

Renegotiating Expectations about Participation

The passive contract between leader and participant needs to be renegotiated early and dramatically. When you do this, something always changes. There is more life in the room. people ask more questions. Some people get irritated. Some would rather keep talking to their neighbor. All are signs of life. Here is one way to do it.

After the opening, tell people you want them to answer four questions. The questions confront people with the nature of their participation in the meeting we are about to have. Embedded in the questions is the belief that the participants will create the experience they are about to have. Have them rate each question on a 7 point scale, where 1 is very low and 7 is very high.

Question 1. How valuable an experience do you plan to have in this session or this effort—not what kind of experience you want, but what kind do you plan to have?

The Point

People are responsible for their own experience. Therefore, they have the capacity to determine, up front, the quality of their experience at each moment. If we are going to have a disappointing experience, then let us name it in the beginning and get about the business of making it come true. In answering this question, we are faced with deciding, even in a whimsical way, the success of our own future.

Each step of the way in a consulting project is a sample of the larger culture and the larger effort at implementation. If we can decide the quality of this step, then we can decide the quality of every step. And each person in the room has to be faced with this choice. It does not matter how people answer the question; once they answer it, they have taken a step in making the effort their own.

Question 2. How engaged and active do you plan to be?

The Point

This is an investment question. We know that the success of implementation will depend on widespread ownership and care. We care for what we have invested in, complained about, spoken for. This question carries within it a demand for activism. If we say no, we

do not plan to participate, we have at least defined that stance for ourselves and surrendered, a little, our instinct to watch and blame others' participation. Plus, if people approach a process with cynicism and reluctance, naming the reluctance is the first step in shifting it.

For those who say they plan to be somewhat or very active, stating it early creates pressure to be true to the intent. And we are asking for the intent early, before the stakes are either clear or in play.

Question 3. How much risk are you willing to take?

The Point

This is a question about learning. All learning, change, and transformation come from stepping toward tension. The important moments of our work have been ones of risk, stress, and anxiety. The institutional instinct is to stay calm, move according to plan, be in control, and, above all, don't be surprised. It is just this instinct that turns human systems into mechanical ones. Much of our reluctance to commit is grounded in our wish for safety.

This question is also a measure of our commitment and, as for the other questions, even the answer "no risk" is a starting point for accountability. When I become willing to be accountable for my own position, I have begun to be accountable for something larger.

Question 4. How invested are you in the quality of the experience of those around you? What is your level of concern about the well-being of the larger group?

The Point

This is a Samaritan question. It is a question of accountability: To be accountable is to care first about the larger institution, then to ask what's in it for me. This is a radical stance in a culture that thinks self-interest is the only interest in town. We have listened to the voice of the economist and thought it was the only voice. We have constructed the workplace as a place of barter. Give only where and when you get. You get yours, 'cause I've got mine.

This question confronts the belief that people will consistently choose in favor of themselves over the larger system. It is the most difficult question for people to answer

and therefore the most useful. It gets at the heart of implementation and change. Care for a larger purpose is all we have to invite people to go through the stress, loss, and uncertainty of real change.

These four questions have in them the seeds of what is needed for implementation to take hold. At their center, they begin to renegotiate the contract between the leaders and consultant and the participants. That is why they need to be asked early. True, they are just four questions, but they raise the right issues and trigger the right discussions.

When people have answered the questions, have them share their answers with three people around them. Urge them to be curious with each other. Forget the right answers; there aren't any. The process of simply answering the questions and then having to say the answers out loud changes the culture in the room. It communicates to each participant that something more is required than just to sit in the audience. Even if a person does not want to engage and prefers to be quiet and listen, at least it becomes a choice and not a constraint of the setting.

Having done this many times, I can assure you that something always shifts. There is more life in the room. People ask more questions. Some people get irritated. Some would rather keep talking to their neighbor than return to the speaker. All signs of life.