Personal Leadership
Values
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SEEING SELF
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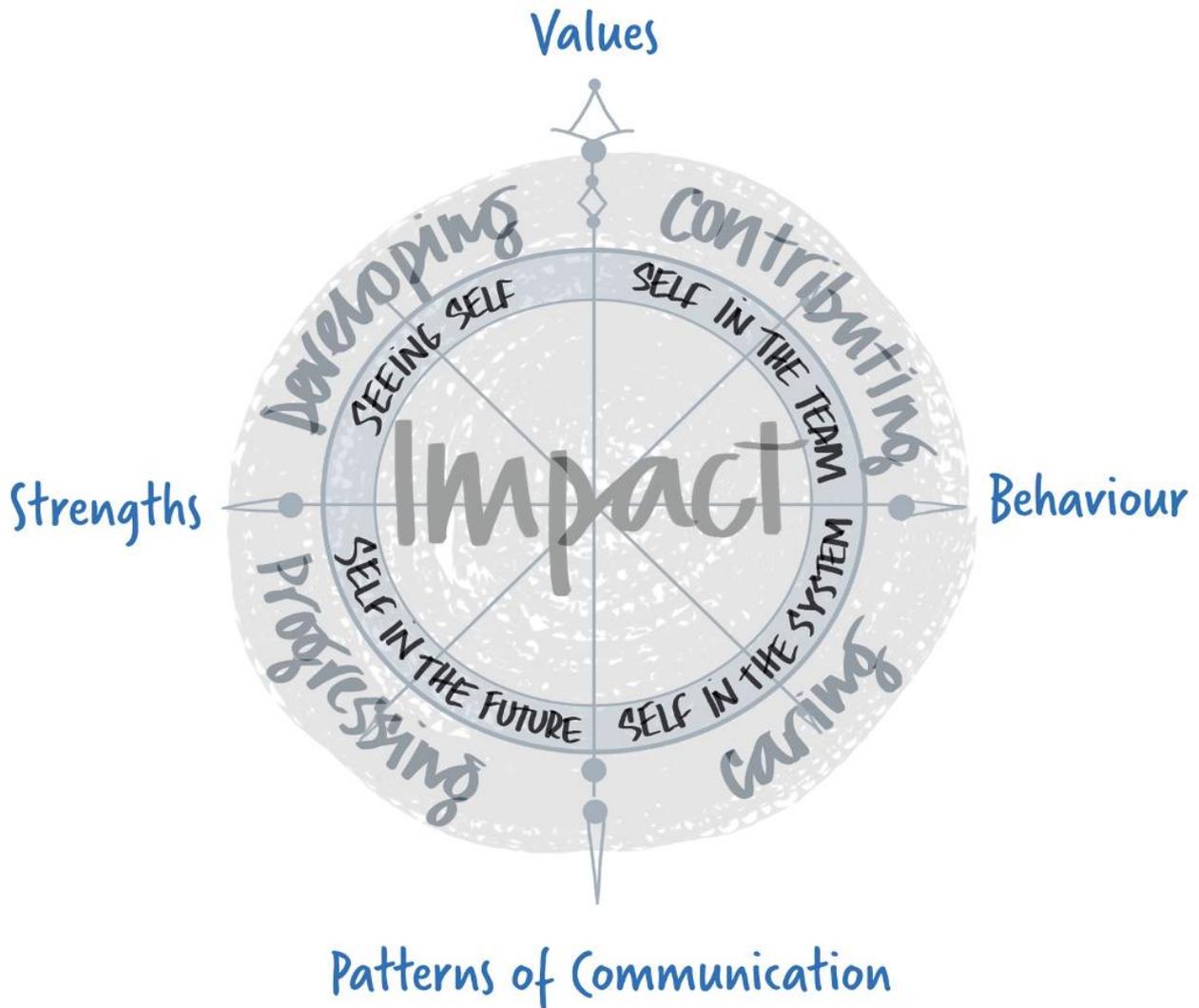SELF IN THE FUTURE
SELF IN THE SYSTEM
Caring
Patterns of Communication

# *Liberating Thinking: In Pursuit of Powerful Questions*
## *A Practical Introduction to Powerful Questions*

## INTRODUCTION

Many of the questions that are prevalent in organisational life are not powerful. 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 mechanistic 'fix it/sort it model' and cultivate a Parent/Child dynamic. They are often deficit-based questions that 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.

## LIBERATING THINKING AND FEELING

One of the central beliefs around leading in this level of complexity is that leaders need to see the system, to engage with what is below the surface, to liberate thinking about what's working and what's not working as well as what's possible and what's causing pain and damage. This is a big ask. It requires leaders to be vulnerable to undo years of conditioning of what leadership is about and for some to let go of ego and status power. Having led an organisation and a team of associates for 26 years it took me 10 years to understand that I didn't need to do all the thinking, all the inspiring, all the worrying. People can think for themselves. They want to. They do it when they are not at work. As leaders we do neither them, nor ourselves any favours by deciding/assuming/believing that it is down to us. We seriously need to get over ourselves! Leaders need to have all the questions, not all the answers.

