

From the series Witness the Common Good

Anatomy of a Question

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Conversations are central to our life together. They have the capacity to bring us together or keep us apart. They can leave us with a feeling of helplessness or serve to activate our energy.

Conversations can serve to explain, to express ourselves, to share opinions and judgments, to teach and inform, to share feelings. All can be useful and interesting.

Conversations also can be something more. They can accelerate trust, especially among strangers. And, if we are lucky, conversations can create something new, produce more agency and accountability than existed before.

“Questions are fateful. They determine destinations. They are the chamber through which destiny calls.” – Godwin Hlatshwayo

The intent here is to be very specific about a methodology for constructing conversations for strong connection and ones that evoke ownership. Which takes us to the importance of the question. The critical and under-appreciated means of impact when we are in a leadership, facilitation, or convening position.

The Power of a Question

A question is a vehicle for moving the action forward. Or shifting the direction of what is not working. Or creating an alternative to the story of polarization that is so popular. We want to detail a way that makes it more likely for people to have conversations that produce a sense of agency and accountability to produce an alternative future. And to know they are not alone in doing this.

Certain questions make it more likely for people to be more connected with others; other questions and conversations leave them and us with a sense of isolation and helplessness.

Unfortunately, too many conversations consume energy and agency rather than produce it. Some common examples of these are found in how we teach most classes, deliver most PowerPoint presentations, handle townhall meetings, produce virtual webinars, conduct board meetings designed by General Roberts, and do staff meetings. All have prepared agendas, use question and answer as a primary means of engagement, and seek to make the world more predictable and action oriented.

All of these occasions and more would benefit from conversations evoked by special questions for all in the room to engage in. Aided by declaring a context that values curiosity and discourages advice, being right, knowing what is best for others, and beginning by what is next.

What follows is some background and a framework for conversations, language, and ways of engaging people with each other that increase the chance of creating what some call social capital and even transformation.

Speech Acts

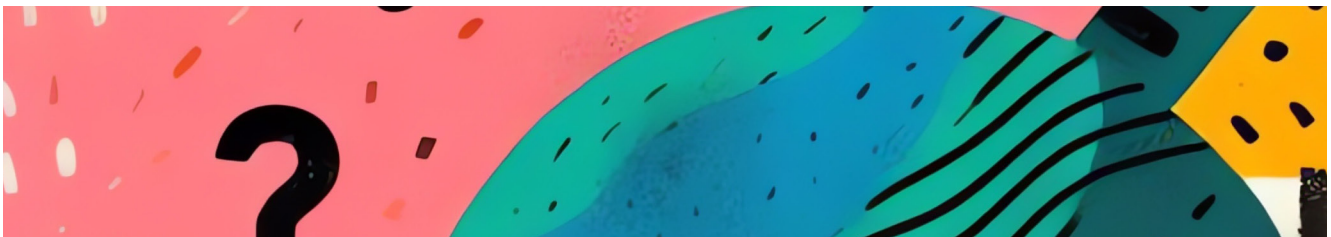
"The person who first hurled a word founded civilization."— Sigmund Freud

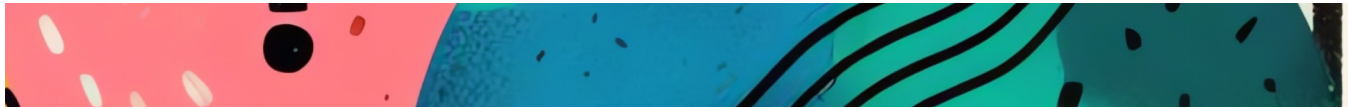
Many years ago, Werner Erhard introduced me to the idea of speech acts. Certain words and sentences when spoken hold the power and capacity to bring something new into being, simply in the naming. These are called performative speech acts. Extreme examples: "I pronounce you husband and wife." "You are under arrest." Everyday examples are stating what we want from each other, offering forgiveness, making promises, retracting commitments, saying no, acknowledging your contribution to a problem, naming the gifts you have just experienced from another person. When these actions are spoken, something for the speaker has changed, stopped, or been initiated. Call this something accountability or agency.

Many everyday statements have no accountability or agency. These speech acts come in several forms:

- Expressive statements. Statements of how you feel.
- Statements with the intent to explain some thing in the world. Research results. Analysis.
- Statements of judgment. Preferences. Right and wrong.
- Advice.

These ways of speaking are simply interesting or efforts to persuade. Which in many moments may be satisfying and, rarely, enough. They may or may not serve to connect us or change patterns or habits. Usually, they do not and can serve to keep us apart.





Powerful Speech Acts

Speech acts as originally conceived by Fernando Flores fall either into a “word-to-world” fit or a “world-to-word” fit. This distinction is between two kinds of speech: (1) speaking that creates a world and (2) speaking that describes the world. The former kind of speaking has the possibility of altering the world. In this case, with one speech act, a person can bring an entire realm of possibility into the world – opening new possibilities that were not present before.

Speaking that creates a world is the essence of transformation, which seeks a shift in people’s and group’s lives in very practical ways. This was the intent of both Erhard and Flores, who have long been committed to the work of personal and institutional transformation. They worked together to create Erhard Seminars Training (EST) which is now called The Forum.

