Try It Out: Identify Powerful Questions

This exercise is about recognizing powerful questions. Assign the numbers 1-6 to the following questions (with 6 being the most powerful). After you’ve assigned the numbers, look at the next page for a discussion of each question.

- How do we convince auto drivers that climate change is a problem and that they need to take public transit?
- Do you drive a car?
- How can we fix climate change, the health care system, poverty, close the achievement gap in schools, and achieve lasting global peace?
- Where are opportunities for exchange of ideas and collaboration between scientists, artists and environmental organizations?
- Why would you drive and not bike?
- What three things stand out to you as the most significant right now when it comes to climate change and how do you want these three things to be the same or different in the future?
Discussion of Questions

The questions are presented here in order, with the last one being the most powerful.

1. Do you drive a car?

   Construction of the question can make a question more or less powerful. There are multiple ways to ask the question: yes/no, why, how, what, which, what if, who, when, or where. Each of these types of questions could invite different levels of inquiry and creative response.

2. Why would you drive and not bike?

   Be very aware of how “why” questions are crafted since they may invoke a defensive response and cause justification of an answer, instead of thoughtful response.

3. How can we fix climate change, the health care system, poverty, close the achievement gap in schools, and achieve lasting global peace?

   The scope of the question is important to keep in mind. Some questions are provocative, but are outside of the scope of our capacity. Powerful questions have a scope is broad enough to be compelling but narrow enough to be meaningful for the specific audience.

4. How do we convince auto drivers that climate change is a problem and that they need to take public transit?

   Be aware of assumptions within the question, such as assuming that the primary cause of climate change is automobile usage, and that automobile drivers are not environmentalists. Assumptions not only trigger defensiveness and narrow discussion, they can prevent you from seeing a situation more accurately. Neutral questions encourage reflection and creative response.

5. Where are opportunities for exchange of ideas and collaboration between scientists, artists and environmental organizations?

   This question would be an example of focusing the attention of the question into a specific area of inquiry, such as opportunities for exchanges in this specific situation.

6. What three things stand out to you as the most significant right now when it comes to climate change and how do you want these three things to be the same or different in the future?
Move the thinking of the group forward with questions that invite the collective imagining of a preferred future.