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An Introduction to Strategic Questioning

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Strategic Questioning is a powerful tool for positive change. SSNE is nationally known for its leading edge teaching of the art and science of asking strategic questions that help organizations do well by doing good. Using our unique Search for Insight™ process, you can apply strategic questions to one problem or across an entire organization. Often, it's a first step in building a skill and knowledge base that includes:

- Strategic questioning to identify key issues, opportunities, and needed technical expertise
- Best practice benchmarking
- Strategic risk analysis and problem solving
- Training and capacity building to extend and continue organizational learning

Here's an overview of strategic questioning. If this wets your interest, call us about our highly interactive, presentations, executive briefings, and seminars.

The Need:

Many of us have concerns about where the world is going, and would like to find ways to do well by doing good. We want to protect our communities, reduce inequity etc. We have ideas that we think would make a difference, if we could only convince others to help us implement them! Unfortunately:

- Convincing rarely works.
- People need to believe they'll see meaningful results quickly.
- We are all tired of being told what to do, by society, bosses, relatives, advertisements.

How can we make progress?

How can we make progress and set aside the competing 'shoulds?' One answer is to explore open questions that help us figure out how to solve our problems (rather than apply answers suggested by others).

What is strategic questioning?

Strategic questions build on our innate drive to align our values and actions in ways that create a more positive, personally compelling future. Strategic questions focus on what could be. They involve us in deep inquiry based on our strengths and how we believe change happens.

For example, which of the following questions would you rather ask, or be asked?

"Normal" Questions	Strategic Questions
Why don't we do it this way? How can I convince you?	How might we best get this work done? Who and what might help us shift our situation for the better?
What idiot created this regulation?	Since permit applications slow everything and add cost, how could we redesign what we do so we don't need permits at all?
We can't expand the facility, don't you know there's no money?	What assumptions are we making about costs and productivity as we gauge what is cost effective?

Such questions start conversations that aren't about positions, but about listening and learning.

Strategic questions have certain characteristics. They:

- Usually start with words like: “what might you,” “how could we” etc.
- Tend to evoke a deep response, often months later.

Strategic questions conform to certain principles. They must:

- Be engaging, invite further learning, and assume the best of intentions in the hearer
- Be asked at the right time by someone whom the hearer truly respects
- Be truly open (not be asked manipulatively).

Strategic Questions Come in Categories.

Problems and strategies gain significantly more power if the correct category of questions get asked. SSNE has tools that help you figure out when and how to ask questions about a situation’s history, focus, observation, analysis, etc.

How does it work in the real world? How can I learn to ask strategic questions and get the benefits in my situation?

Usually a neutral third party facilitator is needed to help guide the process and deal with power relationships and other complications. Here are some practical applications:

For an individual wanting to see a change adopted:

- Figure out who is the right person to ask a given strategic question, when and how it should be asked. The wrong timing and/or wrong person can make a strategic question seem offensive or manipulative.

In a team or organization context:

- Conduct training to enhance team members’ skills in asking strategic questions.
- Use SSNE’s unique Search for Insight™ process to gain group input on a particular challenge using strategic questions. The Search for Insight™ will generate dozens of strategic questions, and 5-10 great ones in the first couple of hours. The participants then plan how to ask, research and apply the answers that emerge.

Typical social responsibility-related questions include:

- Given global, regional, and local trends, what are the critical environmental and social issues that might impact my business? e.g., global competition, traffic congestion, income equity, housing affordability, water consumption and rates?
- What does my organization take, make and waste to deliver its products and services? Which materials in our supply and disposal chains might be most critical to monitor, reduce and/or eliminate?
- What stakeholder groups might generate unpleasant surprises or unexpected support based on my current and emerging strategies and operations?