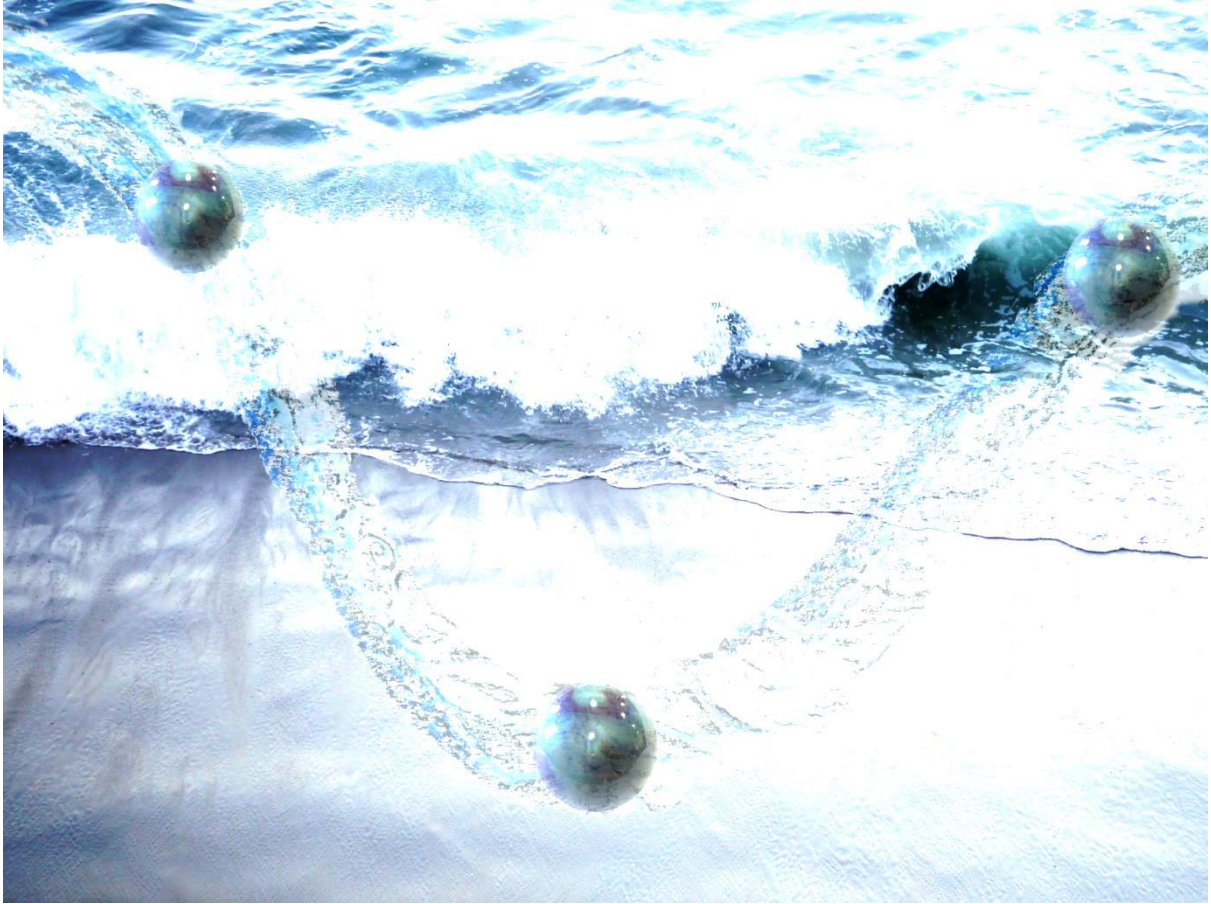


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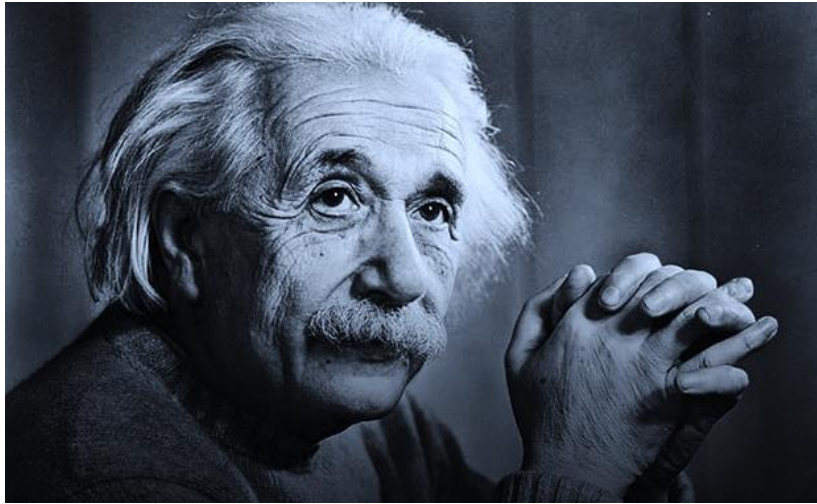
In Pursuit of Powerful Questions

Open mind; new thinking and shared thinking

Open heart; deep genuine empathy for the whole system

Open will; practical application supported by development partners

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Einstein on Questions

"The important thing is not to stop questioning; curiosity has its own reason for existing"

Einstein on Learning

"Most people waste their time by asking questions that are intended to discover what a pupil does not know, whereas the true art of questioning is to discover what the other does know or is capable of knowing."

What is the importance of powerful questions, to 21st century facilitators and change makers in complex organisational systems?

We know that questions are more transformative than answers and are essential tools of engagement. Questions create the space for something new to emerge. However in the busy world of task, target, fix it and sort it, answers are still valued more than questions and in the short term often feel easier. Answers, especially those that respond to our need for quick results, while satisfying, shut down the discussion, and the future shuts down with them. What can make us impatient with questions and hungry for answers is that in organisational life there is confusion between the process of exploring a question and 'talking shop'. The latter has no meaning that has no meaning and leads to ego based argument, analysis, explanation and defensive behaviour. The former creates space for new thinking to emerge.

As facilitators, change makers and leaders what does this mean for our practice and how we ask questions? Time has been called on the old fashioned patterns of questions that many of us have been trained in and trained others to use. The processes we used 10 years ago are not fit for the unprecedented times of uncertainty and austerity that organisations find themselves in. We need to change.