Speech Acts and Transformational Leadership

Erhard has devoted his career to developing courses and distinctions to empower people in achieving their personal commitments. He developed the view that, for human beings, the world occurs in language.

In a’s view, most people spend most of the time in conversations in ways that don’t make a difference. Most of what we say falls in the category of “expressions,” which include beliefs, opinions, judgments, and other modes of talking about things, but which really amount to little more than expressing our own “internal states.” For example, “I feel...,” “I think...”, “I believe...,” and the like.

What is lacking is a commitment to cause something to happen. This is a vital way of thinking about leadership: To conceive that one of a leader’s primary functions is as convener; to bring followers, participants, citizens, students to interact with each other in transformational ways. This implies that perhaps the question is more important than the answer.

Questions Are Decisive

The task of the leader as convener, in this line of thinking, is to invite and evoke powerful speech acts. Questions are the essential tool for this task. Choosing the questions -- and the preface within which they are offered -- is in itself a special form of activism. Call it relational activism. The questions we choose are a declaration of what we think is important. The questions guide where our attention is placed. And where our attention is placed determines what is created. For good and for not so good.

Questions carry within them an invitation. The question, in its framing, has the possibility to create a world, as do the speech acts they bring about. As implied above, questions for horizontal conversation can invite people to describe a world, or they can invite people to create a world. Words to create a world, not a world that produces our words. The questions in this way become central to reinforcing compliance and helplessness or to producing independence and accountability.

"Rilke never said I give you the answers. He said love the questions and perhaps you'll live your way into the answers." – Stephen Mitchell, on Rainer Maria Rilke

The Context Is as Transforming as the Question

When we intend to create conversations of word creating world, the context is decisive. Accountability for the next step can only occur in a context free of advice. Absent of statements such as "Have you tried this?" "What actions do you plan to take? Here is what we have learned from our experience." "What are others doing and what are their outcomes?" Questions like these do not lead to transformation. Too little is asked in the answering. All of these questions dilute agency and accountability in the conversation. There is a time for these questions, but it is not early or before connection and social capital are established.

There is little power in questions where we are invited to be witnesses to the world. What is spoken is a point of view. These questions invite people to show up as if they are here to react and analyze the world, not to act as a player in the transformation.

To be specific, again, speech acts which have little power of agency, ownership, or accountability are: Explanations. Research. Blame. Complaining. Protest. Analysis. Reports. Measurements and Key Performance Indicators. Personal, cultural, and institutional stories. History. These are interesting, insightful, and compelling. But they do not embody ownership or action in the world. They may be useful to sell or educate or build support for our intentions, but in that way, we become a subtle participant in sustaining the world as it is. Which may be what is desired.

The alternative are conversations where agency and accountability are produced by the simple nature of the speaking. As a convener or relational activist, we can initiate the conversations that lead to stronger connection with those around us and deeper individual agency for creating a different future. The questions we ask, within the context we create, make the difference. All the difference.

"Do we decide the questions at all? We decide the answers no doubt, but surely the questions decide us." –Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland



The Connection Effect: Words Creating a World

The conversations that create a world are ones where we speak as owners of the situation or condition that is on the table. We speak as though we have the right to dissent and the capacity to make commitments, to declare possibilities, to request and refuse wants of those around us. We speak in a way to own and make explicit our gratitude for the gifts occurring as we are together.

These speech acts, these conversations, are brought into being by the questions that we ask. People may choose not to answer them, but our precision in the terms we choose to frame them allows the questions to work on us, even if not answered directly.

The exact wording of the question intended to spark conversation and accelerate trust is critical. A useful example is the question "Why was it important for you to be here today?" This holds the idea that each person chose to be present in this moment. Some familiar questions that do not hold each person as making the choice are "What do you expect from this gathering?" or "Why did you come today?" Those questions avoid the conversation of meaning. They describe the world without asking for the meaning they are creating in the world. In this case, the meaning of showing up.

Questions that are powerful contain a bias towards meaning over explanation. I am not explaining why I am here. I am stating the meaning of my presence. The refusal of the question is also powerful. We create space for one who is choosing to not answer. Answering or not is an act of agency. To say no to the question, even in the form of answering a question that was not asked, involves words that create the world. To declare that I do not want an alternative future is a gift to all present. This acceptance of refusal is a primary distinction between transformation and the choice to sustain the control-oriented ways we commonly now live within. For me, for us, for our institutions, our world.

Questions That Produce Agency and Accountability

What is the crossroads you or we are at, in this moment?

The crossroads question affirms the complexity of being human. It supports the fact that no matter what our circumstance, or success, there is an element of not knowing. And no matter what surrounds us, we always have a choice. And that is the point. And that is what brings us together and connects what we hold in common with whomever we are speaking to: Strangers. Others. Opponents, Neighbors.

What is the possibility that you are a stance for?

This framing contrasts with questions about what goals and objectives you can set for yourself and others. Those are problem-solving questions. Useful but not transforming. Problem solving surveys the world as it seeks reform or improvement. It is a response to our sense of urgency. It values speed over depth. It does not question the context of scarcity or control within which we operate nor our wish for safety and predictability.

