



Inquisitive Anthills

Nine Tips for Better Discussion Questions

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Inquisitive Anthills

“Daddy, why don’t you just ask?” It seemed simple enough, but then again things can be so obvious when you’re six.

As we continued working out in the yard, I took a second to enjoy the day off and indulge his question.

“Well, dude,” I answered in my most parental tone, “for starters, I did ask. I asked Mommy.”

I proceeded to explain the whole thing to him.

“After mommy noticed ants in the house, she told me to get rid of them. Sometimes it’s easier to keep ants out than catch them once they’re inside, so I thought I would start by getting rid of the ant hills near the house. That’s when I asked Mommy where they were. But she didn’t know.”

“Since Mommy didn’t know, I thought about asking the ants, but I don’t think they’d tell me. I’ll look for the ant hills tomorrow. For now, we’re going to pull some weeds. ”

I left out the part where I scoured the yard with a flashlight in my few free minutes the evening before, finding none of the ant hills, but plenty of weeds for us to pull.

“No, Daddy,” he responded. “I didn’t mean you should ask the ants. That’s ridiculous. I meant you should ask me. I know where all the ant hills are in our yard.”

I froze in my tracks, shovel in hand.

Of course he knew where the ant hills were. He’s six. I can still tell you where the good ant hills were in my yard when I was six.

It never even occurred to me to ask the six-year-old where the ant hills were.

I know where the trees are in our yard. I know which ones are healthy and which ones need some attention. I know what shape the roof is in, and where the property lines are. I know where the original owner used to have a septic tank, and I know what kind of weeds I’m willing to tolerate. I know the big picture stuff.

But when it comes to ant hills? A six-year-old knows where the ant hills are. He knows where the best sticks are, the softest patch of ivy to jump in, the best spot to make mud with a watering can, and the secret strongholds where the rabbits like to hide when they hear humans approaching.

This was an interesting parenting moment for me, but it occurred to me that it also applies to a lot of other situations. So often, we assume that parents, teachers, leaders, or mentors have all the answers. They don’t. They have a specific set of answers. Sometimes the

answers you need, by definition, cannot come from leaders.

This is why it's a leader's job to ask questions. Of course leaders need to have answers sometimes, but we know that. We overlook the importance of having good questions. This is true in teaching, managing, training, and relationship building.

The purpose of this booklet is to help you think about how to ask better questions, particularly in the context of teaching. Leading discussions is often an integral part of how we do ministry, whether in a meeting, a class, or a room full of teenagers. Asking the right question sometimes can be far more productive than anything else we do.

In this guide, we will be exploring nine categories of questions—four categories to avoid, three to adopt, and two to get you out of sticky situations. The best way to understand these questions is in practice, so we'll follow a fictional Bible Study leader named Baxter as he prepares questions.

Baxter – Our Fictional Discussion Leader



The Lesson

Baxter's group has been talking a lot lately about how Christians are called to use their gifts and abilities. This passage has been on the calendar for the Bible study group for a long time, well before the group got so focused on how to use their gifts.

Baxter decides to read the passage, do some study, and then prepare some discussion questions that will help people engage with the passage.

³Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.' ⁹And he said, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

Mark 3:3-9, NRSV

Styles to Avoid

After reading the passage and doing some research, Baxter knows that this group of people will have a wide range of reactions to the passage, and he believes that they will benefit from discussing their insights.

But Baxter has a problem.

In the past, some of his group discussions didn't go as well as he hoped.

Baxter's a hard worker, so he decides to spend a few minutes coming up with some questions ahead of time to keep things on track.

As he begins, Baxter realizes that some of the questions he asks can actually be detrimental to group conversation. In particular, there are four styles of question that Baxter wants to avoid: the Test, the Tease, the Trap, and the Terse.

As we explore Baxter's four categories to avoid, we'll look at examples and definitions for each, and think about whether these kinds of questions are ever useful and why they are generally best avoided.

The Test

Examples

Baxter is excited about Mark 6. He thinks it will fit quite nicely with his group's recent conversation about using their abilities to live out their faith. The way Baxter sees it, Jesus gives us some freedom to use our gifts over and over, even if it takes a little time to get it right. The first questions he wants to ask will steer the group in that direction:

“What does this passage say about how easy it is for us to use our gifts?”

“What expectations should we have of ourselves and our success in using our abilities?”

Naturally, Baxter is looking for specific answers. That's because these questions fall into the category of... the Test.

Definition

The Test is the question, or frequently the series of questions, designed to elicit specific correct answers. Okay, that may be worded too strongly. Test questions don't need to draw out right answers, just answers that match the leader's answers.

