How to Ask Great Questions
ATD
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Session Outcomes

By the end of this session you will learn:

- How to use questions to move clients past order-filling requests

- Questions that will provide fresh insight into performance issues

- What questions can encourage clients to rethink their problems

A Note About This Session

- My focus is as a Performance Consultant so we'll use a front-end analysis framework to look at initial questions

- We'll also take quick looks at coaching, ID, and managing change questions

- But you'll find that all of this content should be helpful to you regardless of the role

The Power of Questions

"The answers to our problems already exist. What we need to do is to discover the right questions."   --Jonas Salk

- Create curiosity
- Ask for "context" as an excuse for delving in to other issues outside your silo
- Get deeper than the client intends to go—peel back the story
- Move from transactional to performance focus
- Get information
- Meta-questions

Business Priorities and Evaluation

"You don't tell a client to performance, you ask them."
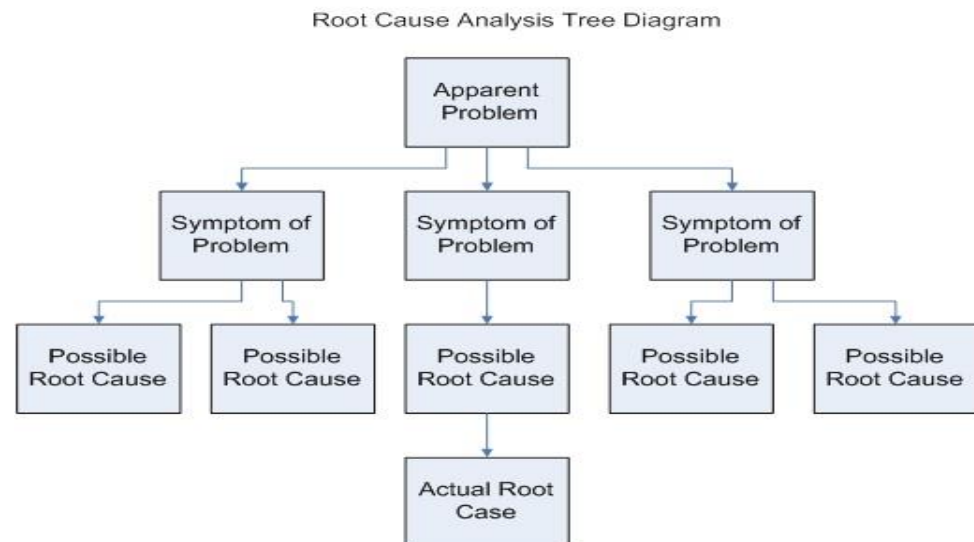   --Dana Robinson

- What would success look like?
- Help me understand the context here, what are the strategic priorities for the year?
- What are the two or three biggest priorities for the business this year?
- If you could use an object as a symbol for this problem—no money or clocks—what would it be?

Identifying Meaningful Outcomes

- What does the organization value? If you achieved that and nothing else changed, would you be happy?
- In order to do what?
- What results have to happen in order to meet this goal?
- Out of the hundreds of things that have some impact on your strategic priorities, how important is this one?
- In what ways does the performance vary (by day, by performer, by season)?
- How will we judge if we've made progress?

Pinning Down the Cause

- Was there ever a time they could do this correctly? What changed?
- Why (Five Why's or Why Tree)
- Bob Mager's .356 Magnum Test
- Questions that "bound" the problem

Root Cause Analysis Tree Diagram

Apparent Problem

Symptom of Problem

Symptom of Problem

Symptom of Problem

Possible Root Cause

Possible Root Cause

Possible Root Cause

Possible Root Cause

Possible Root Cause

Actual Root Case

Exemplars and Top Performers

- How do you identify who is a top performer?
- What is it that they do that produces better performance?
- What steps do your top performers add (or delete) to this process?
- What work-arounds do you have to do in order to get the results you need?
- If you were King/Queen for a day, show me how you'd do this job?