For 10 years FMA have explored a variety of models that come at questions from a different perspective. These include Appreciative Inquiry, Thinking Environments and Systems Thinking.

This article aims to capture your curiosity and support you to join us on the journey to discover powerful and generative questions; that not only change the conversation but change the future.

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What are powerful questions and how do they differ from other kinds of questions?

Weak Questions reinforce the present and the past

Often existing conversations are organised around a set of traditional questions that have little power to create an alternative future. They carry no power, they are focussing on what is not working and are therefore likely to elicit more stories about what is not working and why it's someone else's responsibility.

1. How do we get people to show up and be committed?
2. How do we get others to be more responsible?
3. How do we get people to come on board and do the right thing?
4. How do we hold those people accountable?
5. How do we get others to buy in to our vision?
6. How do we get those people to change?
7. How much will it cost and where do we get the money?

The hidden agenda in these questions is to maintain dominance and to be right. They urge us to raise standards, measure more closely, and return to basics to create accountability. In reality we are about returning to what got us here.

Questions that are designed to change other people are the wrong questions. Wrong, not because they don't matter or are based on ill intent, but wrong because they reinforce the problem solving model and cultivate a Parent/Child dynamic. They are questions that are the cause of the very thing we are trying to shift: the fragmented and retributive nature of many organisations and systems. These types of questions destroy rather than grow relatedness working against curiosity, innovation and the basic human desire to tell positive stories.