Does it ever work?

Of course these questions can work. Test questions work when... you're giving a test. If you want to review something the group has already concluded, if you want to reinforce factual information, or if you're trying to see if people have been paying attention, The Test is the way to go.

Why avoid it?

In leading a discussion, Baxter doesn't have much need for recapping facts. More frequently, the purpose of the conversation is to help people engage with material and consider new perspectives or depths. Rehashing facts typically doesn't help all that much.

What's worse, test questions create or reinforce the idea that the Baxter has the answers. This shuts down participants' creativity and engagement with the material. It's faster (and less embarrassing) if they just let Baxter convey the answers.

The Tease

Examples

Baxter feels like his first questions are a little bit too leading so he decides to go a different direction. He has started thinking of the story in a new way as a part of his preparation. He used to think of this passage as a story with only one character, but he now has started thinking of the birds, the stones, and the soil as characters. He decides that maybe he can use some carefully crafted questions to introduce this interpretation as part of their discussion.

“As we read this passage who are the characters in the story?”

“How many characters are there?”

Baxter smirks to himself, expecting that most people will probably answer that the only character is the sower.

As soon as he jots these questions down, Baxter gets an uneasy feeling. Something inside is telling him that these questions are dangerous; they could even be considered examples of “The Tease.”

Definition

The Tease is the opposite of the Test. It is a question, often carefully worded, designed to elicit wrong or inaccurate answers.

Does it ever work?

This can actually be a useful technique as part of a presentation, for example when you want to highlight that a common perception is woefully underestimating reality, or just wrong. “What percent of people think that Hezekiah is a book of the Bible?” During presentations, Tease questions serve the purpose of teaching people to re-evaluate their commonly held assumptions, and also of teaching people to keep quiet and listen to the presenter who is the expert on this issue.

Why avoid it?

In leading a discussion, both of those purposes backfire. Baxter doesn't want to undermine people's assumptions; he wants to deepen them. Also, encouraging people to keep quiet will make for a very one-sided discussion (sometimes called a lecture). Instead, Baxter wants people to feel confident enough in their thoughts to contribute them.

The Tease is also dangerous for its potential to backfire. Someone may give Baxter a correct answer instantly, or a more precise answer than he expects. In either case, he may find that his plans for the discussion have to change pretty significantly.

The Trap

Examples

Baxter would like to get his group a little more personally invested in this story. He wants to help them see some applications to their lives. He notices that most of the seeds fail to sprout. This gives Baxter an idea for a discussion question.

“If the various types of soil are like people, who in your life is like the thorns?”

“When have you tried hard at something and failed?”

Little does Baxter realize that these aren't questions. They're Traps.

Definition

The Trap is often unintentional. But, as you may assume, it's dangerous. Trap questions make people vulnerable to attack based on their answers.

Trap questions force participants into taking a stance on an issue that they will need to defend, or cause people to divulge potentially embarrassing information. This could involve asking someone to take a stand on a controversial issue, or it could be a question that invites excessive personal disclosure.

Does it ever work?

When a group has a high level of trust and respect, trap questions start to become less dangerous. When a group is new, suspicious, unsafe, or uncertain, Trap questions are very costly.

In some groups, either of those questions could be healthy and lead to robust conversation. In other groups, they could result in broken trust and hurt feelings. If you're uncertain whether it's safe use a Trap question, then be certain that you should avoid it.

Why avoid it?

Trap questions can be costly for several reasons. First, if people feel cornered, they may withdraw from the discussion altogether. Second, if they don't feel cornered, they may put themselves in an awkward situation, or open themselves up to ridicule or attack. Third, if someone answers a Trap, they may regret what they've said, making them less likely to continue to participate in the conversation.

On the flip side, some people crave opportunities for this kind of snap self-disclosure. Trap questions may open floodgates that Baxter may not be able to close.

The Terse

Examples

Baxter starts to get frustrated at how difficult this preparation has become. He decides that maybe he should start with some simple warmup questions for his group.

“According to the passage, who told this story?”

“Have you heard this story before?”

Immediately Baxter realizes that these questions won’t produce helpful responses. The answers will be one or two words at most. They’re not helpful, they’re Terse.

Definition

The Terse questions produce short, almost undiscussable answers. Some of the worst offenders are questions that produce single-word answers like “yes” or “no.”

Does it ever work?

Not really—at least not alone. With some additional prompts (like the Incisive Addendum) it can, but we’ll tackle that later. These questions can also be helpful as part of test-style questions, but even then they have limited use.

Why avoid it?

