# Quality Questioning

## Why Is This an Important Practice for Leaders of Learning Communities?

*Questions require discipline in asking them, a discipline we seldom practice. No matter how simple the questions, we most often rush past them. We feel compelled to act rather than inquire.*

—Myron Rogers, "Bringing Life to Organizational Change"

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### FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. Why is quality questioning an essential skill for today's education leaders?

2. What are the essential elements of the quality questioning process?

3. What is the relationship between quality questioning and leadership functions that support high-performance learning communities?

**T**he *whos* and the *whats* of school leadership are strikingly different today than in decades past. Contemporary leadership embraces individuals serving in a variety of new roles and discharging a wide range of responsibilities, many of which were not in play a generation ago. In fact, the terminology that describes many current roles and responsibilities is itself relatively new. For example, the following descriptions, commonplace today, would have had many educators scratching their heads not long ago.

> *A school principal seeks to maximize the potential of all members of the school community by encouraging them to assume an "it's my job" approach to teaching all students.*

> *An assistant superintendent for instruction creates a district learning collaborative to mobilize leaders around a shared vision for teaching and learning in a culture of change.*

> *A school principal mediates a conflict between a parent and a beginning teacher through the use of dialogue.*

> *A school principal helps a faculty come to a shared understanding of the purpose and procedures of assigning grades to students.*

> *A literacy coach collaborates with a team of teachers to monitor their implementation of new teaching strategies.*

> *In solving an attendance problem, a school faculty creates new strategies for monitoring programs and practices.*

These statements describe but a few of the challenges confronting contemporary school leaders. As these leaders address critical issues, the following three truths become self-evident:

1. *There are no ready-made, simple, fail-proof solutions.* As a result, the capacity of a leader to formulate incisive questions is a more important skill than the ability to advocate for one particular solution or answer.

2. *Even if there were a surefire solution, the changes demanded of the individuals required to do the work cannot be mandated.* Hence, the

ability of a leader to engage others in reflection and dialogue that help individuals find personal meaning in proposed changes is more desirable than charisma, which might elicit only temporary compliance.

3. *And even if such changes could be mandated, the results would be ephemeral at best if the individuals and organization did not concurrently develop the capacity to monitor and adjust, given the constancy of change in our global society.* Therefore, the leader who nurtures a culture in which individuals routinely inquire into the impact of their behaviors and activities is far more effective than the leader who monitors with a heavy hand.

Effective leadership in these challenging and complex times depends, to an increasing extent, on the skillful use of quality questioning. It's that simple—and that complex.

## How Is the Context Changing for Leaders?

Many school leaders are redefining educational leadership as they seek to cope with the sometimes-conflicting challenges of test-based accountability and the preparation of students for an uncertain future. School leadership is being transformed by interconnected patterns related to the following three cultural shifts in education.

1. From command-and-control decision making in a bureaucratic organization to the sharing of leadership across the learning community

2. From a right-answer orientation to a culture of inquiry

3. From individual autonomy to collective responsibility for the learning of all

Within this context, effective leadership depends on mastery of quality questioning's essential elements.

The traditional, bureaucratic structure of schools features a top-down, command-and-control governance system—from the superintendent's office to school principals, from the principal's office to classroom teachers, and from the teacher's desk to students. Compliance is an expected outcome of an effective command-and-control system.

The familiar lines from Alfred Lord Tennyson's (2005–2009/1854) *The Charge of the Light Brigade* comes to mind: "Theirs not to make reply, / Theirs not to reason why, / Theirs but to do and die." In such a system, leaders typically make decisions and pass them down the line of subordinates; they do not pose questions or encourage thinking and discourse concerning alternative approaches. Although widely recognized as an outmoded paradigm for leadership, vestiges of this mode are alive and well in many quarters. However, advocates for learning organizations challenge the premises on which command-and-control leadership rests.

Engaging people throughout an organization or school community in meaningful conversations is the defining characteristic of learning organizations, learning communities, and professional learning communities—concepts that have dominated professional literature over the past two decades. With the publication of *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990, Peter Senge popularized the concept of *learning organizations* that demanded increased collaborative inquiry within organizations. Senge and others argue that learning organizations promote the efficiency and effectiveness of individuals at all levels of an organization by engaging them in inquiry and accompanying learning. Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, and Smith (1994) define inquiry as "holding conversations where we openly share views and develop knowledge about each other's assumptions" (p. 237). They further offer a set of tools and skills that we can draw upon as we seek to become better practitioners of inquiry.