These questions are also a response to the wish to create a predictable future. We want desperately to take uncertainty out of the future. But when we take uncertainty out, it is no longer the future. It is the present projected forward. Nothing new can come from the desire for a predictable tomorrow. The only way to make tomorrow predictable is to make it just like today. In fact, what distinguishes the future is its unpredictability and, mystery.

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What are powerful questions and how do they differ from other kinds of questions?

Powerful Questions co-create the future

Questions that have the power to make a difference are the ones that engage people in an intimate way, confront them with their freedom, and invite them to co-create a future possibility. Achieving accountability and commitment entails the use of questions through which, in the act of answering them, we become co-creators of the world. It does not matter what our answers to the questions are. Powerful questions are the ones that cause you to become engaged as soon as you answer them. You no longer have the luxury of being a spectator of whatever it is you are concerned about. Regardless of how you answer these questions, you are involved in the present and have a say in the future with all the responsibility that entails.

Powerful questions also express the reality that change, like life, is difficult and unpredictable. They open up the conversation – in contrast to questions that are, in a sense, answers in disguise. Questions themselves are an art form worthy of a lifetime of study. They are what transform the hour. Here are some questions that have the capacity to open the space for a different future (related to the questions from page 2):

1. What is the commitment you hold that brought you into this room?
2. What is your contribution to changing the very thing you complain about?
3. What is it about you or your team, group or community that wants to do the right thing?
4. How significant do you plan for this effort to be in making sustainable change?
5. What is the story you would like to be telling about the impact of this change 12 months from now?
6. What is the change you are personally willing to make to take a step towards the vision?
7. What is the cost in human terms of us doing nothing?

Questions that have the power to make a difference are ones that:

- Engage people with each other
- Confront them with their accountability
- Invite them to co-create a future possibility

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What are powerful questions and how do they differ from other kinds of questions?

How can we create and set the conditions to ask powerful questions?

Basic Guidance for creating Powerful Questions

- What question, if explored thoroughly, could provide the breakthrough possibilities we are seeking?
- Is the question relevant to the real life or real work of the people who will be exploring it?
- Is this a genuine question – a question to which I/we really don't know the answer?
- What work do I want this question to do? That is, what kind of conversation, meanings and feelings do I imagine this question will evoke in those who will be exploring it?
- What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?
- Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, new thinking and creative action, or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?
- Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored?

Powerful questions have legs; they travel well and may end up taking you somewhere that you never expected
Powerful questions lead us to the future

Powerful questions have heart; they get to us at our values base, connecting with stuff that really matters to us as individuals

Powerful questions motivate fresh thinking

Powerful questions have hope; they are about the possibility and potential in any given set of circumstances

Powerful questions are a window into creativity and insight

Powerful questions have power; they can shift thinking and behaviour that has been stuck

Powerful questions challenge outdated assumptions

You can find a series of some of the most powerful questions we have discovered/created at the end of this piece. Please come back and let us know your additions and experiences.

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Basic Guidance for creating the conversation

Once you have the question/s, there is a way of setting up the conversation that makes a difference. If the conversation is not set up clearly and intentionally, the old conversation will occur. To initiate a new conversation, we have to give a reason for it, and to guard against solution finding and advice giving. Thinking about the setup is as important as creating the question/s, as it creates the space to explore stories, relatedness, accountability, strengths and ideas.

There are four things that can help:

- Set the boundaries, the rules of engagement, this could simply be no interrupting, note taking or devices
- Give permission for silence and then don't fill it!
- Avoid advice (it's not about you, your job is to help the other person/people think better for themselves) and replace with curiosity
- Precisely name the question and stay focussed on that question not a different default from the old way

Your role as a Thinking Partner

Nancy Kline (More Time to Think) once said that the role of the Thinking Partner was both essential and irrelevant and that the only function we have in this role is to help the Thinker to think better for themselves. We do this by:

- Listening deeply and inquiring with genuine curiosity
- Surfacing connectedness based on listening, genuineness and not knowing
- Assuming that positive team and personal relationships are critical to business success
- Giving structure to the emotional dimension of the work and the workplace
- Supporting the Thinker to make decisions around assumptions
- Supporting the Thinker to surface doubts and commitments, moving the thinking, decisions and action forward
- Encouraging directness, authenticity and personal accountability

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Questions around Leadership

- Describe the leadership journey that brought you here?
- What are your intentions as a leader?
- When have you faced significant new challenges, and what helped you cope with them?
- Describe your best team experiences. How do they differ from your other team experiences?
- What top three challenges do you currently face?
- Who are your most important stakeholders?
- What are your intentions as a leader?
- Do you know what is happening at the edges of your leadership impact?
- On the basis of what outcomes, will your performance be considered a success or a failure - and by when?
- In order to be successful in your current leadership role what do you need to let go of and what do you need to learn? What capabilities do you need to develop?
- How do you influence people through giving them experiences?
- How will you develop your team? What do you need from your team, and what does your team need from you?
- Nine to twelve months from now, what criteria will you use to assess whether you were successful?

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Questions around Team Cohesion

- When you think about your deeper purpose within our team what would you like to think about and what are your thoughts?
- How do we engage in the unknown?
- Why does being part of a team matter to you?
- What happens when we think outside self-imposed boundaries?
- What if we asked at least one person for feedback everyday?
- What if we were taking personal responsibility for our attitude and behaviour?
- How will your way of working send out signals about your core values?
- How does your personal contribution support customers through the system?
- When you feel proud what kinds of things happen to you and those around you?
- Where do you think the team is stuck?
- What would it be like if we could work more collaboratively?
- If your part of the service was viewed as a model of excellence by others what would that feel like for you personally?
- Why is it important to capture the ideas, energy and innovation that live within the team?

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Questions for Development Conversations

- Tell me about a time in the last 4 weeks where you made a positive difference to the lives of people?
- How did doing this help you to deliver the best possible experience or outcomes for customers?
- How could you use what you have learned with other team members?
- How has your passion about customers 'shown up' in your work in the last 4 weeks?
- What if you went that extra mile for a fellow team member?
- Can you share a recent story about how you have connected to your knowledge, skills and experience to deliver the best outcomes?
- How could you share this best practice with the team?
- Thinking forward what areas do you want to open up for development?
- What could we do as a team to improve in this area?
- How do you connect to the thoughts and feelings of the team and the people we serve?
- What could we do as a team to improve in this area?
- Tell me about a time when you had the courage and strength to do the right thing?
- How do you create space and the environment to have everyone's voice heard?
- If you were being courageous now, what would you tell me?
- How do you contribute to creating a safe space for all of the people who touch our business?
- If I was to ask you to name a risk you were concerned about, what would that be?
- If you were valuing yourself and others more, what would you do that you don't always do now?
- If it was up to you what would you do next?
- Tell me a story from the last 4 weeks about how your enthusiasm, positively influenced change?
- What ideas do you have about how you could contribute to improvements for service users or the team?

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Questions for Change Projects

- How do you plan to make the experience of this project positive?
- How will we demonstrate care for people and resources?
- How much risk are you willing to take and how much commitment will you offer?
- To what extent are you invested in the well-being of the whole?
- When you think about the success of this project and the positive impact on others what comes to mind?
- What does your curiosity tell you?
- What do we want to create together (that we cannot create alone) that would make the difference?
- How will we make it OK to say no and disagree?
- How will we really hold each other to account?
- What measures have meaning for us all?
- What idea do you/we have that has game changing potential?
- What is the crossroads with the work right now?
- How can we move into our whole potential?
- How can we work together to make this happen with more intention?
- What can you do that has the power to transform the project and inspire progress?
- Where can we make a start that will feel different, new and exciting?
- What are the first things we are collectively committed to?
- What is solid and useful in what we have achieved that could be the foundation for the next stages?
- How did that conversation go, what didn't get said?