When I declare a possibility, it occurs in the world at the moment of declaration. And it is with me wherever I show up. Nothing to wait for.

How are you contributing to what you find so concerning?

The question of our contribution to the problem is the ultimate construct for freedom and transformation. It calls each of us to be a producer. Agent. Author. In the present, not the past or the future. A world is brought into being in the answering. Even if we give no answer, this in itself makes visible our participation in our stance of helplessness. This is also a choice.

What doubts do you have about what is being discussed?

Some deepening variations of the doubts question, or more precisely the dissent question, are asking "What is the no you are postponing?" and "What is the yes you no longer mean?" This type of question gives life to change because if you cannot say no, then your yes means nothing.

What promise are you willing to make with no expectation of return?

This embodies the essence of the vulnerability that transformation calls for. It constructs a world, in this moment, of no escape. No conditions. No barter, which lets us off the hook if they do not deliver. It also invites accountable refusal: "There is no promise I am willing to make in this moment." Valuable. It is the antidote to lip service.

What courage is required of me or us now?

What prevents real agency and an alternative future is the wish for safety. There is no safe path to transformation, which is why we cannot find it alone. I may not have the courage required, but in naming it, I and we find more peace in living with this reality.

What do you want from the person you are speaking to? What do they want from you?

An alternative future is dependent on knowing and declaring what you want. It is not dependent on getting what you want. The declaration of wants is the essence of authoring our future and being accountable for our place in it. Want statements also stand in sharp contrast to needs statements. To have needs may be an accurate description, but as a speech act it celebrates helplessness and breeds entitlement. Not wrong, but not useful. The creation of an alternative world does not come from the focus group declarations of a consumer.

What gifts have you received from those in this conversation? What gifts have you not fully brought into the world?

In the problem-solving context, we feed on deficiencies, on self- and other-improvement. The greater risk -- and the essence of accountability -- is the idea that we are enough and have enough. I discover that when others tell me my gifts in this moment. This supports me as I enter into the possibility of an alternative future. Plus, acknowledging my hidden gifts offsets the modesty that is just a wish for safety and a defense against accountability.

Any discussion of my gifts is the hardest question of all.



A Question for Any Moment

There are elements of powerful questions that evoke conversations that have the potential to create worlds. This allows us to invent conversations that fit any moment. These are the anatomical elements, the periodic table of questions and connection.

Every one of these questions meets certain criteria:

1. *It is about this moment. The only place where action occurs.*
2. *It demands vulnerability. It has an element of risk. It does not offer safety. Or certainty. If we are not anxious, or vulnerable, then nothing new is possible.*
3. *It encourages dissent. It says that not answering is useful in its own right. Saying no, or passing, is an action of integrity and taking the moment seriously. In this context, you can refuse, and we still want you at the table. Even more so.*
4. *It calls for depth and ambiguity. There is no bottom, no finality, no certainty. It is the choice of depth over speed. Plus, if I responded to it again and again, the answer would still be compelling and have nuances not there before.*
5. *It invites meaning rather than methodology. Meaning occurs in the present, all else is the past or future. The question "Why does that matter to you?" is the most loving question of all. It is a moment to be seen for who we are and what matters, without judgment or advice. It puts aside the illusion that we can control events and instead declares that all we can control is the meaning we give to events.*
6. *It declares that we always have a choice. This is the only answer to helplessness. And even injustice. Explanations, history, analysis can serve to distract us from the choice always present in this moment, which is at the center of being human. This means we treat each of us as a co-producer of this moment and this condition.*

Powerful Questions Are the Point

What creates belonging, what ends our isolation, is not just being in the presence of another, or meeting or dining with them; it is in exchanging vulnerability without a solution, in each of us standing as co-producers, agents, authors of whatever we are giving attention to.

The beauty of powerful questions is they travel well. We can ask them of ourselves or, better yet, ask them of each other. The power of asking them of each other is that when the answer is spoken out loud, it cannot be taken back. And in the speaking, the reality of our situation -- while still present and important -- loses its power over us. In the speaking, our condition unfreezes and is quietly, without drama, launched into motion. When I tell you, when I say out loud, that my contribution to the problem is that I treat my boss as the center and cause of my well-being, in that moment, my boss loses some of their hold over me. The statement of authorship puts transforming the condition in my own hands.

Any one of the questions outlined here, any one speech act of agency, will be a step towards wherever we want to go. Powerful speech acts are a window that, once opened, doesn't close. Used in a supportive context, one of curiosity and not advice, they shift the tone, trust, and connection when it is time for analysis, explanation, problem solving, and key performance indicators.

"What if people connecting was the point, and problem solving was an excuse to come together?"
— Jim Keene

And, finally, as a leader who is convening in this way, it works best when you are a part of a small group conversation and join in answering the questions and participating fully and personally in the process. When all join in engaging the questions, it levels the room moving to an alternative future. The isolation of convening and leading we are in the habit of experiencing today does not have to be so. The choice of connection before content is simple, it is an act of relational leadership. All it takes is a little faith.



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