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How might we introduce Probing Questions more effectively?

"A good question is never answered. It is not a bolt to be tightened into place but a seed to be planted and to bear more seed toward the hope of greening the landscape of idea." — John Ciardi, American poet

What do we want from a question? Defying logic, I contend that we don't want questions with clear answers. The ideal question doesn't have an answer. Or, more clearly, it doesn't have ONE answer. Rather, the most powerful questions push us to think about possibilities, probing us to contemplate further. I call it the "lingering factor of a more powerful probing question," and I believe probing questions are at the heart of our work as facilitators, coaches and participants of Critical Friends Group® communities.

As an International Facilitator for NSRF® and an active CFG™ Coach, I've witnessed numerous participants leave a training session or meeting carrying those lingering probing questions. Even the expression on their faces shows that they're looking more deeply into their work.

While arguably probing questions are the most important part of so many CFG protocols and the key to innova-

tion, they are also the most difficult to generate and especially challenging to teach. I've come across a wonderful method for introducing probing questions that can be used not only with Critical Friends Group communities, but also with students and colleagues alike.

How might we create more powerful probing questions?

I was first introduced to the [Right Question Institute \(RQI\)](#) while reading *A More Beautiful Question* by Warren Berger (in my opinion, a must-read



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for all facilitators and educators). The founders of the Right Question Institute, Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana have devised a method known as the Question Formulation Technique (QFT), which Berger praises as a process that is "simple enough that teachers can learn it in an hour, and students can grasp it immediately." I couldn't agree more!

As an offshoot, the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) provides an innovative way for participants to experience probing questions, while also offering a powerful process for use in the classroom, boardroom, or other collaborative group. Best of all, their website offers most of their materials free of charge, only requiring that you register your email. Check out their

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website at www.rightquestion.org. You can download the templates, explanations and handouts. I also suggest you watch [Dan Rothstein's TEDxSomerville Talk, "Did Socrates Get it Wrong?"](#) which will help you to understand the QFT and to probe the possibilities.

How might you apply the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) within your group?

In my latest training for New CFG Coaches, I have found the Question Formulation Technique (QFT) extremely effective to introduce probing questions. Here's how I applied it: participants were divided into smaller groups, each given a large piece of butcher paper and their own space to work. They were all introduced to the four key rules of the QFT (see mini protocol at right). The process requires that participants only ask questions, not discuss, that they write down all questions, and that they change all statements into questions.

Essentially, the process asks the participants to brainstorm, not with answers or ideas, but only with questions. At the center of the process is the Question Focus or Q-focus, a statement (similar to NSRF's Focusing Question) providing the frame and focus for the brainstorming. I instructed the participants to write "We can affect student learning" in the center of their group's paper, which provided their Q-focus.

Setting the timer for six minutes, I watched the groups take off, scribing question after question and laughing periodically while reflecting the breadth of their interests and experiences related to the Q-focus. Closely following the QFT from the PowerPoint slides downloaded from the RQI website, I then asked members to classify their questions as "open" or "closed" (i.e., do they require more than a yes or no answer). Next, they inverted several of those questions from open to closed and vice versa, taking mental notes of what took place along the way.

I then asked the group members

to rank their most powerful questions as defined by those that "push the group's thinking" and "suggest that 'ah-ha, hmmm' lingering sensation." We then shared those questions out to the large group.

In the next step I moved into the Probing Question Materials from the nsrfharmony.org website, introducing them to the participants. The [Pocket Guide to Probing Questions](#) , and the newly created [Probing Questions Cheat Sheet](#)  and [Probing Question Approaches](#)  provide an excellent overview of probing questions, including their design and function.

Finally, I took the participants back to their own questions from the QFT and we debriefed as a large group, discussing the impact of the most powerful probing questions. It was in this context that I introduced the pivotal role that probing questions can play in Critical Friends Group work, especially when unraveling the complexities using an [Issaquah Protocol](#) , or a [Dilemma Analysis Protocol](#) , or exploring the possibilities within a [Consultancy Protocol](#)  or a [Dilemma Consultancy Protocol](#) .

One of the most difficult challenges when introducing probing questions is to convince the participants that they need not begin with "the answer" in mind. In fact, they should not begin with any answers. Only questions, and the more, the better. It is through the QFT that the CFG participants begin to realize that probing questions are not only intended for the presenter of an NSRF protocol, but strategically placed to encourage the entire group to widen possibilities before even considering answers.

As educators, CFG Coaches, and NSRF Facilitators, we can indeed provide opportunities for colleagues and students to explore more powerful questions. The RQI technique as well as numerous NSRF protocols continue to find their way into the classrooms, trainings and meetings of several of my colleagues, who have raved about their use. I hope that you can try them out for yourself. A more powerful probing question awaits! 

Mini-protocol around the Right Question Institute "Question Formulation Technique" (QFT)

1. Create groups of 5-6. (2 min.)
2. Present each group with a large sheet of butcher paper, markers, and space to work. (2 min.)
3. Instruct groups to write the Q-focus statement in the middle of their papers. (1 min.)
4. Review the QFT Rules: Ask only questions, no discussions, writing down all questions, and change all statements into questions. (2 min.)
5. Participants write as many questions as they can think of around the Q-Focus statement. (6 min.)
6. Invite participants to classify all questions as "open" or "closed," and then invert those questions. Remind them to take notice of the process for later reflection. (5 min.)
7. Each group ranks their most powerful questions according to the NSRF descriptions and models for creating effective probing questions. (5 min.)
8. Share out to the larger group. (5 min.)
9. Debrief: What surprised you? How did the results of this protocol differ from other means of brainstorming questions? How might this protocol be helpful to you in your work? (10 min.)