Cultivating an Unstuck Mind:
Four Steps to New Insights

When it comes to problem-solving, the questions
we ask often undermine our desire to uncover novel insights.
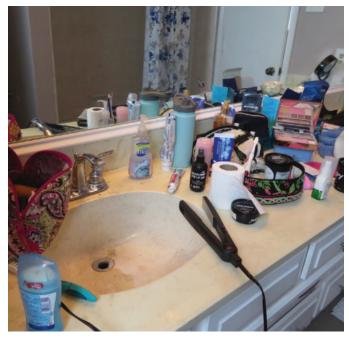Here's how to counter this tendency.

by Jay Gordon Cone

THIRTY YEARS OF RESEARCH and practice have led me to a conclusion that sums up my approach to organizational problem solving: The questions people ask about situations they want to change reveal a lot about what they are thinking and feeling.

This insight about the relationship between *what people ask* and *how they frame a situation* has not only informed my approach to working with leaders, it has inspired me to develop a framework for recognizing and avoiding 'thinking traps'.

In the last several years, I have been collecting the questions leaders ask about situations that have them 'stuck'. In some cases they are experiencing a persistent and intractable problem; in others they are facing a daunting opportunity and don't know where to begin. I have found that in most cases, leaders get stuck because they focus their attention — and the attention of their organization — on answering the wrong questions.

Let me start with an example. Imagine a father walking into his teenage daughter's bathroom and encountering the scene pictured on page 82.

Sadly, I don't have to imagine the situation, because I am the father who took the picture. Allow me to highlight a few features of the scene: Note that the basin is stained with mascara goo; and a random role of toilet paper is positioned near a dangerously hot electric hair device. Before I go on, let me confess that the daughter who owns the array of toiletries and cosmetics in this photo is now an adult and has moved out of the house. This has become somebody else's problem.

After the initial emotional reaction, I thought to myself: How can we get our daughter to keep her bathroom clean and organized? I'm certainly not the first parent to pose such a question, nor will I be the last. Some of you who can relate to my situation may feel compelled to answer the question with ideas or advice based on your own experience. Perhaps a clever solution eluded my wife and me. More likely, we felt stuck because we had unconsciously fallen prey to a thinking trap. Had we understood at the time that our thoughts and feelings about the situation manifested as a counterproductive question, we might have spent

The scene that spawned the author's interest in 'thinking traps'.

more time reframing our understanding of the situation and less time implementing ineffective solutions.

Quicksand Questions

I refer to questions that lure us into thinking traps as 'quicksand questions'. With these questions, the more we focus on answering the question, the more stuck we become. For the last few years, as I've asked leaders to describe their most persistent problems in the form of a question, I have noticed distinctive patterns in the questions they start with — patterns that undermine their desire to find novel, comprehensive and widely accepted solutions. Following are four common traps I have observed.

TRAP 1: THE LURE OF THE VEILED SOLUTION. Organizational leaders are expected to have a point of view about any and all situations. They also have a bias for action. We shouldn't be surprised, then, that when feeling stuck or challenged by a complex situation, leaders quickly form opinions and then set about implementing their conclusions. The urge to 'fix things' often shows up in the way we pose a question about a situation we want to change.

For example, when confronted with complaints that business support functions (e.g. Human Resources, IT) feel left out and underutilized, one leader I worked with described his problem as: How do we improve communication between line leaders and their support functions? This question includes a point of view about how to respond to complaints about feeling left out and underutilized; but is a lack of communication really at the heart of the matter? Maybe the truth is that line leaders feel overly regulated when they involve support functions so they intentionally work around them. A lot of unproductive work gets generated when people rush off to solve the wrong problem.

TRAP 2: THE LURE OF THE FALSE DICHOTOMY. False-dichotomy questions contain either/or assumptions, which means the question gets framed to limit (sometimes intentionally) answers to one of two opposing options. In reality, options are rarely if ever, mutually exclusive. False dichotomies have rhetorical impact, but almost always contain a logical fallacy. Imagine the politician who declares, 'Either vote in favour of this legislation or condemn this country to a future of lawless anarchy.'