The formulation of powerful questions is at the heart of productive inquiry. The right questions, however, are only catalysts for successful inquiry. If the inquiry is to produce useful results, it must be situated in a culture where individuals value active listening, demonstrate respect toward one another, and are willing to suspend judgment when conflicting points of view emerge. Additionally, individuals need skills in discussion and dialogue—skills that are associated with quality questioning.

Harvard Professor David Perkins (2003) calls for inquiry-centered leaders to nurture this type of culture. He contrasts inquiry-centered leadership to answer-centered leadership, in which leaders "declare what's to be done and why":

> An inquiry-centered leader . . . would encourage others' questions, facilitate conversations, initiate investigations, welcome multiple viewpoints, and the like. Inquiry-centered leaders let others do a lot of the thinking and let them take credit for it.
>
> Beyond direct personal contact, an inquiry-centered leader fosters organizational structures that support inquiry—for instance,

small teams composed of diverse expertise, matrix structures that promote organizational crosstalk, or support for small-scale testing of risky innovations with high potential. (p. 99)

In Perkins's view, answer-centered leadership suffers from at least three limitations. It does not "address strongly the leadership goal of motivation," nor does it "promote the individual or collective growth of the participants, who become dependent upon the leader." Additionally, "the leader, who is supposed to have the answers, may have none, or not good enough ones" (p. 97). Clearly, inquiry-centered leaders situate themselves in a learning organization or community. In a learning community, both the leader and the constituents move away from the quest for an immediate "right answer" to the framing of important challenges and problems. They embrace the belief that they must first seek out the right questions.

The tendency to seek right answers or quick fixes is one of the impediments to the development of a culture of inquiry. The well-known maxim "Ready, *fire,* aim" conveys the compulsion of many to act, rather than inquire. In today's complex, rapidly changing context, leaders run the risk of adopting superficial, short-lived solutions when they rush to action without considering what is really worth doing (Block, 2003). Current thought leaders argue strongly for bringing members of a community together to grapple with important questions—to engage in inquiry before action (Block, 2003; Johnson, 2005; Lambert, 2002). Among the difficulties inherent in quick fixes are (1) the tendency to adopt solutions that are not consistent or congruent with an organization's deeper purposes and (2) the failure to engage the people responsible for implementation in conversations about the *what* and the *why* of the change. Failure to help people understand the meaning of changes usually results in little buy-in or ownership. When this happens, both quality and sustainability are compromised.

> *Most human beings, especially well-educated ones, buy into something only after they have had a chance to wrestle with it. Wrestling means asking questions, challenging, and arguing.*
>
> —John Kotter (1996, pp. 99–100)

The construction of meaning is a theme that runs throughout the work of Michael Fullan, one of today's leading researchers in educational change and leadership. Fullan (2007) posits that "a core question for educational practitioners is how to combine 'meaning' and 'action'

to achieve continuous improvement on a sustainable scale never before experienced" (p. xii). He reports that, too often, change is introduced to schools without the "opportunity for teachers to engage in deeper questioning and sustained learning" about the what and why of the change. "As a result, meaningful reform escapes the typical teacher, in favor of superficial, episodic reform that makes matters worse" (p. 28). This superficial, episodic reform is the result of action without inquiry, the problem referenced in the quote from Myron Rogers at the beginning of this chapter.

Bypassing dialogue about the nature of a problem, issue, or challenge can lead to another trap: failure to distinguish between technical problems and adaptive or generative problems. Fullan (2005) describes technical challenges as those that can be addressed with existing knowledge and/or technology.

> A technical problem would be teaching a child to read or raising literacy proficiency scores from 57% to 75%, as was the case in England. Not that technical problems are easy to solve, but we do know how to approach them. An adaptive challenge is one for which we do not have the answers. Engaging alienated or unmotivated students, involving parents and the community at large, addressing social inclusion of special needs students, moving from 75% to 90% literacy, and reforming high schools are all examples of current adaptive problems. (p. 53)

Fullan and others suggest that a key to addressing adaptive problems is to pose the right kinds of questions for dialogue to those who know the problem up close and personal.

