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The Power of Questions

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as it unfolded in 2020, this paper explores the use of questions as a powerful partnership intervention tool. When a partnership broker's field of view is condensed to a zoom window, deep consideration of the questions that frame our partnership discussions can help maximise our effectiveness. Drawn from personal reflections and the concept of strategic questioning developed by Fran Peavey, a process for framing questions is introduced, emphasising clarity of purpose, consideration of how and by whom questions are delivered, and the partnership broker's reflection on their qualities as questioner and listener.

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Partnership brokering accreditation

Final paper: The power of questions

Kylie Shae, January 2021

2020, and the unfolding impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, was the coincidental backdrop to my journey through partnership brokering accreditation. In the midst of a chaotic and unpredictable year, regular reflection anchored me as I rapidly revised and tested tools and strategies that would enable continued effective work with partners across the globe, without ever being physically in the same location.

Like many, adapting to working remotely meant experiencing and working with the capacities as well as limitations of video conferencing. One limitation I have found most concerning is the degree to which the partnership broker's 'field of view' is restricted. We are restricted by who can meet, as access to the required technology is inequitable. Particularly in developing country contexts, often only lead actors are able to convene by video conference. Time with partners and stakeholders is constrained to tightly scheduled sessions that begin and end abruptly. We miss opportunities to build human connection with our partners outside of a meeting, or to follow up on a discussion with individuals in less formal ways. Further, our access to the broader context in which a partnership and its work is set is constrained by what is available to us through a two dimensional 'zoom window'.

In response, I found myself thinking deeply about how as partnership brokers we can make the most effective use of questions to expand our field of view in this new reality of remote partnership work.

Why focus on questions?

The dictionary definition of a question is *"a sentence worded or expressed so as to elicit information"*. My view is that questions hold a greater power than this definition implies. Questions can, for example, steer the direction of a discussion and its conclusion; prioritise one topic and de-prioritise another; invite thought or close down discussion; provoke emotions; confer and/or infer authority, judgement or opinion.

In partnership brokering, questions are a key intervention tool. In the context of COVID-19 questions are even more important, as their deliberate and precise use can assist to mitigate some of the challenges, restrictions and risks of remote work. This paper shares my thoughts and emerging conclusions regarding how to maximise the power of questions; outlined in three steps (see figure 1 below) as a possible systematic process for their preparation and delivery.

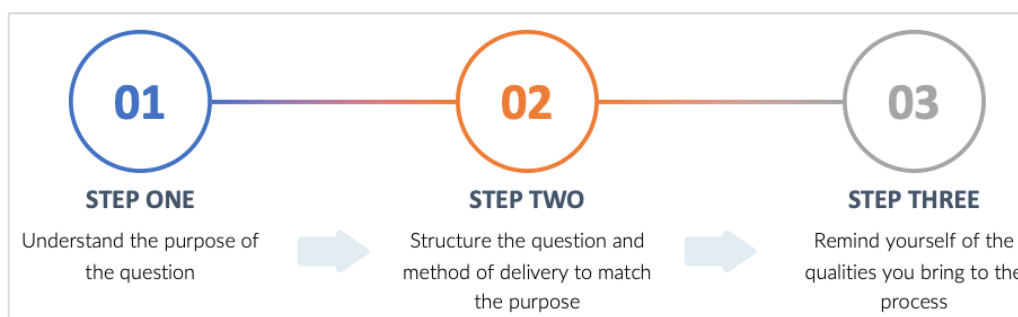


Figure 1: Process steps for question development

Step one: Understand the purpose of the question

In the first few weeks of COVID-19 impacting international travel, I cancelled an in-country consultation, and began re-designing the consultation using remote methods. The consultation was intended to gather information and perspectives from multiple stakeholders to inform the content and scope of new national guidelines. It would also enable me to gain background and context information to support their work.

We agreed to use a range of methods to gather information, all of which required the preparation of questions – and this required clarity about who each question was intended to serve, and how.