Here's a false dichotomy question that lured another leader into a thinking trap: Should we bring in someone from outside the company to head up the marketing department or promote someone from within? Are those really the only two alternatives? What if she hired someone from the outside to become a chief of staff to support and mentor an internal hire that runs the department?

TRAP 3: THE GET-THEM-TO-CHANGE LURE. Sometimes when we feel stuck and can't control all the variables influencing our dissatisfying situation, we assign blame. *If only our suppliers would lower their prices. If only our employees would act with greater accountability. If only our sales people would forecast the pipeline more accurately.* In some respects the 'get-them-to-change lure' is a special case of the lure of the veiled solution, where the solution is for the identified group or individual to change their behaviour.

I worked with a leader of an insurance company who had been assigned the goal of increasing sales of bundled insurance products. He initiated a number of projects with the task of finding answers to the question, How do we get our insurance agents to cross-sell our products? When we accept a 'get-them-to-change' framing of a dilemma, we end up thinking of people as automatons. Solving our problem becomes an exercise in figuring out the programming required to alter behaviours we find sub-optimal or troublesome.

TRAP 4: THE LURE OF THE DISTORTED SCOPE. The scope of a question can be either too narrow or too broad. When we experience a problem in a specific way, we may arbitrarily narrow our focus. I have worked with a number of HR leaders who have been asked to respond to disturbing trends in their employee engagement

surveys. Let's say a survey shows a decline in scores related to 'trust in leadership'. We could be limiting ourselves by asking the too-narrow question, How do we improve the trust scores on our engagement survey? Alternatively, we could err in the other direction by asking the overly broad question, How do we improve trust around here? The first question focuses our attention on the survey itself rather than the purpose of the survey; while the second question gives us no place to start.

The Unstuck Minds Compass

In my work with clients over the years I have used a number of thinking systems to make sense of complex and uncertain situations. Each prioritizes different factors when choosing a path toward a desired future. Rather than treating each as a competing system of thought, I wondered: Could these models be combined to help organizational leaders who feel stuck?

The result is the Unstuck Minds Compass (see **Figure One**), which synthesizes four well-researched thinking systems: strategic thinking, systems thinking, social network theory and design thinking. The compass has four dimensions: Contextual Inquiry, Critical Inquiry, Collaborative Inquiry and Creative Inquiry. Let's take a look at the compass's four dimensions.

1. CONTEXTUAL INQUIRY: TO REDUCE THE RISK OF MISSING SOMETHING IMPORTANT

Contextual inquiry is about zooming out. Contextual inquiry points us toward the environment and asks us to consider influences, trends and future scenarios all of which are outside of our direct control and may nevertheless be at work altering the rules of the game. Sometimes we get stuck because external conditions are changing, yet our routines remain the same. The advice offered by Finish architect **Eliel Saarinen** beautifully describes the importance of studying the environment when solving a problem, "Always design a thing by considering it in its next larger context — a chair in a room, a room in a house, a house in an environment, an environment in a city plan." If you have a 'chair' dilemma, contextual inquiry suggests you consider the 'room.' If you have a 'room' dilemma, contextual inquiry suggests that you consider the 'house,' and so on.

2. CRITICAL INQUIRY: TO AVOID SOLVING THE WRONG PROBLEM

If contextual inquiry is about zooming out, critical inquiry is about zooming in. Critical inquiry points us toward the systems and structures below the surface of how we perceive a problem.
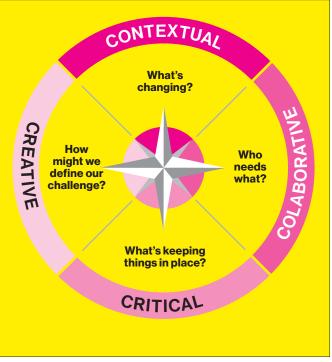

The Unstuck Minds Compass: 4 Types of Inquiry

CONTEXTUAL — What's changing?
COLLABORATIVE — Who needs what?
CRITICAL — What's keeping things in place?
CREATIVE — How might we define our challenge?

