

Question Circles

Background: As I was preparing this process, I wondered as to how many ideas are truly original. The idea for Question Circles came to me in the course of reflection around ways and means of asking bigger questions. Anyone reading it will see echoes of a whole body of work right from Socratic questioning to coaching supervision methodologies and Tavistock inspired material. For that I am truly grateful.

And yet this feels different and that is why I am sharing it. For starters, this is about creating a space for group exploration of a particular issue in the presence of peers. There are no teachers, no experts or indeed answers. The focus is thus on the group and on the process. For me, possibility comes not from seeking answers but from learning to ask better questions. I have found that once you find the "right question for you in a particular moment" the answers often flow almost uninvited. At the very least you now know where to start looking for answers.

Purpose: Question Circles are a simple means of encouraging participants to delve deeper into questions, gaining fresh insights and perspectives through questions rather than answers. The process is considered more important than the outcome so there is no pressure to reach any particular outcome or destination.

Structure: This is designed for a small group of 5 or 6 people. One person acts as facilitator and another person (the "questioner") brings a question to the group. The other group members offer reflections on what they have heard. The process is intended to take no more than 25 minutes and can be shorted if required. This format emphasizes the importance of enquiry, dialogue and reflection in gaining a deeper understanding of complex issues. By focusing on asking questions rather than seeking answers, participants can uncover new perspectives and insights.

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Process: Here is a breakdown of how it works:

1. Introduction (1 minute): The facilitator briefly explains the purpose and structure of the process and encourages participants to approach it with an open mind and a willingness to explore the questions from various perspectives. Remember:
 - a. The only purpose is to be part of the process;
 - b. Everyone is encouraged to truly listen for what is and isn't being said;
 - c. The idea is not to fix, help or jump to answers;
 - d. Judgement and knowing are left outside the circle.
2. Sharing the Question (4 minutes): The questioner shares their question and explains the context. The facilitator may nudge the questioner to "Say more" or ask specific questions to tease out any aspects of the question that seem unclear to the questioner.
3. Group Exploration (10 minutes): Instead of trying to find answers, the group focuses on unpacking the question and understanding its underlying themes or assumptions as well as what hasn't been asked (Why this question?). Each participant briefly shares their perspective on what they believe is the core question they heard, drawing on their own experiences and insights.
4. Reflecting on the Question (5 minutes): After hearing everyone's input, the questioner considers any new insights or perspectives they have gained from the group's input and reflects on how their question may or may not have shifted or evolved. They also reflect on whether any next steps have become apparent.
5. Conclusion (5 minutes): The facilitator invites the other participants to briefly share their thoughts on the process and any insights they may have had around any issues they are dealing with.

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Benefits: Some key benefits include:

Shifting focus from answers to enquiry: The process challenges the conventional wisdom that finding answers is the ultimate goal. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of asking better questions and engaging in meaningful dialogue, which can lead to deeper understanding and more effective problem-solving.

Deepening understanding: By focusing on the question and examining its underlying themes and assumptions, participants gain a more profound understanding of the issue at hand. This allows them to see it from different angles and consider new perspectives.

Encouraging collaboration: The process fosters an open and supportive environment where everyone's input is valued. By sharing their insights and experiences, participants learn from each other and enhance their collective understanding of the issue.

Promoting personal growth: Through reflection and dialogue, participants develop their critical thinking and communication skills. They learn to ask better questions and become more open to different perspectives, leading to personal growth and transformation.

Uncovering new insights: As participants explore the question from various angles, they may discover new aspects of the issue or identify previously unrecognized connections between ideas. These insights can lead to innovative solutions and transformative change.

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