



Ask and Receive:
Marilee Adams says finding solutions is a matter of asking the right questions.



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Inquiring Minds Want To Know

People have a habit of jumping to answers when facing a complex problem, but focusing on immediate solutions can lead them astray. **Marilee Adams**, founder of the Lambertville-based Inquiry Institute, suggests a different focus. "Answers are important," she says, "but people don't realize that they can't get the best answers without the best questions."

The quality of common questions can be low because they are not motivated by a spirit of curiosity and inquiry, Adams says. "People will say, 'We've got problem X — what's the solution?' They won't typically say, 'What questions are we missing?'"

Without the critical and strategic thinking impelled by good questions, people often jump to poor conclusions. "If they had a shared discipline and habit of asking open-minded questions, then they could become far more effective," says Adams.

Adams will speak on "Question Thinking Theory and Tools for Strengthening the Inquiring Mindset" on Wednesday, June 27, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Courtyard by Marriott Princeton Hotel. Other speakers include **Marge Schiller** of Positive Change Core, and **Kathy Telban**, director of curriculum and assessment at Cuyahoga Community College and founder of iSOLVit. Cost: \$95. Call 609-499-3158.

The conference will partly focus on questions in a school environ-

ment, where teachers can learn to ask the types of questions that will help students develop 21st-century skills: problem solving, decision making, and collaboration.

Adams says that the ability to ask good questions is not a skill we are born with, and that many schools have fallen down on the job, which has created a big disconnect between education and business.

"Businesses need employees who are able to be good problem solvers, decision makers, and collaborators," says Adams. "All of these are based on asking questions." If schools do not support students in being thinkers and question askers while in school, they may lack these skills when they join a business as adults.

Judger and learner. Adams' approach posits two opposing mindsets, one the judger and one the learner, which in turn inspire different types of questions. The judger is generally reactive and asks questions like "Who's fault is it?" or "Why am I such a failure?" The judger tends to focus on blame and see relationships as win-lose. This approach can bring an individual to the point of depression and pessimism and can entirely freeze up a work team.

The learner has curiosity and courage, asking open-minded questions like "Where we are willing to discover things we don't like?" Open-ended questions are critical when addressing a problem or trying to accomplish a goal, she

says. What are our real goals here and why are they important? What other perspectives could we be missing? How are our potential solutions aligning with our values?

The time for close-ended questions comes afterward: Who is going to do what? What commitments are we making? When are things due?

Usually a team with a learner mindset is high performance and a judger team the opposite. "On a learner team, there is a good balance between inquiry and advocacy," says Adams, "and on the judger, a lot more advocacy and much less listening."

Despite worry that asking too many open-minded questions will take valuable time away from actually doing a project, Adams says that the opposite is true. "It turns out to be far more efficient."

Change the tone of team interaction by getting people to listen to each other and think creatively. A company where Adams was doing a workshop was seeking a large contract from a contractor in another country, but the American team was in conflict. One team member felt he could not sign off on the project. "He was doing that with good reason," says Adams. But everyone else was angry at

him. She encouraged him to think of switching his question to one that would move the team from a judger to a learner perspective. The question was a simple one, "How else can we think about this?" He kept asking it in a calm, neutral way until the rest of the team members were able to move beyond their annoyance and hear him out.

"People started to consider the question and then started thinking about creative ways to design the contract that would work for everybody," says Adams.

Gain the courage to act by changing the questions you ask yourself. One of Adams' clients was a stockbroker who had gone from being a top performer to someone whose performance was so low she was worried about getting fired. The downspin began when she was forced to share her office and her desk with a guy who was loud and messy. When she was on the phone with prospective clients, he would talk loudly and touch her on the shoulder to get her attention. As she got more and more upset, she was less able to have effective sales conversations.

When Adams asked her what kind of question she was asking herself that was getting in the way of improving the situation, the woman responded, "How can I keep it peaceful around here?" As a result, she kept quiet, and tried to hunker down and do her job, to not pay attention and try to ignore him.

With Adams help, she changed the question she was asking herself to "What do I need in order to be successful?" The answer was a clear call to action: "I need to have a real conversation with this guy, to set boundaries, and to be able to be

on the phone without interruption." She ended up earning three times as much money the following year.

The Q storm. In her book "Change Your Questions, Change Your Life," Adams talks about "Q-storming," or generating as many questions as possible without worrying about the answers. Adams offers four guidelines for the questions people ask in these sessions: they should be in first person; they should be generated from a learner rather than a judger mindset; they should be mostly open-ended; and they are allowed to be courageous, provocative, silly, or dumb.

Adams grew up in Richmond, Virginia, where her father owned a wholesale electronics business that his own father had founded. "I grew up in a family business, and then I went the academic route," says Adams. "The irony is that here I am, all these years later, doing a lot of consulting with businesses."

At Drew University, she earned a bachelor's in sociology, and then got a master's in social work from Virginia Commonwealth University and a doctorate in clinical psychology from the Fielding Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara, California.

Adams was a psychotherapist for many years. When she was ready to modify her career path, she wrote a textbook, "The Art of the Question" to bring together material she had developed that was applicable to businesses and other organizations. Since the book came out in 1998, she has been working with organizations, teams, and leaders.

Improving communication can have big effects not only on the

bottom line but also on personal satisfaction. And the right kinds of questions are key. "The questions we ask have a huge impact on our success and our satisfaction, whether at work, home, or in life," says Adams. "So before you jump to an answer, step back and ask a question." — **Michele Alperin**