Commitment Questions

- Why now?
- What happens if you do nothing?
- How long has this problem been going on?
- Is this initiative already in your budget?
- What will it take for you to get a bonus this year?
- Who else owns this issue?

Assessing Organizational Culture

"Culture eats strategy for breakfast"
> --Susan Grandpierre

- What gets rewarded around here?
- What unwritten rules exist for this place?
- What work topics are "undiscuss-able"?
- How is this place different from others you've worked at?
- What stories about the company get repeated over and over?
- What differences do you see between official versus actual priorities?

Change and Implementation

- Have you tried to deal with this issue before?
- What went wrong with the last initiative that didn't work?
- What rewards the existing behavior?
- What other tools have we built in to support this initiative?
- How will you know if everyone is committed to this initiative?
- Who stands to lose from this change? What do they lose?
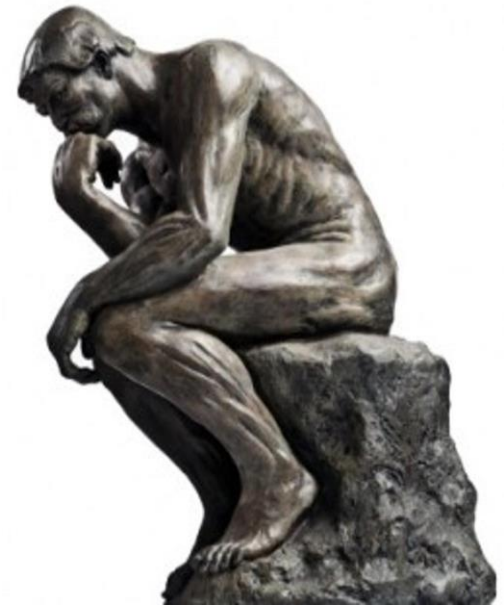
Instructional Design Questions

- For tasks or skills, ask about speed, environment, frequency, consequences, complexity, and multiple ways to achieve the desired result
- Ask SMEs what they see as critical tasks or where they see the most common breakdowns by others
- How complete and up-to-date is the documentation?
- What other factors (besides knowledge and skill) determine performance on this task?
- Why were you given the SME you were given?

Coaching Questions

- How did you come to this conclusion?
- What information did you consider?
- What would you like to be different?
- What is it about you/your position that you think he doesn't understand?
- What did you learn from this?
- What do you see as your next steps?
- What do you think would be a good way to measure your progress in this area?

Managing the Project

- Ask about roles, responsibilities, roadmap (how they expect we'll get from A to Z), reporting requirements, risks, and resources

- Set priorities among timelines, quality, and cost—which one trumps the others?

- Where do we anticipate possible issues that require mitigation?

Questions That Open Up Opportunities

- What do our best performers do that others don't? How'd they get to be better?
- Once we've done the training, what else could prevent us from getting these results?
- How are our competitors different on this—what do their people do we don't do?
- What additional support can we use to reinforce this initiative? How can other functions besides L&D get behind this?
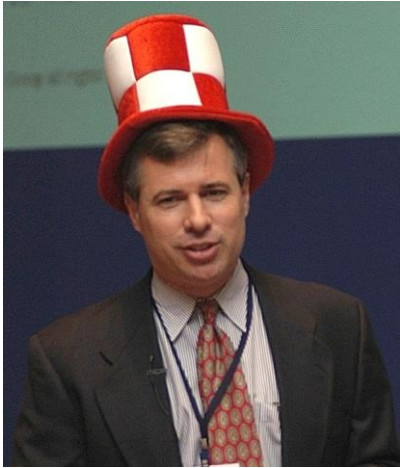
And Always End With….

- Is there anything I haven't asked you, you think I ought to know?

About Joe Willmore

Joe Willmore is the President of the Willmore Consulting Group. He is a former member of ATD's Board of Directors. He is the author of several books including "Performance Basics" (2nd edition 2016). He has been heavily involved with ATD's HPI program and is also a facilitator for the Human Capital Institute. He is reachable at: joe@willmoreconsultinggroup.com