

The Answer Sheet, the Question Sheet and Deep-sensing what is Emerging

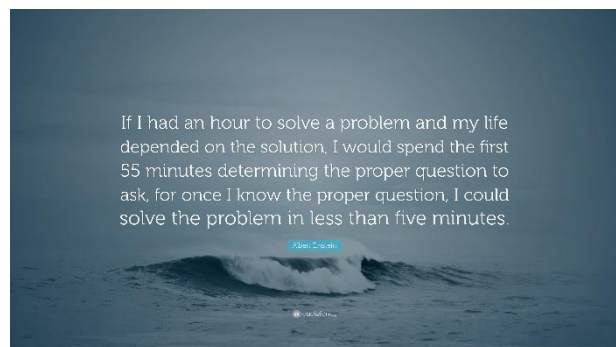
Years ago, I was part of a small team that developed the first course for aid organisations on ‘Operational Security Management in Violent Environments’. Our second workshop was held in the UK and brought together aid workers from different countries. One moment has stuck with me ever since: Having worked in small groups on case scenarios we came back in plenary and shared the insights gained. As facilitators we listened and clarified a few things and then started moving to the next session. We were halted by a participant saying: *Hey, you cannot move on yet, you haven’t given us the answer sheet yet!?* Which led me to explain that we could not provide an answer sheet because participants came from very different contexts and what might be the right or a smart answer in one context would not necessarily be so in another. We were developing a resource for use around the world. We could identify a few ‘must do’ and ‘must not do’ instructions, valid everywhere. But most of our resource material consisted of various attention points and a structured question sheet to help the user think through her or his situation as thoroughly as possible. And some considerations around possible answers. There was no claim or pretense that we had identified all attention points and all relevant questions and elaborated all possible considerations. In their work environments, their answer to their questions could benefit from this resource, but also required contextual understanding and situational judgment. That our generic guidance could not provide. Situational judgment, we underscored, was absolutely important: In the same context, what was a sensible action in February might no longer be so in November!

That moment led to a lasting appreciation of the difference between the answer sheet and the question sheet, but also between ‘answers expertise’ and ‘questions expertise’.

We need ‘answers expertise’, I need it. When I have a water leak and my kitchen floor is wet, I need a plumber who has the answers, who can provide me with the solution. The same goes for so many problems related to complicated issues that require technical expertise. But there are limits to that: Most of the problems and challenges faced by those I work with, are not complicated but complex (in the terms of Cynefin framework): There are neither simple nor sophisticated ‘technical answers’ for it. Secondly, when we outsource our problem-solving to someone else, we are not learning ourselves. Next time I have a plumbing problem I will have to call the plumber again.

Over the years, I have been developing my ‘questions expertise’. This is not superficial. To find a solution, we may have to first find the right question. Also: the quality of your solution will depend on the quality of your framing question. Einstein agreed as you can see in the inserted quote. (There are slight variations in how this quote circulates, but you get the point). So there is a skill called ‘the art of asking powerful/generative questions’ – formulating questions that help us think more deeply, more broadly, more creatively, more afresh.

There is a second purpose to this: the person or organisation I am working with is going to continue facing complex situations - and tomorrow I will no longer be there. If you outsource the thinking to me today, you will not develop the skill that you will still need tomorrow, and the days, weeks and months after. You need to strengthen that skill, just as I will have to if I know that for the next extended period of time, there will simply not be any plumber on call!



Try it out: It is remarkable how powerful a structured set of generative questions can be. Coming in from the questions rather than the answer angle can also lead to fun situations, like when you are invited as a speaker or a ‘trainer’, and you start by asking the would-be learners: ‘What are your questions?’ or

'I may have an answer but what is the question?' Likely there will be a moment of silence, of bafflement from the surprise caused by the unexpected approach. But then many if not most will shift from passive to active learners, to explore the issues with you and not just sit listening critically to your thoughts.

We can take this to another level of collaborating: that of going on a joint learning process into the unknown. After all, the world today has not only become more complex, it has also taken on stronger VUCA qualities: it is full of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Inevitably, to quite a degree, answers expertise but also questions expertise lean on the past. But what are the questions that can stimulate our intelligent and wise engagement with an emerging future in which so much is new and still shrouded in fog? The question becomes: What are the fit-for-the-future questions? This we can only discover by exploring, testing, experimenting, and constantly reflecting and asking ourselves: what are we learning, what is this still emerging experience telling us? Our psychological ability to be OK with uncertainty and ambiguity is almost more important now than our intellectual abilities. We need to control our impatience, our impulse to want to have quick and decisive answers, 'solutions' now! Haste will be as counterproductive as sitting still and not exploring, not trying and testing anything.

My questions expertise here is no longer 'expertise': I will have to tap into deeper sources of learning and use more what is referred to as our 'second brain': our instinct, intuition, gut feeling, metaphorically or not situated around the stomach area. It is a deeper quality of 'observing', 'learning', 'discovering', 'sensing something' that we have, though most of our formal schooling approaches disconnect us from it with their heavy concentration on the first brain, in the head. It expresses itself differently: The answering expert will quickly come up with the answer or say *'let me examine this a moment'* or *'let me look this up'* to find what the problem is, because then we know what answer to apply. The questioning expert goes a bit slower, spends initially more time identifying what the questions are, and how to frame them in the most generative way. Tapping into and using our second brain works differently: First, we need to significantly calm the first brain: its busy-ness, the clutter of its thoughts actually stand in the way and prevents us from connecting with it. That is why animals are better at it: they spend more time sensing and less time caught up in their own thoughts. Handy, to sense danger before you can see or hear it. Then we need to 'listen', not with the external ear but to what comes up from that deeper sensing. That is also how it expresses itself: *'what comes up in me now is...'*, which is not an answer or a sharply defined question, more an image, with emotional dimensions to it, a form that we are beginning to discern but which still has many unknowns to it – but that we now can begin to probe and explore more intentionally. This is not woolly stuff: it is tapping into the same source we need and use for creativity, for innovation.

Explore this: This evening, look back on your day and see where you have been providing answers, where you have used your questions skill (not: 'calling into question' – but helping a positive development through the skillful use of catalytic questions), and where you have tapped into your deeper sensing ability. If you look back at different situations: did you use the most appropriate approach and skill? All are relevant, all are useful, all are potential resources to enable positive developments. Mastery lies in being able to tap into all three and using the most appropriate one for different situations.

For an intro to the Cynefin framework

<https://clear-impact.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Intro-to-Cynefin-Model.pdf>

Koenraad Van Brabant, GMI 18 February 2021