In the context of partnership brokering, the ‘right’ question has potential to serve partnership broker/s, the individuals and groups that make up a partnership, and the partnership goal in different ways. For example, responses to questions about what is already known to partners can help a partnership broker understand context; build partners’ confidence as they recognize how much they already know; and surface information that informs decisions about the partnership’s goals.

Clarifying the purpose of questions is therefore a logical first step in developing an effective questioning approach. For example, when adapting my consultation to remote methods, we identified question goals including: to fill information gaps; to raise awareness of issues in preparation for further discussion; and to facilitate active engagement with the guidelines development process. This last was particularly important in the context of COVID-19. Physically convening stakeholders to discuss and contribute to the new guidelines would likely be impossible for an extended period of time due to the pandemic, beyond even this first consultation. This risked less stakeholders being able to participate in the development process, reducing ownership, relevance and eventual use of the final guidelines.

Being clear about our goals helped us prioritise our questions and consider different approaches suitable to remote work. For example, to meet our engagement goal, we planned a series of short online surveys for the largest stakeholder group (personnel). By using an initial survey for the first consultation, with the intent to signal and continue further engagement in the process through future short surveys, we saw an opportunity to build and maintain this group’s connection to the project throughout. This was effective in reaching more personnel than other remote methods; and in fact a greater number than would have been able to attend the previously planned in-person workshops.

Step two: Structure the question and its delivery to match its purpose

Once the question purpose is clear, the next step is to plan how questions will be structured and delivered so they serve the intended goals. Adapting a quote from Thomas Kuhn¹ “*the answers and results you get depend on the questions you ask*”. Below are some question aspects I worked with throughout 2020, offered as questions partnership brokers may find useful to consider when developing questions for purpose.

Who devises the question/s? Questions invariably drive the focus and direction of dialogue. Those devising questions for a partnership activity therefore hold this power through the questions they frame. Further, their selection of questions will unavoidably be influenced by personal factors such as culture, experience, expertise and bias.

That said, it is often the appropriate role of a partnership broker to frame effective questions for partners or stakeholders to work with. For example, partnership broker Joanne Burke describes four questions² she posed for partnership brokers to discuss during a workshop designed to contribute to understanding of the partnership role in review and evaluation. She reported the discussions elicited “...*generated a wealth of creative and useful new ideas which were shared in plenary, leading to a reflection exercise on the day’s outputs and next steps.*”ⁱ Leading the question development was highly appropriate to her role as workshop convenor and relevant to her deep understanding of the topic and stakeholders.

As partnership brokers, particularly when the context and experience of a group is distinct from ours, we may in other situations co-create questions with our partners or hand the role over entirely. During preparation for a consultation this year, I was struck by a comment made by the leader of a Disabled Persons Organisation (DPO). When asked to describe her experience engaging on issues that directly impact people with disabilities, she said “*We are always invited, however we never set the agenda*”. This led me to discuss with partners how we could engage differently with the DPO in the consultations. Rather

¹ The exact quote from Thomas Kuhn (American philosopher of science) is “the answers you get depend on the questions you ask”

² 1) Why is this evaluation area important for a partnership broker? 2) What methodologies/tools/approaches already exist for a partnership broker to work with? What’s missing? What do we need to know? 3) What new ideas do we have for partnership brokers in this area of evaluation work? 4) How will we know if our partnership brokering evaluation interventions have been successful?

than presenting our prepared questions to the DPO and their members, we invited the DPO to set questions and manage consultations with their networks. In doing so, we intentionally handed over the dialogue to the DPO, who have the deeper knowledge of what matters most to themselves and their members in relation to the issues being discussed.

Who asks the question? The person who asks questions is often afforded a measure of power. I have also observed that how the questioner is viewed, for example whether they are trusted or a person with authority, can influence how people react to their questions. This dynamic may impact factors such as how much attention the question is given, or how openly people respond. Partnership brokers may adjust, in discussion with partners, who asks specific questions (themselves, co-broker, partners, stakeholders) in order to work with this particular dynamic.

