

# APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: ASKING POWERFUL QUESTIONS

## PURPOSES & BENEFITS

This tool and resource helps the collaborative group to frame and ask the right questions, whether that's within the collaborative group or in the larger community. Asking the right questions is key to successfully addressing community issues like sexual and domestic violence. The specific purposes and benefits are:

- To learn about what constitutes a powerful question.
- To understand the three dimensions of a powerful question, including construction, scope and assumptions.
- How to use appreciative inquiry, including sample questions for focusing attention, connecting ideas and finding deeper meaning, and creating forward movement.

## HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

This document illustrates why asking the right questions using appreciative inquiry is important and how to construct good questions. Asking the right question in the collaborative group or in the community can create meaningful and positive change. This document is meant to be used in conjunction with every other tool and section of the toolkit.



# APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: ASKING POWERFUL QUESTIONS

## What is a powerful question?

While you may not readily be able to articulate all of the aspects of a powerful question, we recognize one when we see it. For example, rank the following questions, with 1 being the most powerful:

1. What time is it?
2. What possibilities exist that we have not thought of yet?
3. What does it mean to be ethical?
4. Did you take a shower?

A powerful question:

- Is thought-provoking and invites reflection and finding deeper meaning
- Expands possibilities or focuses attention
- Brings underlying assumptions to light
- Stimulates curiosity and creativity
- Can help a group move forward

## The dimensions of a powerful question

There are three dimensions to a powerful question:

1. **Construction**—The construction of a question can make a critical difference in either opening our minds or narrowing the possibilities we consider.

Review the following key question construction words on a continuum from less powerful questions to more powerful questions:



Now consider the construction of the following questions:

- *Are victims in our community getting the services they need?*
- *What is it about our community that supports healthy relationships for all of its citizens?*
- *How can we prevent sexual and domestic violence from occurring in the first place?*
- *Why\* is it that so many families in that area of town experience violence?*
- *What if we got it right? (Creating a community that supports non-violence and healthy relationships.)*

As you move from simple yes/no questions to why to what if, the question stimulates more reflective thinking and more creative responses.



**\*A note about the continuum and example questions above:** Unless a why question is carefully constructed, as the example question above illustrates, it can evoke a defensive response, because people try to justify their answer rather than proceed in a spirit of inquiry (e.g., Why does our collaborative fail to reach the larger community?).

2. **Scope**—The scope of a question must match the need we are addressing or the discovery that we’re trying to make.

Note the impact of scope below:

- *How can we best share information as a team?*
- *How can we best share information as a coalition?*
- *How can we best share information with our community?*

The questions above progressively broaden in scope. Sometimes questions are interesting, but are outside the scope of our capacity (e.g., *How can we change the social norms in our society that support male superiority and sexual entitlement?*).

3. **Assumptions**—Almost all questions, explicit or implicit, have some degree of assumptions built into them.

Review and discuss the assumptions imbedded in the following sets of questions:

- A. *How can we create a bilingual education system in Kansas?*
- B. *What is best way to educate English and non-English speaking students alike?*
- A. *What did we do wrong, and who is responsible?*
- B. *What can we learn from what has happened, and what are the possibilities now?*
- A. *How can we address the lack of cooperation between collaborative partners?*
- B. *What are all the possibilities for collaboration between our agencies?*

Which questions assume a solution? Which assume error or blame, leading to narrow discussions or defensiveness? Which stimulate reflection, creativity, and/or collaboration among those involved?

Examine each question for any unconscious beliefs it may introduce:

- What assumptions or beliefs are we introducing with this question?
- How would we approach this issue if we had an entirely different belief system?

## **Using Appreciative Inquiry**

Pay attention to the construction, scope, and assumptions of the questions you ask.

When working with groups, spend time crafting the questions they will address:

1. Start by discussing the end-in-mind for the discussion or process.
2. Work with planning partners to write down several questions relevant to the topic.
3. Discuss and rate the questions.
  - Which is best constructed to promote reflection and creativity?
  - Which has the right scope for the end-in-mind?
  - What are the underlying assumptions embedded in each question? The goal is not always to make the question assumption free; work to make sure it has the right assumptions to move your group forward.
4. Experiment with changing the construction and scope to get a feel for how each can change the direction of the inquiry.
5. Give each question the “genuine test.” Is this a question to which we do not already know the answer? If we already know the answer or have a preset right response, it is not inquiry.
6. Run the question by an outside key informant to see how well the question works and where it leads the discussion.

### QUESTIONS FOR FOCUSING ATTENTION

- *What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of (your situation)?*
- *What's important to you about (your situation) and why do you care?*
- *What draws you/us to this inquiry?*
- *What's our intention here? What's the deeper purpose (the big "why") that is really worthy of our best effort?*
- *What opportunities can you see in (your situation)?*
- *What do we know so far/still need to learn about (your situation)?*
- *What are the dilemmas/opportunities in (your situation)?*
- *What assumptions do we need to test or challenge here in thinking about (your situation)?*
- *What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we do say about (your situation)?*

### QUESTIONS FOR CONNECTING IDEAS AND FINDING DEEPER INSIGHT

- *What's taking shape? What are you hearing underneath the variety of opinions being expressed? What's in the center of the table?*
- *What's emerging here for you? What new connections are you making?*
- *What had real meaning for you from what you've heard? What surprised you? What challenged you?*
- *What's missing from this picture so far? What is it we're not seeing? What do we need more clarity about?*
- *What's been your/our major learning, insight, or discovery so far?*
- *What's the next level of thinking we need to do?*
- *If there was one thing that hasn't yet been said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding/clarity, what would that be?*

### 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 and energized about (your situation)?*
- *What's possible here and who cares? (rather than "What's wrong here and who's responsible?")*
- *What needs our immediate attention going forward?*
- *If our success was completely guaranteed, what bold steps might we choose?*
- *How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?*
- *What challenges might come our way and how might we meet them?*
- *What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that created new possibilities for the future of (your situation)?*
- *What seed might we plant together today that could make the most difference to the future of (your situation)?*

Vogt, E., Brown, J., and Issacs, D. (2003). *The Art of powerful questions: Catalyzing insight, innovation, and action*. Whole Systems Associates: Mill Valley, CA.