



## The question behind the question

*What is a good question? What kind of question helps to achieve an inquiry? Take the following one, 'Why do I get all the blame?'. We all recognize the feeling that underlies this question, but is it a question? It may rather be classified as a statement, or a complaint. It also lacks one or more interesting concepts that challenge our own thoughts and assumptions. But maybe there is a fundamental question that lies behind this question. So let us find out.*

### Approach

The main steps in this practical guide are similar to the ones in practical guide 10, Socratic dialogue, and 12, Preparing a Socratic dialogue.

1. Determine the topic, the example and the question;
2. Clarify the example and the question;
3. Participants take the position of the presenter in the example, guided by 'What would be my question in this situation?';
4. Inquiry of underlying positions, assumptions and questions;
5. Plenary exchange of underlying questions;
6. Conclusion / selection: which question(s) will work as a start for a Socratic dialogue?

### Example

Instead of an elaboration of the steps we describe an example in some detail.

#### 1. *Topic, example, question*

The presenter wants to inquire into how one can avoid a negative atmosphere. He describes the following case: I was invited at a management meeting to present my proposal for solving problem X. It was scheduled to last about 20 minutes. I was well prepared and anticipated a difficult time, as the atmosphere can be negative. When I entered and understood that the previous point had been dealt with in a positive way, I became a little bit more optimistic about my own proposal. But during my presentation I saw that one of the managers was very critical; his comments were very negative. I explained the advantages of my proposal. But again he responded negatively. His body language was very negative. I gave up my efforts to defend my proposal.

So what is the question here? The presenter revised his initial question into: how does a negative atmosphere arise and what can I do to prevent that? This 'how' question is a rather instrumental one; it stays at the surface of 'what can I do?'. But there is a genuine concern in it, which, however, is not addressed yet in his question.





2. *Clarify the example and the question*

Other participants ask clarifying questions about the situation. Again the presenter revises his question, into, 'How can I adjust during the meeting?' His focus is still upon 'What can I do?' The underlying concern does not become clear yet, nor the more abstract concepts involved in it.

3. *Take the position of the presenter: what is your question?*

All participants take the position of the presenter and write down what – if in that situation – their question would be. The following questions appear on the flip chart:

- What is truly going on here?
- How come this happens again and again, and what does that tell about me?
- How can I improve my relation with the members of the management team?
- Why is a good atmosphere important for me in order to gain support?
- Why is a feeling of common interest and trust lacking?

These questions open different perspectives, but still they lack the proper focus which is needed for a Socratic inquiry. Some are too undetermined, others are too psychological or merely empirical. They are not uninteresting, but they do not challenge us to start a self inquiry into our underlying knowledge, values and assumptions.

4. *Inquiry of underlying positions, assumptions and questions*

In small groups the participants interrogate each other about these questions, 'How did you come to this question? What is your reasoning? What is your perspective or point of departure? How would you phrase your question if it challenged that very perspective?'

5. *Plenary exchange of underlying questions*

In the plenary exchange the following questions are put on the flip chart:

- When are comments negative?
- Why do you want to prevent something?
- Is there a relation between content and atmosphere?
- Can one discuss what one holds for evident?
- Can you understand somebody else without agreeing with him?

The presenter comes forward with the following question:

- Can you set your own prejudices aside?

These questions are much more interesting than the initial question, aren't they? They dig deeper and challenge more of our thoughts and assumptions. That is why they are suitable to give a good start to a fruitful inquiry into both our abstract concepts and our personal experiences.

