

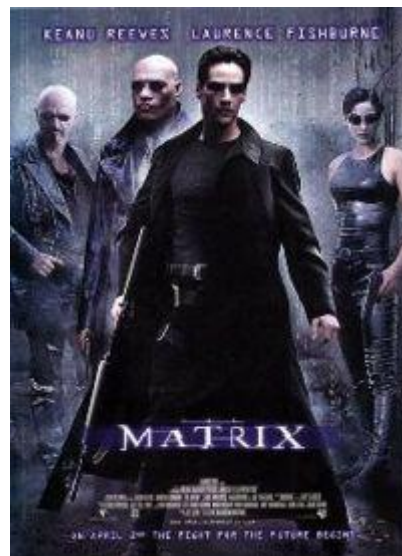
Best Management Tools Ever? – A Good Question

By Anthony Sturgess and Phil Higson

The Answer Is Out There.....

What are the best management tools? Accepting a tool or technique at face value can be an excuse for not doing the hard thinking, and developing the right questions to ask. Of course good tools used appropriately, and in a considered manner, can assist this process. The danger with management tools though, is that they may create a false sense of security, and encourage us to hide from the real thinking that needs to take place.

In the first Matrix film, there is a scene in a darkened night club where the character Trinity approaches the protagonist Neo. Loud music blasting away in the background, she comes close to him and says: "It's the question that drives us." "It's the question that brought you here." Later Trinity finishes the scene saying: "The answer is out there Neo. It's looking for you and it will find you if you want it to."



So what questions do we ask, and what drives them? Sometimes we ask superficial questions, simply out of routine, or as a result of inquisitiveness. Sometimes however, much like Neo, we are troubled by a nagging concern or a sense that things aren't quite right. Questions borne of important or deep seated motivations are a good place to start, but how can we improve the questions we ask? Well the answer is out there – it's looking for you and it will find you if you want it to!! To try and search for answers we'll ask some questions ourselves, to see how questions can become effective management tools.

- ◆ What are we inquiring about and why?
- ◆ Who needs to be engaged in this inquiry?
- ◆ How do we build more powerful questions?



What Are We Inquiring About And Why?

Why are questions so important? Einstein is quoted as saying “If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.” If you’ll pardon the pun, giving yourself the time and space to find the right question(s) to ask should be prioritised, and should certainly precede any use of management tools.

In the late 1980’s David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, two academics from Case Western Reserve University, developed Appreciative Inquiry (you can find out more about this powerful process in our article on strength based change). Appreciative Inquiry seeks to create new ideas that aid the development of an organisation. At its heart is a questioning process which focuses on the positive rather than the negative. Why is this significant? Well it is argued that most change processes are predicated on problem-solving processes, which start by asking “what’s the problem”. The focus of energy is then typically on what we want to do less of and working to “fix” the problem.

Appreciative Inquiry starts from a different basis. It asks: “what do we want more of?” It “appreciates” what is currently working well in the organisation. The principle of Appreciative Inquiry is that organisations grow in the direction of what they repeatedly ask questions about, and what they focus their attention on.

Who Needs To Be Engaged In This Inquiry?

Finding the right questions to ask is not always easy, and in organisations it often starts with finding the right people to talk to. Reg Revans, best known for his work on action learning suggested three simple and powerful questions to resolve any issue. Ask yourself:

1. **Who knows?** - about the situation/opportunity, or who has the information we need to solve it/realise it
2. **Who cares?** - that something is done about it
3. **Who can?** - do something about the solution



These questions are fundamental management tools. They help us to identify the people who need to come together, in order to take appropriate action to solve an issue or realise an opportunity.

How Do We Build More Powerful Questions?

Powerful questions are about creating movement and can be very effective management tools. That is, they help us to think differently about the situation about which we’re inquiring. How do you construct questions that will be powerful? This is the question that



Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown and David Isaac sought to answer in "The Art Of Powerful Questions". They outline three dimensions to a powerful question.

Firstly, there is a "pecking order" implied by the question's words. The more powerful questions begin with why, how or what. These are followed by who, when, where. Finally, the least powerful questions are those beginning with which, or those that can be answered with a yes or no.

The second dimension is the scope of the question. For example, "how can we manage our work group", is different in scope from "how can we manage our company".

The third dimension is the assumption we make within the question. "What did we do wrong and who is responsible" makes very different assumptions when compared with "what did we learn and what possibilities are there for us in the future".

Fran Peavy poses a related view of powerful questions, set in the context of social and community change. She talks in terms of question families, with two levels. The first level of questions are used to describe the issues/problems. This level is about gaining the facts and points of view and consists of:

- ◆ **Focus questions** - Identify the situation. What happened? How has it affected you? What is your concern?
- ◆ **Observation questions** - What do you see, or hear? What have you heard about the situation?
- ◆ **Analysis questions** - What do you think? What are the reasons for.....?
- ◆ **Feeling questions** - How do you feel about the situation?

The second level of questions digs deeper, encouraging movement to a solution. It consists of:

- ◆ **Visioning questions** - How would you like it to be?
- ◆ **Change questions** - How could the situation be changed for it to be as you would like it?
- ◆ **Considering the alternatives** - What ways can you think of to make this happen?
- ◆ **Considering the consequences** - How would the first alternative impact on others?
- ◆ **Consider the obstacles** - What would need to change for the alternative to be done?
- ◆ **Personal concerns** - What would it take for you to participate in the change?

Asking questions such as these forces us all to stop and think. They are as effective as all other management tools. For example, what are the big questions that your department or service or company are facing? What are the most relevant questions to ask? What are the three to five questions which, if they could be answered, would make a big difference to your organisation? You may like to take some time and think about these questions for the area you manage.

Here are some suggestions made by Vogt, Brown and Isaacs to help frame good generative questions. Management tools designed to stimulate new knowledge and creative thinking:



Questions for focusing collective attention on your situation

- What question if answered, could make the most difference to the future of (your specific situation)?
- What opportunities can you see in the situation?
- What assumptions do we need to test?
- What do we know so far?

Questions for connecting ideas and deeper insight

- What's taking shape?
- What's missing from the picture so far?
- What's been your major learning/insight so far?
- What do we need more clarity on?
- What else do we need to think about?

Questions that create forward movement

- What would it take to create change on this issue?
- What could happen that would enable you/us to feel fully engaged about (this situation)?
- What's possible here?
- What needs our immediate attention?
- If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose?

Best Management Tools Ever?

The quality of the questions we ask will serve us well but it often takes some hard thinking before we get to those that really matter. Time spent thinking about the issues, then asking the right questions, is time well spent. Especially if you do this **before** you reach for that toolkit!

**I keep six honest serving men,
They taught me all I know,
Their names are What and Why and When,
And How And Where And Who.**

- Rudyard Kipling's The Serving Men