## What Is the Framework for Leading Through Quality Questioning?

Leaders seeking to develop the skills and dispositions associated with quality questioning can benefit from a framework that organizes research and theory about questioning and leadership. In an earlier book (2005), we developed a framework for quality questioning for classroom use. School leaders reported finding components of the framework useful in engaging adults in conversations related to problems and issues. These reports, along with requests for additional information, led to the formulation of the *Leading Through Quality Questioning (LQQ) Framework* (Figure 1.1).

| Figure 1.1 | The Leading Through Quality Questioning (LQQ) Framework |

| Elements of Quality Questioning | Leadership Functions | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Maximizing* | *Mobilizing* | *Mediating* | *Monitoring* |
| *Crafting Quality Questions* | | | | |
| *Presenting Questions to Engage All* | | | | |
| *Extending Thinking* | | | | |
| *Creating a Culture of Inquiry* | | | | |

The LQQ Framework is two dimensional. The first dimension is related to the four elements of quality questioning that inquiry-centered leaders understand and use.

1. *Crafting Quality Questions* refers to the formulation of questions that are purposeful, clearly focused, and understandable. This requires consideration of the kind of information being sought as well as the context in which it will be used.

2. *Presenting Questions to Encourage Engagement* underscores the importance of thinking about *how* individuals will be engaged in responding to questions. This element reminds us of the value of listening to a wide range of voices—not just the usual, more vocal members of our community. To achieve this, we need to know and use a wide range of processes and strategies that structure and facilitate involvement.

3. *Extending Thinking* involves the intentional use of strategies that encourage and support deep thinking. For example, "wait times" (pauses of 3 to 5 seconds after questions and after responses) can be powerful prompts to individual thinking. Other strategies, such as paraphrasing and gentle prompting, assist people in going deeper in their thought and verbal responses.

4. *Creating a Culture of Inquiry* is about establishing and nurturing norms that promote powerful and productive conversations. Leaders attend to this element when they talk with members of their school communities about the value of inquiry, model inquiry, and build a climate of trust and mutual respect.

The second dimension of the LQQ Framework highlights four leadership functions that can be significantly enhanced through the intentional use of quality questioning.

1. *Maximizing* is related to leaders' efforts to develop individual and organizational capacity. Leaders who seek to maximize, focus on the ways and means to motivate and support individuals in reaching their potential.

2. *Mobilizing* is the process of getting people on board, of motivating them to act. Sometimes, the challenge is to mobilize individuals to accept a new mandate or program. Most often, it's to mobilize people to meet high expectations day-in-and-day-out in their work. Vision and purpose are the vehicles used by effective leaders to mobilize their constituents.

3. *Mediating* is the process whereby a leader helps individuals with differing perspectives understand one another's conflicting realities and forge a shared understanding of the situation so that they can work together. Mediating also involves helping individuals make personal meaning of a new idea or intervention so that they can decide whether or not (and how) to integrate these ideas into their own thinking.

4. *Monitoring* involves ongoing assessment of the extent to which individuals are aligning their actual performance to agreed-upon behaviors and are, as a consequence, on target to meet identified benchmarks or objectives.

These four featured functions are by no means inclusive of all leadership functions that can profit from focused questioning. They are, however, critically important in a school that values collaborative work patterns and is striving to become an authentic community of learners. Further, attention to these functions supports individuals' efforts to learn and grow as leaders.

# Leaders Can Support Adult Learning Through Quality Questioning

Classroom teachers use quality questioning to focus and support student learning. In turn, today's education leaders increasingly use quality questioning to focus and support adult learning in schools. Ongoing learning is imperative in a culture characterized by continuous change, which requires each of us to examine and adapt our perspectives and practices if we are to sustain our effectiveness. *Learning* and *change* become synonymous within this cultural context, and leaders have an ever-increasing responsibility to design ongoing, job-embedded learning for all constituents. While this is a responsibility of all leaders, it is a particularly important one for education leaders, who are by definition leaders of learners. The most effective of these leaders intentionally seek opportunities to engage educators and education stakeholders in learning conversations that are driven by purposeful, well-focused questions. Quality questions are catalysts for productive reflection, dialogue, and learning throughout the school community.