involved ... even if we are sitting on the sideline. We are consuming resources, having relationships, working toward goals. There is no way we are not involved in what is happening. The question is, How best can we be involved ?

We can start with deep and dynamic questioning where the solutions are limited only by our imaginations. Let us find out what our neighbours and co-workers really think. Then when we have heard enough of what people long to do, to be, let us go forward with strategies which come from the people.

Fran Peavey



A STORY of STRATEGIC QUESTIONING

QUESTIONS THAT ARE CLEANING THE GANGES

I'M FROM IDAHO, I don't know if you know what that means, but it's very hard for a person from Idaho to think of cleaning up the Ganges River. About as far as you can get from cleaning up the Ganges River is Idaho. When an Indian friend asked me to help him clean up the river, I knew I had no experience cleaning up rivers. I knew nothing about sewage. What I did know about was how to build a strategy for social change. It seemed that was what they needed.

When I first went to India I used strategic questioning. I began by building a series of questions, starting with how they saw the problem themselves. "What do you see when you look at the river?", "How do you explain the situation with the river to your children?", or, "How do you feel about the condition of the river?"

I listened very carefully to how they explained to themselves what they saw. Essentially I was looking at their logic as well as language. I was looking for the cultural wiring around the river."

I couldn't say, "Oh, I see the river's polluted." If I said that it would be like my saying in a western context, "Your mother is a whore." In the context of India,

it would be a cultural insult, and the Indians would stop listening. It would create a reaction and resistance. So I had to find out how they explained the pollution to themselves.

Over and over again I heard something like, "... the river is holy, but she is not pure. We are not taking care of her the way she needs us to."

The funny thing is that, after hearing this reply, I noticed that I started to personally think less in terms of "pollution" and more in terms of "people not taking care of the river." This was an important change of perspective for me.

Pollution is an abstraction that avoids the responsibility of the people who are making the mess - by focusing the attention on the river. It is almost as if the river is to blame for being polluted !

Very often people also said, "I see the problem, but the others don't." This answer told me a lot about the taboos of the society, and the distance between the people. Such a response told me what they can and can not talk about with each other. Often in a situation such as the holy Ganges, the symbolic overload is so great that to talk about what you really think may seem sacrilegious.

I needed to understand their "change view" - how they expected change to happen, what kind of strategies they have confidence in. In India, there is no social change that compares to the liberation of their country from the control of the British ... and this effects their views on how change happens.



"How do you explain the situation with the river to your children?"

When I asked how that change had happened, I got the strategies for change - satyagraha, fasting, direct action, pressuring civic leaders, citizen's assemblies, marches to the capitol - stories of change strategy that are embedded in that culture. These are also the strategies they were willing to use now to clean their holy river.

I would then ask, "What would you like to do to clean the river?" and they would take their "change view" and apply it to this specific situation.

For several years the Foundation held a citizen's assembly where officials in charge of the Ganga Action Plan came to a large multicolored tent (called a Shamayana) to discuss the progress of the work and plans with members of the Foundation and the citizens. In a public forum the citizens questioned their plans and lack of planning. After the officials gave their presentations citizens stood up at the microphone and gave their own ideas and asked questions. Lobbying was a strategy which went on all the time. We have talked about direct actions and other strategies but were not yet ready for that public campaign yet. It was clear to me that the members of the Foundation had a very precise idea of what to do when the time comes.

One 13-year old young man suggested that he and his friends would like to "get some sticks and go up and down the river and persuade people not to toilet on the river." I did not evaluate this idea but passed it on even handedly to the Foundation members. They recognized the seeds of a great idea in the one the young man offered.

Thus the idea of the home guard was born, and for 5 years or so this consisted of a team of adults who walked along the river front of the city, or moved on the river in a boat. They had sticks but no guns. Their task was to discourage citizens from acts disrespectful to the river like toileting, washing with soap, and dumping animal carcasses into the river.

Before you get too judgmental about this, you need to recognize that most people in India do not have private bathrooms in their homes, and it is hard in a city of over a million to find bare land to bury cows, goats and dogs when they die.

People often told me how impossible it was to clean the river. I started to think that maybe it was going to take quite a long time and I had better start thinking about the next generation in my questioning. I already was questioning young people but I added a question for the adults which said, "How are you preparing your children to clean up the river?"