FIGURE ONE

I can take an aspirin to get rid of a headache, but if the headache consistently returns I look for patterns. Critical inquiry suggests I analyze patterns to discover interconnections that don't reveal themselves when I focus on the consequences rather than the causes. Perhaps I discover that I get a headache whenever I go out for a steak dinner, and every time I go out for a steak dinner, I drink a glass of red wine. Critical inquiry helps me uncover an allergy to the tannins in red wine. Sometimes we get stuck because we solve for the symptoms rather than the underlying structures or fixed mindsets.

3. COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY: TO MAKE IT EASIER FOR PEOPLE TO TAKE CONCERTED ACTION

Collaborative inquiry orients our attention toward the social relationships that comprise an organization as well as the thoughts, feeling and mindsets that fuel the influence of social relationships. We prefer to focus on and manage inputs and outputs; they are easier to see and easier to measure. Relationships and attitudes may be difficult to measure, but no one who has spent any time in an organization would deny their importance. Traditionally, we map relationships by charting functions, roles and reporting hierarchies, but sometime we get stuck because we misinterpret the thoughts and feelings of individuals and underestimate the power of informal relationships not represented on the organizational chart.

Combining the Four Thinking Systems		
Dimension	**Thinking System**	**Benefit**
Contextual Inquiry	Strategic Thinking	Reduces the risk of missing something important
Critical Inquiry	System Thinking	Avoids solving the wrong problem
Collaborative Inquiry	Social Network Theory	Makes it easier for people to take concerted action
Creative Inquiry	Design Thinking	Increases the novelty of our options

FIGURE TWO

4. CREATIVE INQUIRY: TO INCREASE THE NOVELTY OF OUR OPTIONS

Creative inquiry points us away from solutions that represent reengineered improvements to the status quo. Creative inquiry asks us to question our assumptions and iterate by trial and error. Improving the status quo yields efficiency, quality and productivity gains that are predictable and definable. However, an exclusive focus on improving the status quo presumes that the existing business model and methods continue to have value.

Apart from the dampening effect on innovation, there is another consequence of making productivity and quality the prime directives. Leaders unwilling to adopt a creative inquiry strategy meet new ideas with questions about feasibility (how would that work?) and viability (can it be profitably sustained?) rather than asking about who will benefit, what need does it meet and how will we learn our way toward a commercial solution. Consequently, new ideas end up looking like variations on the status quo because they are the most defensible, not because they are the most promising. Sometimes we get stuck because we prematurely insist on making a business case before we get inspired about meeting a hidden need.

Using the Compass to Find a Better Solution

Until recently, the firm I work for conducted our work in various rooms around the world where people had gathered to learn, connect and solve problems. In the last few years, many of our clients have told us that they no longer intend to bring people together for learning experiences. Instead, they want to bring the learning to their employees, through web-enabled collaboration platforms like WebEx®, Zoom® and Adobe Connect®.

At first, we found ourselves asking the question, How do we re-design our programs so they can be delivered virtually? Fairly quickly it became clear that our framing of the situation was holding us back; we had posed ourselves a quicksand question.

At a minimum, the question was too narrow and implied a limiting set of solutions. If focusing on program re-design for virtual delivery creates wasted effort, then what question should guide our efforts?

The four dimensions of the Unstuck Mind Compass can be used sequentially to surface new information, formulate new insights, and in the end, find a new question that invites new options. Here's how we used it to handle the situation described above.