Equally we need to expect more of others, understand some people will be happy hiding under the surface, not contributing in settings where that is expected and not engaging in change that affects them. As leaders we need to turn this tanker gently but with intention. Changes in how we converse need to change forever not just for the timeline of a development intervention or the duration of the current leadership. Wherever you sit in the hierarchy at home, in work, in your community you can transform all your relationships by being more curious and listening more intently. Be present in yourself and connect to others differently and things will change for the better.

Most people understand conceptually that this feels like a good thing, even the right thing to do and then comes the push back about how busy everyone is! Senior leaders often perceive themselves to be busier than other people. There is no space in the day to give people time to think, to ask big expansive questions. So unsurprisingly if you don't change something fundamental, like how you engage people, nothing changes. Conversely, think about all the time that will be saved as people being to understand that they are trusted to think for themselves and have autonomy to make and take decisions commensurate with their experience, role and grade. That they don't need to ask permission to do the job they are paid for, that they are treated like the adults they are. Imagine also all the time that will be saved when you don't need to coerce or micro-manage people around change, because they have been involved in the conversations and asked to generate ideas from the outset.  They can understand how this makes a difference and if they don't yet, they have been given space to think about the 'how' even if the 'what' is not up for negotiation. Ultimately all the research shows that a sense of personal mastery, autonomy and purpose are the real drivers for motivation, engagement and performance. None of which is enabled by any of us doing the thinking for each other or believing we intrinsically 'know' what makes others tick or feel valued.

# THE ARCHITECTURE OF POWERFUL QUESTIONS
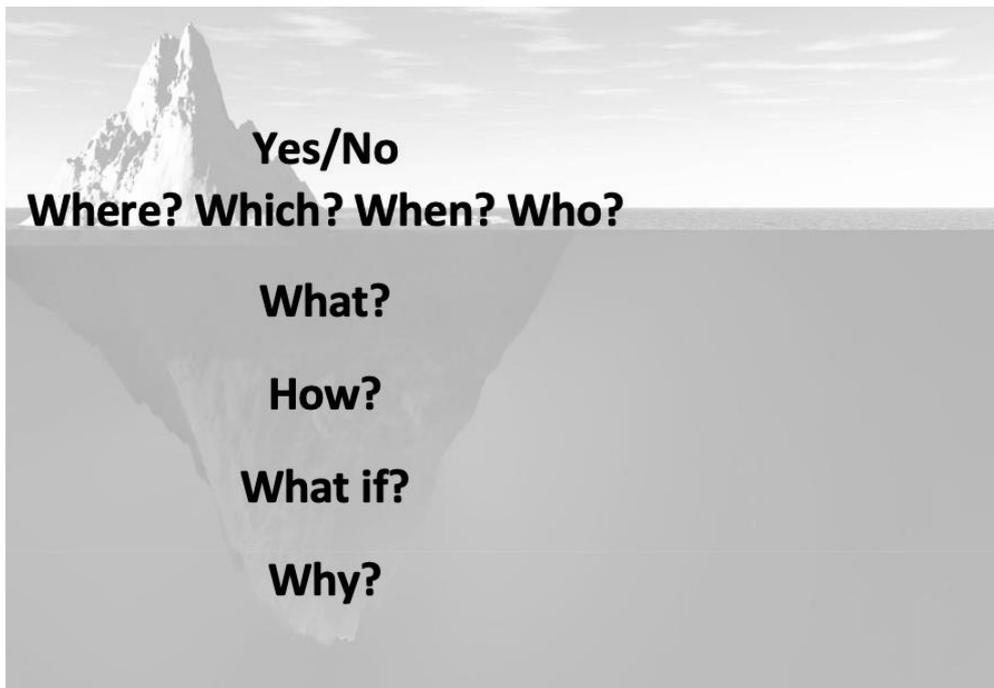


The inverted pyramid of questions shows clearly what is likely to get us below the horizon line and what probably will not. Thinking about which questions we want to ask in advance and planning the space for responses is at the heart of this way of inquiring.

The scope of the question is the membrane or the boundary within which the responses can be made. If the question is about eliciting stories of compassion at work in a particular team, then that needs to be explicit in the question. All roads lead back to the question you will get what you ask about.

**ASSUMPTIONS**

All questions hold assumptions and the language that we use has a huge impact. The difference with Powerful Questions is that they are designed explicitly with a positive assumption. They assume there is a positive story to be shared, an idea to be explored or a decision that can be agreed. "Why does it matter to you...?" assumes that it does matter, "What if you could turn this situation around...?" assumes that you can and "What would you do now if you had no fear?" assumes that you have ideas that could be valuable.

**USING POWERFUL QUESTIONS**

Powerful Questions are helpful in almost any situation. We encourage you to try them anywhere and everywhere. If you are faced with silence and a puzzled expression, then you are on the way. You will need to manage silence, wait with interest and listen with appreciation and ease. On no account interrupt or disagree. Just listen and learn and then ask, "What more do you think or feel or want to say...?"

**CONSTRUCTING POWERFUL QUESTIONS**

The checklist that follows is a useful way of checking whether the question you have is powerful enough. It takes time and practice when we are not used to preparing questions in this way. It is worth it and the knowledge you will gain as a leader is invaluable.

- 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?