Everyone in the foundation had been asked that question and to a person they had said something like, "We are doing nothing to prepare the children to clean the river...". Now, their great love of the river, their love for their children, and the void in their answers to that question could not long exist in the same minds. The dissonance was too great.

One day about a week after that particular round of questioning, we had gone on a trip to Lucknow to see the governor and to check out toilet designs. One afternoon when I was taking a shower and someone came running in and said, "Peavey, come right away, we've got a great idea." I thought, "Gosh, you know, I rarely get summoned from the shower with a great idea." So I quickly dressed and combed my hair and went to find them.

They were gathered and enthusiastically discussing a plan: "We're going to have a poster painting contest for the children. We'll have all the students in

Benares draw posters about what they see regarding the health of the river. And we'll hang the winning posters up at a large musical event. The adults will see what the children see and be embarrassed..."

It was an original idea. Now, where do you think that idea came from? Clearly the idea was theirs. Everybody in that room had been asked a question about the preparation of their children for river cleaning work. Could that question have had anything to do with the emergence of the idea about the poster contest? I believe it did. I surely didn't come up with that idea, they came up with it. Since it was their idea, they had enthusiasm around it.

We have had poster contests almost every year where 500-800 young people have gathered on the banks of the Ganges in poster making competitions.

People need to come up with their own answers. Questioning can catalyses this process. A powerful question has a life of its own as it chisels away at the problem. Don't be disappointed if a great question does not have an answer right away. A very powerful question, a long lever question, may not have an answer at the moment it is asked. It will sit rattling in the mind for days or weeks as the person works on an answer. The seed is planted, the answer will grow. Questions are alive!

Fran Peavey



CREDITS

FRAN PEAVEY

Fran Peavey is an inventive, resolute and funny woman whose life is an adventure in progressive social change. She lives, write and organises in Oakland, California. She has toured America with the Atomic Comics, as well as travelling around the world – India, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Bosnia – learning from and advising other activists.

Fran is a co-founder of Interhelp, an international network of activists who explore the spiritual, psychological, and political dimensions of social change. She is the author of *Heart Politics*, *A Shallow Pool of Time*, and *By Life's Grace*.



*Vivian Hutchinson
and Fran Peavey*

Editor : VIVIAN HUTCHINSON

Vivian lives and works in New Plymouth, New Zealand and edits *The Jobs Letter*, an information service and media watch for people working on employment and economic issues. He is a co-founder of the NZ Heart Politics Gatherings, and a Steward of the Tauhara Centre in Taupo, New Zealand.

Vivian Hutchinson first starting using the strategic questioning techniques in his work with community groups, and in his enterprise courses for the unemployed, after Fran Peavey gave workshops at the Heart Politics gatherings in New Zealand in 1991. He quickly found the ideas and concepts behind strategic questioning to be a powerful tool in his own work for change. In 1993, he worked with Fran in compiling and editing her talks and articles at the Heart Politics gatherings into this paper on *Strategic Questioning*.

This paper updated : 1997

And Thanks ...

Thanks to a whole range of people in Australia, New Zealand and San Francisco, who have contributed to the development of the these ideas, and have funded the writing of this paper. Special thanks to Tova Green.



QUESTIONS

QUESTIONING is a basic tool for rebellion. It breaks open the stagnant hardened shells of the present, and opens up the options that might be explored.

QUESTIONING reveals the profound uncertainty that is imbedded deep in all reality beyond the facades of confidence and sureness. It takes this uncertainty towards growth and new possibilities.

QUESTIONING can change your entire life. It can uncover hidden powers and stifled dreams inside of you ... things you may have denied for many years.

QUESTIONING can change institutions and entire cultures. It can empower people to create strategies for change.

ASKING A QUESTION that leads to a strategy for action is a powerful contribution to resolving any problem.

ASKING QUESTIONS that open up more options can lead to many unexpected solutions.

ASKING QUESTIONS that help adversaries shift from their stuck positions on an issue can lead to acts of healing and reconciliation.

ASKING QUESTIONS that are unaskable in our culture at the moment can lead to the transformation of our culture and its institutions.

ASKING QUESTIONS and listening for the strategies and ideas embedded in people's own answers can be the greatest service a social change worker can give to a particular issue.