Who answers the question? Depending on how questions are delivered, a partnership broker may or may not be able to predict how a group will respond to questions. However, it is worth thinking through what would best serve the question goals and plan accordingly. For example, if the purpose of a question is to build engagement, the partnership broker may structure a session so that as many people as possible are able to respond³. Alternatively, a goal of questions may be to strengthen the voice and confidence of a particular individual or group. I recall working with a male dominated group of health personnel in a five-day workshop. On the first day, the one female in the group was shy and contributed little to discussions. However, in the background I observed her organizing her colleagues and noted that she appeared to have the most knowledge of their hospital systems. I decided to work to her strengths and invited her to lead a tour of their hospital. As we walked side-by-side around the hospital, she responded actively to questions about the facilities. The opportunity for her to respond to questions that drew on her knowledge, in a less formal way, built her confidence. After this, I found her to be a more animated and active participant for the rest of the course.

How will question/s be delivered? Considering the method of delivery and the impact of this on responses is even more critical as partnership brokers adapt to working remotely. Options include (and are not limited to) posing questions in meetings, workshop plenary or group settings (face to face or tele-conference equivalents); less direct methods such as surveys and questionnaires; and sending questions to partners for their consideration and/or use via email or other methods. The best choice of delivery method should be influenced by the purpose of the question.

As an example of adapting the delivery method to the realities of remote work, I recently tested handing over questions to a new partnership formed to design and implement a small project. Operating in a country with limited internet, we were struggling to hold effective video conference meetings in which everyone can equally participate. Perhaps due to this, individual partners began initiating direct communication with me, rather than using the group chat established for in-between video conference calls. While this had the benefit of giving me insights into the issues and/or challenges individuals were concerned with, my priority was to ensure partners raised and addressed their issues together.

As the partners themselves were not restricted from meeting in person, the biggest issue was looping me into video conference meetings. I therefore suggested they meet in person, with me available to them on the group chat if needed. I emailed a short agenda and three questions that I invited them to engage with before addressing the agenda. Two of the questions were designed to assist the group to take ownership of and discuss the concerns they had shared individually with me. These were:

- *From each of your perspectives, what most concerns you about the project (what do you think may be most challenging)? Together you are likely to find solutions to what is worrying you.*
- *What can you include in your planning to address the specific challenges you each see?*

Feedback after the meeting was encouraging. I was informed the group valued these questions, spent considerable time discussing them, and felt they enabled them to make better decisions as they moved forwards with planning the project. Their meeting notes reflected that some of the controversial issues had been raised and resolved.

³ For example, virtual or in-person break out groups, 'carousel' or global café, surveys etc.

When will the question be posed? The partnership broker needs to consider the right timing either within a particular activity, or within the overall partnership cycle, for specific questions. Again, considering the purpose of the question, as well as its nature, will influence this decision. For example, questions designed to open up exploration of ideas may be used during the scoping and building phase of a partnership; and questions that require greater trust in the questioner, or within the group, may be timed for when a measure of trust has been established.

What type of question is needed? In the process of reading and reflection on questions, I have developed a personal working framework for the 'types' of questions that may be used. While there are many types of questions we can consider (ie open, closed, exploratory, leading, provocative, closing, 'wh' questions etc.), in my framework these are all contained within two main question groups: 1) Fact finding and 2) Strategic.

Fact finding questions are those that help set the scene and build a body of information. They bring to light that which is already known to (for example) inform the partnership broker, share information between partners, and gather information from stakeholders. For example, in the survey for personnel impacted by new national guidelines described earlier, we asked: *"What would make these (related existing) standards more useful for you?"* Personnel were being asked to share their perspectives of existing standards, to inform the content and structure of the new guidelines.

The second group, strategic questions, is drawn from the work of social activist Fran Peavey on Strategic Questioning. They are carefully and purposefully designed, simply constructed questions that create movement and energy for change. Strategic questions invite convergent and exploratory thought, and critically, aim to use the knowledge inherent in people to create their own solutions. In this way they are empowering and participatory, because they focus on what those most impacted by the subject can do in response. Fran Peavey describes strategic questioning as *"the skill of asking the questions that will make a difference"*, which points to the particular value of this form of question in partnership work that is transformational in nature.

