

# The role of 'stance' in developing Probing Questions

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I am relatively new to the idea of probing questions, and frankly they run counter to my instincts. After twenty years in management consulting I have developed a real skill in asking leading questions—using questions to nudge people toward the answer I think is right. (I imagine this might also be true for some classroom teachers.) After all that experience, it is hard to walk away from such a successful (for me) tactic.

But the power of probing questions is not in getting people to do what I want them to (as satisfying as that is). It is in the power of unfolding other people's thinking and watching where it takes them. Probing questions encourage lateral thinking, the discovery of self-imposed barriers, the rethinking of assumptions and the kinds of leaps of insight that create a real break through.

So I struggle between my learned behavior and the power of probing questions. At a recent NSRF event, I found three pretty good probing questions in rapid succession. Eager to build on that success, I spent a little time thinking about what exactly was going on in my head that allowed me to find the questions.

After some reflection, I realized that the only difference was what I will call my "mental stance." I realized that if I stand too close to a problem, I am sucked into it -- and my reaction is to immediately begin "solution finding" behavior.

**"What are you most afraid of?"**

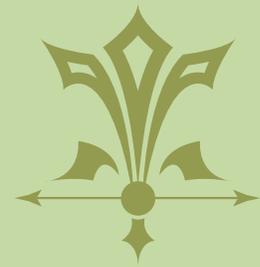
But if I can step back from the problem, create a mental space around it and allow myself to try to understand the problem rather than solve it, new questions begin to emerge. It is a matter of concentrating on understanding the context of the problem, and not on solving the problem itself.

***"Which of your assumptions is most likely to be wrong?"***

Two of the questions that occurred to me were "What are you most afraid of?" and "Which one of the assumptions you are making are most likely to be wrong?" The third question was more specific to the situation, but was based on the idea "What if the opposite were true?"

***"What if the opposite were true?"***

If you are struggling with asking probing questions, and especially if you are guilty of suggestions masquerading as questions, maybe this experience can help you, too.



Jim McKean is a new Critical Friends Group coach in Bloomington, Indiana. A management consultant with 20+ years' experience, he also uses his new skills with protocols in his work at the Coltrain Group.

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