Contextual Inquiry: What's changing? In the case of virtual learning, we might notice the upsurge in online learning options. For example, I can fix my own toilet by watching a **YouTube** video and I can learn screenwriting from Academy Award winner **Aaron Sorkin** at **MasterClass.com**. So, what's changing? I can now learn what I want, when I want and in the way I want. I can learn online by myself or with my team. I can even have a remote coach observe me or listen in as I conduct a meeting and give me feedback at my convenience or intervene in the moment with a private chat.

Critical Inquiry: What's holding us back? In the case of virtual learning, we might discover that our default business model revolves around the design and delivery of workshops — and that we presume that our value proposition gets delivered in the form of programs. Furthermore, the people who buy our programs are rarely the people who will learn from us, the so-called 'participants'. Traditionally our success has resulted from transformational experiences created by expert consultants teaching practical tools to participants who form significant relationships with each other as they learn together. We have been most successful when a participant becomes a buyer or someone who influences a buyer.

Collaborative Inquiry: Who needs what? In the case of virtual learning, we could focus our efforts to meet the needs of our learning population (i.e. organizational leaders); we could focus our efforts on meeting the needs of our primary client (most often an internal organizational development consultant or talent development leader); or we could focus our efforts on meeting the needs of our own consultants. We don't have to limit our efforts to one group or the other, but each group will have distinctive and potentially contrasting needs.

For the purposes of the example, let's focus on organizational leaders who will benefit from learning our tools, but may no longer have an opportunity to attend multi-day, in-person workshops. What do they need? Through collaborative inquiry, we might learn that leaders prefer to develop skills while getting their work done. They like practical tools that can be learned just before being applied. We might also learn that leaders value problem solving with their peers and building their network. The more profound the experiences they share with peers, the stronger the network. Or, we might learn that leaders seek out opportunities to connect with senior executives who often sponsor and make appearances at learning events.

Creative Inquiry: What question(s) will guide our path forward? Creative inquiry builds on the information and insights developed by the first three steps while recognizing and avoiding the thinking traps hiding behind the initial framing of the problem or opportunity. The output of the creative inquiry conversation is a new question. The Unstuck Minds Method favours 'guiding questions' over mission or purpose statements. That's because a mission suggests 'a task to be accomplished'; and once accomplished, the mission ends. If conditions change, the mission may need to be abandoned. A guiding question, on the other hand, allows for a variety of answers and can more easily adapt to changing conditions.

In the case of virtual learning, contextual inquiry helped us identify trends in learning and critical inquiry identified our assumptions about selling programs and identified important distinctions between the buyer and the learner. Collaborative inquiry helped us develop empathy for the learner by focusing on their needs, not ours. We have come to realize that traditional, multi-day leadership development workshops meet a variety of needs. Participants not only get their learning needs met, they also get a variety of social connection needs met.

We can now transform our quicksand question: How do we re-design our programs so they can be delivered virtually? While there is no one right way to reorient our approach, three guiding questions based on three distinct needs suggest themselves:

1. How might we help people in organizations develop their leadership skills while they work?
2. How might we help leaders access tools and expertise when they need it most?
3. How might we help our clients create transformative experiences that enhance and sustain cross-boundary collaboration?

In closing

You can develop your question-formation acumen by learning about your tendencies when feeling stuck. When first encountering a complex challenge, do you want information about the big picture (contextual inquiry) or data about the nature of the problem (critical inquiry)? Should you seek out the perspectives of others (collaborative inquiry) or start by questioning the assumptions behind the framing of the challenge (creative inquiry)? Diversifying your approach could help you become more adaptable and less likely to get stuck.

Just imagine how the tone of the conversation at our dinner table shifted when we moved from 'How can we get our daughter to clean her bathroom?' to 'How can we reduce the amount of nagging at home?' In the end, thinking traps not only prevent progress, they can isolate and divide us. The four types of inquiry discussed herein can make all the difference **RM**

Jay Gordon Cone, PhD, is a Senior Consultant with Interaction Associates and the Founder of Unstuck Minds. For more about his work, read his blog at www.unstuckminds.org