



# How to Craft Powerful Questions

And get Community Conversations Started

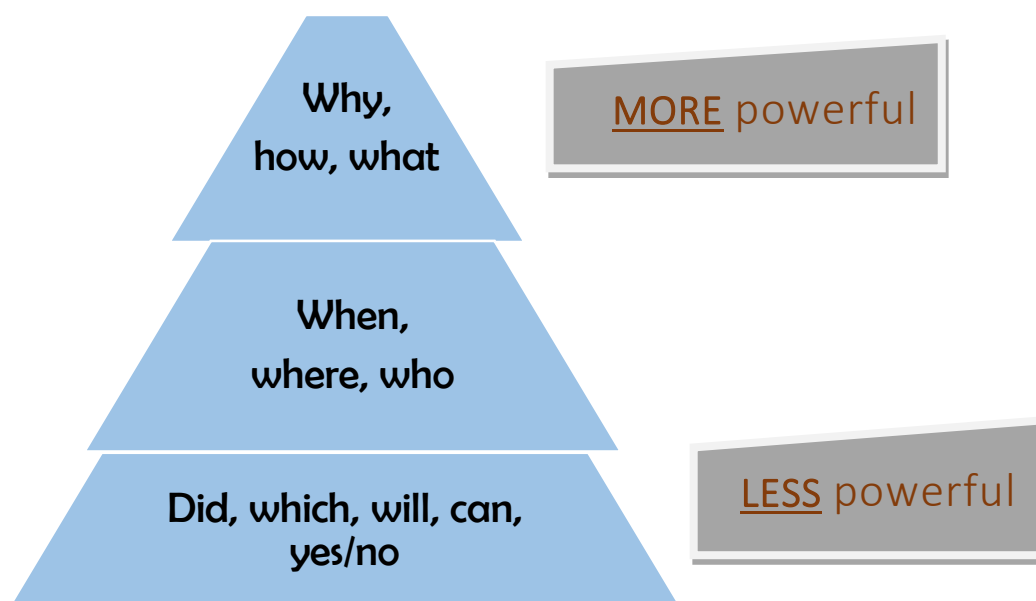
## Why do Powerful Questions Matter?

The kinds of questions we ask can have a big impact on the way people engage with us, the type of information we/they receive, and the involvement or action that follows.

Powerful questions used in thoughtful conversations:

- help people to discover their own knowledge
- are thought-provoking and help people reflect and find deeper meaning
- expand thinking about new possibilities or focus attention on what really matters
- help underlying assumptions and diverse perspectives come to light
- stimulate curiosity and creativity
- help accelerate the potential of a group or community to move forward

What's the difference between a powerful question and any old question?



Here are some examples.

Less powerful questions	More powerful questions
Should we hold the event on Saturday or Sunday?	When should we hold the meeting? Who do we really want to attend the event?
Is crime a problem in your neighbourhood?	How safe do you feel in your neighbourhood? Where do you not feel safe? What would help you feel safer?
Do you think this community is prepared for an emergency?	Why or why not? How has this community prepared for an emergency in the past? What went well? What could be improved? How?

Notice the difference in your own responses to these questions. Which questions engage you more?



## How do we Craft and Use Powerful Questions Well?

Powerful or thoughtful questions help us engage with people in a non-threatening way. They help us to draw out and listen to community members' knowledge and creative ideas before deciding if or when to offer our own ideas. Powerful questions and [active listening](#) help us activate community engagement and [work in a respectful way with each other](#).

For example, rather than saying "I think we need to involve local hapū in our community initiative", you could instead ask:

- How have local whanau, hapū or iwi engaged so far and what's has their response been?
- Who has the best relationships with the local hapū and why?
- What do you think it would take to engage local hapū better?

Through a process of questions and answers, the fact that local hapū might not be effectively engaged can be identified in a non-threatening way. People are also encouraged to think about new ways to progress or address this challenge (if it is a challenge).

**The following three dimensions can help us design powerful questions<sup>1</sup>.**

### Construction

How we construct questions can make a real difference as to whether the person we are asking will open their minds or narrow the possibilities they consider. Moving from simple *yes/no* questions to *why/what if* questions stimulates more reflective thinking and more creative responses.

### Scope

The scope of a question must match the need we are addressing or the discovery that we're trying to make.

### Assumptions

Almost all questions have some degree of assumption built into them, whether obvious or implied.

