

# *LeaderPerfect Newsletter*

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## **Catalytic Questions: A Dynamite Five-Minute Exercise**

**by Dr. Mike Armour**

Good leadership, I've often said, is more about asking the right questions than about having the right answers.

**Well-chosen questions have an exceptional power to focus attention on what really counts.**

When I'm chairing a meeting, I prefer to form the agenda around questions to be answered rather than topics to be discussed. Then when someone draws the discussion into a side-issue, I can bring the conversation back on track by asking, "Is what we are talking about right now truly germane to our question?"

When the agenda is organized around topics, it's relatively easy for people to justify a diversion into some side-topic. If challenged for their diversion, they can defend it by showing some linkage between what they are saying and the agenda item, because agenda items tend to be rather broad or vague.

Such justifications are more difficult to make when the agenda item is a question. The specificity of the question (if it has been properly formed) forces a focus and discipline on the discussion.

A governing question is equally valuable in leading a planning session. When I'm facilitating a strategic planning meeting, the first thing that I seek is agreement on the primary question that the meeting is to answer. Then I write the question down on a flip chart or whiteboard so that it remains prominently displayed through the entire discussion.

The reason for writing it down is to assure that everyone is agreed on the wording of the question. Otherwise, in the midst of the meeting's give-and-take, the question will have a way of changing, so that before long we are no longer addressing the original question, but some modified form of it.

### **A New Twist on Brainstorming**

Recently I've begun taking questions to a new level by borrowing a concept from Hal Gregerson. He's the recently-appointed director of the Leadership Center at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In his MBA courses he uses a technique which he calls "catalytic questions." His approach is basically a variant of the age-old technique of brainstorming.

In a typical brainstorming session, a thorny or challenging issue is posed. Then the group starts rapidly listing ideas that might be considered in dealing with the issue.

A session to generate catalytic questions has a similar structure, but a different methodology. The beginning point is the same as with a brainstorming session: a thorny or challenging issue is laid before the group. (Here, again, it's profitable if the issue is worded in the form of a question.)

When people are brainstorming catalytic questions, however, they are not sharing thoughts about possible solutions to the issue. Instead, they are identifying questions which might be helpful to ask about the issue.

Thus, the primary question might be, "What can we do to recapture our lost market share?" The brainstorming question might produce questions like:

- Has the market moved away from a preference for our type of product?
- Does our web page need a fresher look?
- Are we providing adequate value for the price that we charge?
- What lessons can we learn from successful new competitors?
- What's morale like in our marketing department?

## The Follow-Up to Questions

The rules for conducting a session like this are the same as for any other brainstorming exercise. Whatever anyone offers is written down, with no further commentary or critique. And during the brainstorming time, no evaluation of any input is made. The idea is to let one idea fire off another idea in the group, and to keep this pace moving as quickly as possible.

With catalytic questions, the non-evaluation rule means that the group does not start offering possible answers to questions which are tossed out. The purpose of the conversation at this point is to generate questions, not seek answers for them.

Gregerson normally allows this brainstorming to continue for about five minutes. There's no hard and fast rule as to how long the session should run. The goal is to create a catalytic effect as one question triggers another and another, etc. So long as good questions are continuing to surface, the session can extend beyond five minutes.

When the session is finally brought to a conclusion, an evaluation process can begin. Which of the questions are genuine jewels and need to be explored? Which ones seem less promising and may be set aside, at least for the moment?

The evaluation process may or may not be done by the group which did the brainstorming. In his graduate courses Gregerson uses this technique to help class

members gain new ideas on how to tackle some tough issue that they are confronting in their own business.

In this case the individual class member knows his or her business far better than the group. It's therefore left to the class member to decide which questions to pursue and which ones to put on back burner.

## **Basking in the Results**

What Gregerson has found — and what I have learned in experimenting with this technique — is that this process inevitably surfaces great questions, questions that otherwise might have never come to mind. In fact, some truly dynamite questions tend to come out of these sessions.

My experience, brief as it has been, clearly confirms the value of Gregerson's technique. A brainstorming session designed to raise catalytic questions is one of the most profitable five minutes you will spend in finding a path through thorny scenarios.

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