

Lines of Inquiry

THE QUESTIONS WE ASK CAN LEAD US DOWN PATHS OF DISCOVERY AND DELIGHT, OR DOWN CORRIDORS OF DOOM AND GLOOM. WHICH ROAD ARE YOU TAKING?

By CLARA BEACON

On the path to happiness and success, most of us think we get the greatest mileage from having all the right answers. According to Marilee Adams, PhD, cofounder and partner of the Institute for Inquiring Leadership, we'll actually go further, faster, when we focus on asking the right questions.

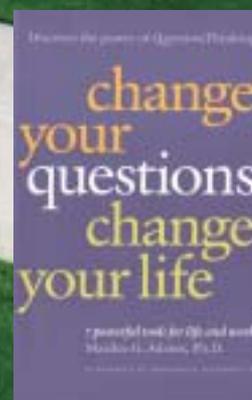
And what might those be? According to Dr. Adams, a psychotherapist-turned-organizational consultant and executive coach, we get the most bang for our buck from "Learner Questions" — the kind that lead to discovery, intimacy, understanding and accountability — as opposed to "Judge Questions," which more often lead to frustration, narrow-mindedness, blame and regret.

Adams, whose corporate consulting clients include Lockheed Martin, Siemens Building Technologies, Aventis Pharmaceuticals and Aetna U.S. Healthcare, as well as the National Defense University and NASA Goddard, is the originator of a problem-solving methodology called QuestionThinking™. She is also the author of two books: a psychology text titled *The Art of the Question: A Guide to Short-Term Question-Centered Therapy* (Wiley & Sons, 1998), and just published, *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life: 7 Powerful Tools for Life and Work* (Berrett-Koehler, 2004). This more recent work is an easy-to-read fable aimed at laypeople, specifically executives and others who are seeking a higher level of personal satisfaction and effectiveness in their professional and personal lives.

EMPOWERING YOUR OBSERVER

As Adams explains it, becoming more aware of and selective about the types of questions we tend to ask is one of the very best and most empowering tools we have for creating constructive change. "Questions are at the very core of how we listen, behave, think and relate, both as individuals and as organizations," she says. "Virtually everything we think and do is determined by the questions we ask."

But, she notes, if we are unaware of the questions that underlie our daily assumptions, reactions and behaviors, we can very easily wind up with flawed decisions and choose a →



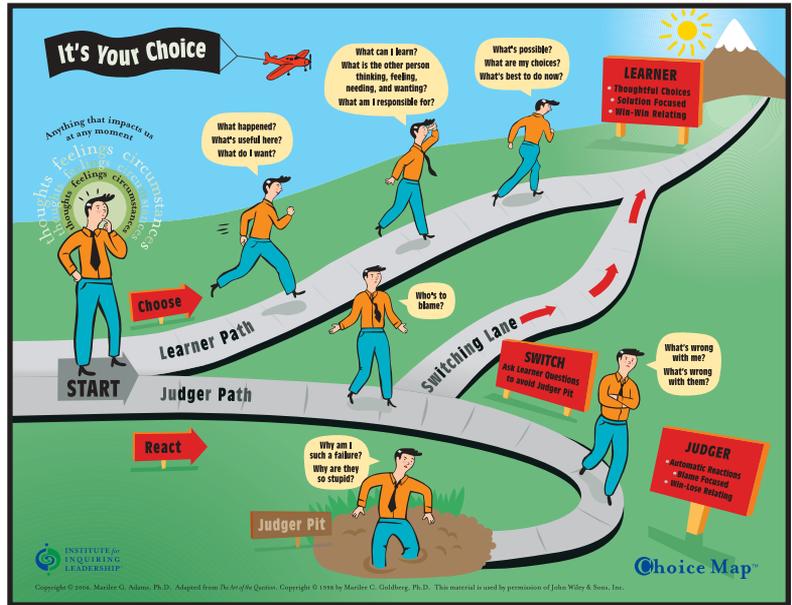
less than optimal, or even tragic, course of action. To illustrate this fact, Adams employs something she calls the Choice Map, a graphic that looks something like one of those old Uncle Wiggily board games, except that starting from the very beginning (an experience of thought, feeling or circumstance), players get to choose from two distinct routes: the Learner Path or the Judger Path.