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Questions which are generally good for any situation!

- When you think about xxx what would you like to think about and what are your thoughts? And what more do you think, or feel or want to say?
- What assumptions are you holding that are influencing your thinking?
- What strengths could you engage to support a change?
- What if we changed from complainers to problem solvers how would we look at this differently?
- What if we stopped thinking and started doing, what would we do first?
- What if we chose to really listen to each other with no judgement and no interrupting, what would you say first, and then what and what more?
- What if you had the courage and the confidence to move into the unknown, what would you do first and then what and what more?
- What if you could turn your frustration into an intention, what would it be?
- What would it look/sound/feel like for you if...?
- Where is your blind spot?
- Help me to understand where you think my blind spot is?
- What is the story that you would like to be telling about x 6 months from now?

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In summary

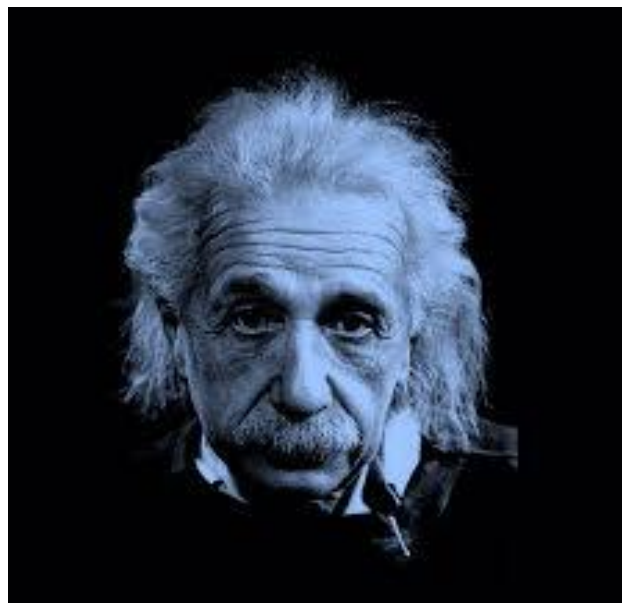
The story of organisations and what works has changed dramatically in the last thirty years and cognitively there is an understanding that taking time to think, share ideas and involve people is a good idea. However, this is rarely translated into practice as mechanistic models, hierarchical power and influence from the old world are still very visible and their impact felt. The impact of electronic communication, flexible working, and a consistent demand to do more with less and do it better means there is a perception of no space and time to embrace thinking in a new way to get new decisions, new engagement and real transformation. Recent research from Gallup indicates that “World Class” organisations have 67% engagement within their workforce as opposed to the international average of 33%. Improved engagement has direct and measurable links to leadership relationships, attendance and performance. In a resource reducing economy, organisations must connect on a real level with their people to survive and grow, this requires something different from consultancies supporting organisational development and change.

Using an approach that engages people through powerful questions (that we may not know the answer to) places new responsibilities on facilitators and change makers to be the organisation’s thinking partner, supporting the development of leaders, teams and individuals as appreciative inquirers, intent listeners and the custodians of new and different thinking that can really make a difference. This approach sees the organisation as a relationship rather than a structure, teams as communities of purpose rather than delivery vehicles and individuals as people with strengths and ideas rather than people who demonstrate learned helplessness in parental relationships with line managers and the “organisation”.

Powerful questions do make a difference and can change thinking, conversations and therefore the outcomes. Facilitators and change makers have their own patterns and learning journeys, and we need to shift our understanding of our role and develop our practice. We need to ‘go there first’ and truly believe with an open heart that our job is to hold the space where others can think better for themselves.

As I’m sure Einstein would say if he was here.....

“We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.”



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And finally.....

What if all of your conversations with the most important people in your life, including your spouse/partner and family members, were started with the premise that they can think for themselves and your job was to listen and be curious?

What difference could that make, to the quality of your life, if you discovered that this way of being; provoked learning, tackled the tough challenges and enriched relationships?