Terse questions halt conversation. They can eliminate any momentum in the discussion, and cause awkward silences or pauses. Even experienced teachers and discussion leaders like Baxter often slip into Terse questions. When he does, there's a way to recover, but it takes some work. (That'll come in the Styles that Save the Day section.)

Styles to Adopt

Staring at his page full of Traps, Teases, Tests, and Terses, Baxter realizes he needs to start over.

He opens a fresh page and starts again.

Baxter's new questions will focus on creating a welcoming atmosphere that encourages people to participate without making them incur undue risk.

This new attempt at creating some questions will focus on three different categories: The Indomitable Answer, the Insight Beckoning, and the Informed Core.

Baxter knows that these questions aren't foolproof, but he also knows that they set him up for a good shot at a productive discussion.

He focuses his attention and gets to writing.

The Indomitable Answer

Example

Baxter starts by altering his last Terse question. Instead of asking “Have you heard this passage before,” he decides to ask “When have you heard this passage before?”

As Baxter writes this question, he knows that this passage has been the subject of several sermons and lessons over the last few years.

Most people in the group should have memories of this passage, but he’s curious to see what they are. He hopes that this will be a good “ice breaker” style question to get people talking.

He also considers a few others:

“What is your favorite part of the story and why?”

“What did you think was the most surprising part of this parable?”

Definition

Indomitable Answers are opinions or personal reflections about the story/passage/subject itself, without venturing too far into analysis, interpretation, or meaning.

Be careful to avoid venturing into the Test when crafting Indomitable Answer questions. These answers should not be verifiable information-style facts.

Indomitable Answers should always be easy to discuss but virtually impossible to dispute.

How does it work?

The Indomitable Answer allows people to engage in a conversation with very little at stake. It doesn't require people to make serious judgments, recall specific facts, or volunteer potentially sensitive information.

These questions can range in their level of investment from participants, with something like an unverifiable fact at the lowest end (When did you first hear this?) and something like an unchallengeable opinion as slightly more personal (What was most surprising?).

The insignificant answer allows people to “test the water” of a group with minimal risk. By asking people to reflect out loud, they learn that the group is a safe place to do so. They also engage with the subject material in a deeper way by safely pulling a part of themselves into the conversation.

Why adopt it?

Indomitable Answers may sound like a waste of time at first glance. When used well, I assure you that they are worth every second. These questions are wonderful

openers because they offer people a low-risk opportunity to “test the waters” without shutting down conversation. If someone says they liked the beginning of the story because it was exciting, others may have an alternate viewpoint, but it’s not likely to lead to an argument. In fact, voicing that differing opinion may set the tone for healthy, reciprocal conversation.

The Insight Beckoning

Example

Baxter is starting to feel a little better about his plans. Confident that his first round of questions will get people thinking, he decides to introduce a second round that can either draw people a little deeper into the conversation or get them thinking on a different level.

“What did you notice in this passage that you haven’t noticed before?”

“What in this story made you think?”

“What questions did this raise for you?”

Definition

Insight Beckoning answers are opinions not about the subject matter itself, but its meaning. They offer a level of interpretation and analysis, but still avoid making major claims.

Be careful to avoid The Trap or The Terse style of question when asking Insight Beckoning questions. These questions should produce answers that vary from person to person, but are still difficult to dispute or argue.

How does it work?

Insight Beckoning builds on the gains of the Indomitable Answer by asking for an opinion that initiates interpretation or analysis. It subtly shifts the discussion toward meaning, which gently guides the group deeper into the subject.

These kinds of questions give participants a chance to shift from the almost insignificant opinions of the Indomitable Answer to the main portion of the discussion without jumping too quickly into far greater personal investment.

Why adopt it?

Insight Beckoning questions can serve as a gauge of the group's interest and readiness for a conversation.

These kinds of questions allow participants to choose an area of focus. If your plan was for a relaxing, surface-level discussion, you may be surprised at the depth your group wants to explore. If you were preparing for a heavy, abstract conversation, you may find that the group is still wrestling with very concrete concerns.

Not only do Insight Beckonings demonstrate the depth of the group's interest, but they can also suggest topics that may not have occurred to the leader. These questions allow the group to chart a course without surrendering the leader's ability to steer the ship.

The Informed Core

Example

Baxter realizes that it's time to get serious. If his group successfully responds to the first few rounds of questions, they may be ready to continue the conversation with little intervention from him. On the other hand, they may need a little more guidance into deeper waters.

“What do you think is the main point of this passage?”

“What is the most challenging part of this story?”

“How does this change the way you live/think/act?”

Definition

Informed Cores are the kinds of questions that require participants to focus their thoughts and prior comments, and to make a claim about their interpretation of the subject.