One of my projects in 2020 involved the facilitation of three separate partnerships in three countries, each engaged in a rapid pilot aiming to test new methods of integrating an aspect of health care into primary health care centres. It was important the project be open to solutions that may not have already been thought of or tried. The short time frame created pressure, and risked partners 'closing' too quickly on known solutions, missing the opportunity to generate new ideas. Unable to travel to work alongside lead partners in each country during the consultation and design phase of the pilot, my focus shifted to enabling each to take on more of the partnership brokering role themselves. We structured our work together around a series of video conference workshops, spaced to allow partners time in-between to form the necessary local partnerships and consult with stakeholders.

To meet the partnership goal of 'testing new methods' and establish in the lead partners an exploratory mindset, I used a visioning exercise followed by a strategic question. To open each partner's first workshop, I asked them to imagine the service we were aiming to introduce being in place and described a vision of what that may look like. At the conclusion of the description, I invited them to share their thoughts in response to: *"What would it take to change the current situation to closer to this vision"*. I was impressed with the wide-ranging discussion the question generated. Although there was a tendency towards identifying challenges rather than solutions, with gentle probing and reflection back to the vision, action ideas began to emerge. I was particularly encouraged to hear that one of the partners used this same exercise when they ran their first workshop with their stakeholders, giving me confidence that they felt the question was valuable to their planning process; and motivating me to continue exploring the power of change focused strategic questions.

I have since reflected on whether there is an ideal order (sequence) for fact finding and strategic questions. Fran Peavey, in her manual on strategic questioning describes information gathering focus, observation, feeling and visioning questions as *"necessary in order to have enough information to create the strategic questions"*ⁱⁱ. In the example above, a strategic question was used deliberately early in the partners' work, to set a strong tone of action for change. However, the question did initially generate

information (known challenges), which supports Fran's recommendation that information gathering precedes and prepares people for strategic questions.

As noted above, grouping questions into fact finding and strategic is a personal working framework, and I look forward to working with, testing and refining this as I continue deploying questions as a key component of my remote partnership work in 2021. Table 1 below summarises the distinction between the two groups and how each may serve partnership brokers, partners and partnership goals. For now, I have made no comment on the sequencing of these question groups.

Table 1: How questions can serve in partnership brokering

Question group and examples		Example goals for:		
		Partnership broker/s	Partners	Partnership goals
Fact finding questions ⁴	<i>Do you think that new guidelines will be useful for other stakeholders?⁵</i>	To understand the context To 'catch up' in knowledge to partners	To build confidence in own knowledge, through contributing to the partnership discussions	To uncover, gather and analyse known information
	<i>From each of your perspectives, what most concerns you about this project?⁶</i>	To build relationships with the individuals and groups within the partnership To better understand and support group dynamics (by observing how a group responds)	To expose issues known to some but not all those involved in the partnership To practice and establish a norm of equitable contribution within a group	To identify information gaps To build a shared knowledge base that offers a base line to inform next steps
Strategic questions	<i>How does this activity help support steps towards the vision of more people accessing assistive products, closer to their homes?⁷</i>	To reflect on progress in the partnership To reflect on own partnership brokering practice and build skills	To see things differently / foster shifts in attitude To understand and/or challenge the perspectives of each other and/or other stakeholders	To identify possible solutions not readily apparent
	<i>"What would you like the community to say about your organization as a result of being engaged about this issue?"ⁱⁱⁱ</i>	To contribute to the development of partnership brokering practice	To address challenging issues / conflict / topics that may ordinarily be difficult to ask (taboo)	To explore (more than two) ⁸ options To explore challenging or taboo issues To consider the pros and cons of potential actions To reflect and evaluate what has been learnt / progressed / achieved

Step three: Remind yourself of the qualities you bring to the process

Partnership brokering is often described as both an art and a science. In using questions as a tool, the art is in understanding who you are, and what you bring to the questioning process. Every partnership broker brings their own unique personality and qualities to their work; and it is part of our practice to understand how this impacts our partnerships. Below are a few aspects of self that have particular potential to strengthen the effectiveness of a partnership broker's use of questions.