One starts down the Learner Path with neutral questions such as: "What just happened? What's useful here? What do I want?" One starts down the Judger Path with judgmental questions like: "Who's to blame? What's wrong with me? What's wrong with them?"

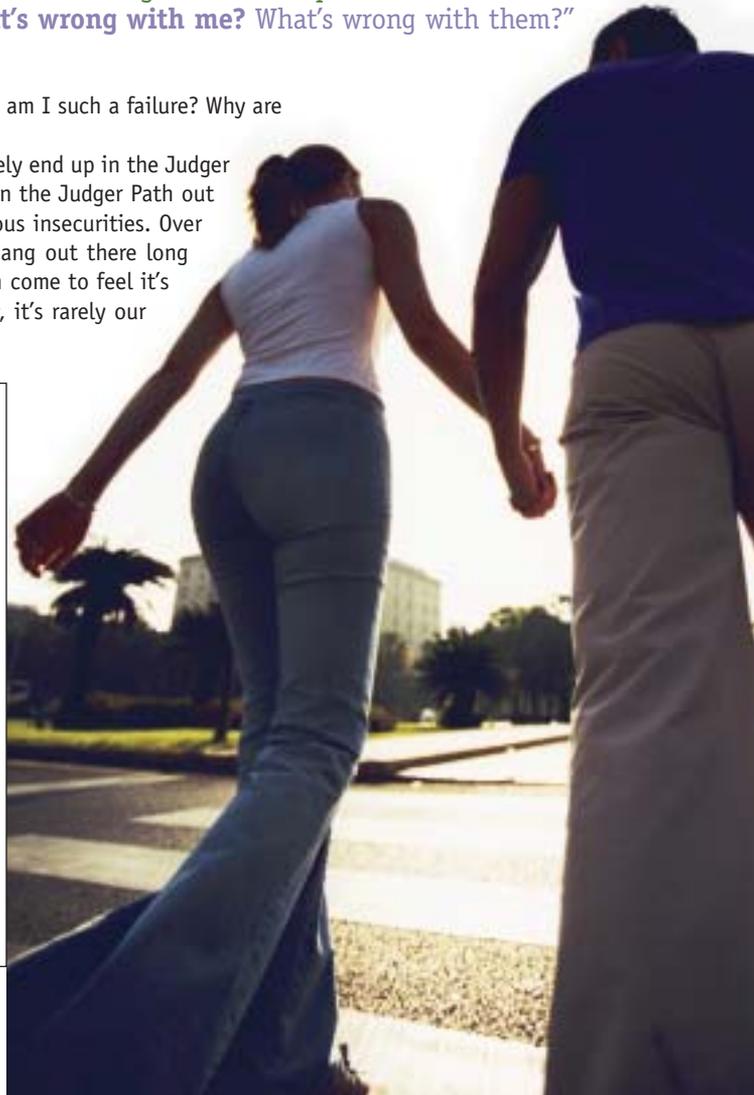
Learner Questions generally lead you toward thoughtful solution-focused choices, says Adams. Moreover, they tend to produce win-win relating styles, which help build and solidify relationships. Accordingly, on the Choice Map, the Learner line of questioning leads toward the sun-dappled mountains of discovery, and even more expansive and productive questions, such as, "What's possible? What are my choices? What's best to do now?"

Judger Questions, by contrast, tend to be automatic, even unconscious, reactions; they are often blame focused; they typically produce win-lose relating styles. So while Learners are busy getting ahead, Judgers are often obsessed with how to get even. On the Choice Map, the Judger line of questioning leads to a "Judger Pit," a trap filled with gruesome ooze. Once entrenched in the Judger Pit, one can be tormented with questions like, "Why am I such a failure? Why are they so stupid?"