Be careful to avoid The Trap by saving these kinds of questions until the group has established some trust and safety.

How does it work?

Informed Cores take advantage of the information and culture already developed by the group. These questions build on this safety and trust that result from several rounds of questions. These deeper, slightly riskier questions encourage participants to step fully into their interpretation of the subject matter and to articulate their understanding.

Sometimes, even at this stage it can be helpful to allow participants to express their responses as opinions to avoid confrontations or debates. For example, you might consider phrasing the question as “what do you think is the main point” instead of “what is the main point.” This subtle shift may signal to participants that it’s still safe to volunteer their thoughts on a potentially divisive subject.

Why adopt it?

From time to time, groups will have a hard time articulating the most important aspects of the subject matter, or centralizing their discussion. Informed Cores guide these discussions into focused conversation about key issues.

These questions also allow people to explore the true depths of the subject matter. This exploration is crucial when participants get stuck on more surface level discussion.

Informed Cores may not be necessary. Sometime groups will dive into this level themselves after a few introductory questions. Other groups need a little more nudging.

Styles that Save the Day

Baxter is feeling good about his preparation, but he has led enough discussions and taught enough lessons to know that things rarely go according to plan.

Inevitably the group will be too talkative, overly energetic, too combative, or, in the worst scenarios, too silent.

He wants some back-up plans for when that happens, so Baxter starts to work on some “in case of emergency” kinds of questions.

Baxter is going to prepare a few Imaginative Analogy questions, and maybe even some Incisive Addendums... just in case.

The Imaginative Analogy

Example

Realizing that sometimes groups need a little help focusing, Baxter decides to prepare a back-up question or two that allow for some rather goofy ideas.

“If this passage was a kind of pie, what would it be and why?”

“If you were painting this passage, what colors would you use and why?”

“What kind of music would you use as a soundtrack to this story?”

Definition

The Imaginative Analogy produces silly comparisons, analogies, or metaphors that help participants vocalize serious insights about the subject matter such as interpretations of meaning, tone, significance, or implications.

How does it work?

These kinds of questions give participants a chance to use their artistic or creative capacities to engage in a conversation. It also provides a level of safety for people who want to say something threatening or personal in a softer way.

Imaginative Analogies are best with groups that have a high level of creativity, energy, or even lethargy, and would benefit from some silliness.

When conversations get off track, this can be a way to pull people back by giving them some direction and by asking them to use a different part of their minds.

Why adopt it?

Imaginative Analogies are not always necessary, but it's good to have a few general comparisons ready for use in any discussion. The comparisons themselves can fit a wide variety of subject matter.

Some people develop specific categories of analogy that they can fall back on at any point.

If you find yourself embroiled in an awkward or difficult discussion, this kind of question may salvage the conversation.

The Incisive Addendum

Example

This just might work. Baxter realizes that he can't completely control the conversation, but he feels good about the preparation he's done.

He decides he needs one more tool at his disposal in case the discussion starts to take on a life of its own. He has some strong personalities in his group, who often state opinions like facts, or just speak a little more definitively than he would like for a discussion based lesson.

He jots down a few questions to help him stay on course in those moments.

"That's a great insight. Why do you think that?"

"You've done a great job explaining your interpretation of that passage. What other interpretations might people have?"

"That's one way people understand this, but others may disagree with that point of view. How do you think would they explain their opposing viewpoint?"

Definition

Incisive Addendums are intended to cut into a terse answer and draw deeper insights. They encourage

participants to consider other points of view, or to explore a more robust approach to their own view.

Incisive Addendums serve to counteract the Terse, but beware the Trap, as some people may not be capable of critically evaluating their own views, or they may just not be ready yet.

How does it work?

Incisive Addendums give people the opportunity to step back and evaluate their own understandings without threatening them.

Incisive Addendums can be dangerous when used too early in a discussion, and become Traps. When the group has established some trust, Incisive Addendums can draw quiet people further into the conversation, or gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of an issue without requiring them to change their beliefs.

Why adopt it?

Some groups tend toward simple answers. Incisive Addendums can be particularly helpful for them. This style is also helpful when the majority of people in a group hold the same view of the subject matter, whether it's controversial or not.

Epilogue

As Baxter looks over his page of questions, he realizes that he's as ready as he can be.

If things go well, he won't use 90 percent of his questions. If they don't go so well, he'll have lots of options to help steer the conversation and some categories that will help him think on his feet if it becomes necessary.

Ultimately, a page of written questions can't guarantee a good discussion. What it can do, though, is prepare Baxter to bring out the best from everyone in the room.