---

<sup>1</sup> Vogt, E., Brown, J., and Issacs, D. (2003). The Art of powerful questions: Catalyzing insight, innovation, and action. Whole Systems Associates: Mill Valley, CA.



- Which questions assume a solution?
- Which assume error or blame, leading to narrow discussions or defensiveness?
- Which stimulate reflection, creativity, and/or collaboration?
- What assumptions or beliefs are we introducing with this question?
- How would we approach it if we had an entirely different belief system?

Here's a process to help you develop some powerful questions for your community conversations, while paying attention to the three dimensions above.

1. Start by discussing what you want to get out of the discussion or process.
2. Work with partners or in a small group to write down several questions related to the topic.
3. Discuss and rate the questions.
  - Which question is best constructed to promote reflection and creativity?
  - Which has the right scope to achieve our end purpose?
  - What are the underlying assumptions embedded in each question? The goal is not always to make the question assumption free. But make sure it has *the right assumptions to move your group forward*.
4. Experiment with changing how the question is constructed and the scope to get a feel for how this can change the direction of the conversation.
5. Give each question the "genuine test." Is this a question to which we don't already know the answer? If we already know the answer or have a pre-set correct response in mind, it's not a true inquiry conversation.
6. Run the question by someone outside your group to see how well it works and where it leads the discussion.



## Some examples of questions for focusing attention

- What's important to you about your situation and why do you care? Why are we doing this? Why is this worthy of our best effort? What's our intention here?
- What opportunities can you see in (your situation)? What do we know so far and what do we still need to learn about?
- What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of your project/your place?
- What assumptions do we need to test or challenge in thinking about your situation? How could we do that?
- What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs say about your situation?
- How can we best ask these questions so that we get a wide range of people engaged?

## Some questions for connecting ideas and finding deeper insight

- What's taking shape? What are you hearing from the variety of opinions being expressed? What are you observing? What new connections are you making? How are these happening?
- What had real meaning for you from what you've heard? What surprised or challenged you? Why?
- What's missing from this picture so far? What is it we're not seeing? What do we need more clarity about? How can we get that by doing something together, rather than just asking more questions?
- What metaphor or image comes to mind if you were naming your situation? How it is now compared to where you have come from? How does that image help us see where we might need to head next?
- What's been your/our major learning, insight, or discovery so far? What's the next level of thinking/acting we need to do?

## Questions that create forward movement

- How can we create change on this issue? What's possible and who cares? What are we noticing about where the energy is right now?
- What if our success was completely guaranteed, how would we act now? What bold steps might we choose?



- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What contribution can we each make?
- What challenges could come our way and how might we meet them? What timing/pace might work for us?
- What needs our immediate attention going forward?

## Questions are more transforming than answers

*The skill is getting the questions right. The traditional conversations that seek to explain, study, analyze, define tools, and express the desire to change others are interesting but not powerful. Questions open the door to the future and are more powerful than answers in that they demand engagement. Engagement in the right questions is what creates accountability. How [do] we frame the questions? ...They need to be ambiguous, personal and stressful. Introduce the questions by defining the distinction the question addresses, namely what is different and unique about this conversation... The important thing about these questions is that they name the agenda that creates space for an alternative future. The power is in the asking, not in the answers.*

~ Peter Block <sup>2</sup>

Check out <https://conversational-leadership.net/powerful-questions> for more examples and strategies for using powerful questions.

---

<sup>2</sup> Block, Peter (2009) Community: The Structure of Belonging. Berrett-Koehler Publishers



## ABOUT



Inspiring Communities catalyses locally-led change, to achieve sustainable, effective outcomes.

We are the reference point for community-led development in New Zealand, building on international and local practice-based evidence to grow and share expertise.

Inspiring Communities operates across many sectors at multiple levels.

Talk to us about your CLD training, workshop needs, coaching, support and opportunities in your community or region. We understand diversity! We can tailor packages to your specific requirements.

Email us [exchange@inspiringcommunities.org.nz](mailto:exchange@inspiringcommunities.org.nz).



### RESOURCES

Harakeke/Flax - from the root to the flower the harakeke shares its properties.



### ADVICE

Korimako/Bell Bird - fluent, graceful speaker.



### EVENTS

Whakaatu/Presenting - the peak of the mountain as a stage to present from.