There's no question which path is most appealing. Yet we rarely end up in the Judger Pit by conscious choice. Often, notes Adams, we go barreling down the Judger Path out of habit, in reaction to fear or as the result of our own unconscious insecurities. Over time, if we wear a deep enough groove to the Judger Pit, and hang out there long enough, it may become the path of least resistance. We may even come to feel it's "normal," hardwired — just our lot in life. In reality, fortunately, it's rarely our best available option. →



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Judger-Learner Questions

JUDGER

- What's wrong?
- Who's to blame?
- How can I prove I'm right?
- How can I protect my turf?
- How can I be in control?
- How could I lose?
- How could I get hurt?
- Why is that other person so clueless and frustrating?
- Why bother?

LEARNER

- What works?
- What am I responsible for?
- What are the facts?
- What's the big picture?
- What are my choices?
- What's useful about this?
- What can I learn?
- What is the other person feeling, needing, wanting?
- What's possible?

The key to navigating your way onto the Learner Path, explains Adams, lies in identifying your own Judging triggers, noticing when you've inadvertently embarked on a Judging journey and then grabbing the first off-ramp you can find. On the Choice Map, this opportunity is represented by a convenient "Switching Lane," which one can access at any time just by asking "Switching Questions."

"It's about strengthening the observer self, becoming more discerning and disciplined about the questions you ask, both of yourself and others, so you can enjoy being in Learner more often."

Switching Questions, it turns out, are really just a special type of Learner Question capable of diverting what might otherwise become a full-throttle Judger voyage. Switching Questions (see sidebar below) might include everything from the simple, "Am I in Judger mode right now?" to more probing questions, such as, "How else can I think about this? What assumptions am I making? How can I be more objective and honest? What am I missing or avoiding? What do I really want?"

According to Adams, these switching skills can be enormously helpful in navigating conflicts, rescuing failing teams and projects, transforming negative self-talk, even getting a lapsed diet or exercise program back on track.

STEERING CLEAR

The whole idea behind QuestionThinking is using your best available line of self-questioning (and the best questions you can employ in relating to others) in order to minimize the time you spend thrashing around in the Judger Pit and maximize the time you spend in Learner mode. But that doesn't mean you can avoid your internal Judger altogether.

Change happens through awareness and observation, notes Adams, so it's important not to shut down your observations with an overly critical negative reaction every time you identify a Judging Question going through your brain (or coming out of your mouth). "We all wind up on the Judger Path from time to time," she explains, "sometimes several times a day, or even every hour."

When people first learn the Learner/Judger concepts, she points out, "they may have an initial tendency to 'go Judger on their Judger,'" meaning they blame themselves every time they notice their Judger self coming into play. "Even though it's understandable, it's also a waste of time," she insists. "I tell my clients to forget trying to banish their Judger, and instead focus on building their Learner skills."

The mantra, says Adams, is "Accept Judger, practice Learner." It's not about eliminating every last judging instinct you might have, she concludes. "It's about strengthening the observer self, becoming more discerning and disciplined about the questions you ask, both of yourself and others, so you can enjoy being in Learner more often. And then you get

to see the great places that takes you."

Ready to get started down the Learner Path? Start by considering the Learner, Judger and Switching Questions below and on the previous page. Add a few of your own. Then pick up *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* (it's a fun, easy read that follows the highs and lows of a fictitious character named Ben, who receives QuestionThinking coaching at the urging of his concerned boss).

To find out more about QuestionThinking and inquiry-based coaching, visit www.marileeadams.com. Dr. Adams also conducts one-day "Change Your Questions, Change Your Life" workshops nationwide and offers inquiry-based phone-coaching for individuals. ●

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Switching Questions

THESE ARE EXAMPLES of some useful questions for when you find yourself veering into Judger mode and want to "merge" back into Learner.

- Am I in Judger mode right now?
- Where would I rather be?
- How can I get there?
- What are the facts?
- How else can I think about this?
- What assumptions am I making?
- Is this what I want to feel?