"**Beginner's mind**" refers to having an attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconceptions^{iv}. With a beginner's mind, one is free of preconceptions and expectations; filled with curiosity; and open to a world of possibilities^v. Cultivating a beginner's mind encourages a questioning approach and it also lends power to the process by signaling a genuine interest in responses. For a partnership broker, a beginner's mind set is also an asset in facilitating transformational change by partners and/or their stakeholders, as it supports the broker to suspend their own expertise and hold space for full exploration of what might be possible.

⁴ Fran Peavey describes these as 'focus questions', designed to gather information that is known in preparation for strategic questions.

⁵ Question posed in a survey, gathering stakeholder perspectives related to developing new national rehabilitation guidelines.

⁶ Question inviting partners to discuss issues that were 'floating' however had not yet been addressed.

⁷ Question inviting partners to extend their thinking during a planning meeting beyond the pilot phase.

⁸ Fran Peavey states: "It is particularly important for a strategic questioner not to focus on only two options"

Partnership brokers are more likely to utilize strategic questions well, when this is done with full faith that partners have the capacity to reach their own conclusions. Having faith is particularly relevant for brokers working with change processes outside of our own communities; and even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic when many of us are physically disconnected from our partners. In the situation described earlier, when I was unable to join a meeting due to tele-conference challenges, I sent partners questions to help them resolve their challenges. I did so trusting in their ability to work through the issues and reach a resolution. Faith in the capacities of others enables partnership brokers to let go of leading processes at the earliest opportunity, to avoid overstepping, and to promote ownership of solutions. Not only is this increasingly necessary as our direct access to partners is reduced, it is ultimately more likely to create sustainable change.

Partnership brokers need to understand their own bias and be alert to assumptions that may be unintentionally embedded in a question. For example, asking “*what are the barriers women face in accessing your service*” makes the assumption that women are in fact having difficulty accessing the service. If this has already been established through fact finding, then it may be a relevant question. However, if not, the question may be better framed: “*are you aware of factors that may impact access to your services by women or other groups of people?*”

Have courage. In her strategic questioning manual, Fran Peavey cautions “*strategic questioning is a process that may change the listener as well as the person being questioned. When we open ourselves to another point of view, our own ideas will have to shift to take into account new information, new possibilities, and new strategies for resolving problems*”. It takes courage to step into such a process, possibly more so for an internal broker who may already have a view of how things may turn out. However, with genuine intent to facilitate a partnership that determines its own solution and actions, the partnership broker needs to be prepared for a direction that may be different to that originally envisioned.

In closing

In adapting to working remotely throughout 2020, an appreciation of the power of questions became the backbone of my partnership brokering practice. Drafting this paper has brought structure to the many threads of my internal reflections on questions over the past year; and I look forward to further testing in 2021 the three-step process for developing questions that I have shared here.

I also plan to continue explore my working framework of question groups, and in particular to delve further into the potential and process of strategic questioning. I warmly encourage readers not already familiar with the work of Fran Peavey, to review her manual (see reference list). I have touched only lightly on the concept, and there is more about her process that could directly inform partnership brokering practice.

I would also like to highlight how important I have found the concept of a beginner’s mind set, in this year of being physically separated from partners and contexts. Faced with new partnerships in countries less familiar to me, I have embraced its value in helping me to suspend my preconceptions and actively listen and learn from my partners and their stakeholders to understand their realities.

And finally, it seems appropriate to close this paper with a reflective question, for myself, and other partnership brokers interested in further exploring the power of questions **and responses**: “*If questions hold power, how well are we listening to the answers?*”

References

ⁱ Joanne Burke, 2013, *Making it better: the partnership broker's role in review and evaluation*, Betwixt and Between, the Journal of Partnership brokering, Issue 2, December 2013 (article, accessed 20/12/20 at <https://partnershipbrokers.org/w/journal/making-it-better-the-partnership-brokers-role-in-review-and-evaluation/>)

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^{iv} Wikipedia, accessed 20/01/20 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoshin>

^v Patrick Buggy, *How to cultivate beginner's mind for a fresh perspective* (blog, accessed 20/12/20 at: <https://mindfulambition.net/beginners-mind/>)