

Strategic Questioning

An approach to creating personal and social change

By Fran Peavey

One of the articles in [Creating A Future We Can Live With \(IC#40\)](#)

Originally published in **Spring 1995** on page 36

[Copyright \(c\)1995, 1997 by Context Institute](#)

I'm from Idaho. I don't know if you know what that means, but it's very hard for a person from Idaho to think of cleaning up the Ganges River. When a friend from India asked me to help him clean up the river, I knew I had no experience cleaning up rivers. What I did know about was how to build a strategy for social change.

When I first went to India I used strategic questioning. I began by building a series of questions, starting with how the people saw the problem themselves. What do you see when you look at the river? How do you explain the situation with the river to your children? How do you feel about the condition of the river? I listened very carefully to how they explained to themselves what they saw. Essentially I was looking at their logic as well as their words. I was looking for the cultural wiring around the river. I couldn't say, "Oh, I see the river's polluted." That would be like my saying in a Western context, "Your mother is a whore." It would be a cultural insult. I had to find out how they explained the pollution to themselves.

Shifting Perspectives

Over and over again I heard, "The river is holy, but she is not pure. We are not taking care of her the way she needs us to." After hearing this reply, I noticed that I started to think less in terms of "pollution" and more in terms of "people not taking care of the river." This shift was an important change of perspective for me. Pollution is an abstraction that avoids addressing the responsibility of the people who are making the mess. It is almost as if the river is to blame for being polluted! Very often people also said, "I see the problem, but others don't." Such a response told me what the people I spoke with can and cannot talk about with each other. Often in a situation such as the holy Ganges, the symbolic overload is so great that to talk about what you really think may seem sacrilegious or crazy to others.

I needed to understand their change view – how they expected change to happen, what kind of strategies they had confidence in. In India, no social change can compare to the liberation of their country from the control of the British, and this affects their views on how change happens. When I asked how that change had happened, I heard many strategies for change – fasting, direct action, pressuring civic leaders, citizen's assemblies, marches to the capitol – stories of change that are embedded in that culture. These became the strategies they were willing to use now to clean their holy river.

People often told me how impossible it was to clean the river. Rather than assuming it was impossible, I started to think that it was going to take a very long time and I had better start thinking about the next generation in my questioning. I was already questioning young people, but I added a question for the adults, "How are you preparing your children to clean up the river?"

Everyone I asked said something like, "We are doing nothing to prepare the children to clean the river." Their love of the river, their love for their children, and the void in their answers to that question could not long exist in the same minds. The dissonance was too great.

One afternoon someone came running into my room and said, "Peavey, come right away, we've got a great idea." I found the group gathered and enthusiastically discussing a plan: "We're going to have a poster-painting contest for the children. We'll have all the students in Benares draw posters about what they see regarding the health of the river. We'll hang the winning posters up at a large musical event. The adults will see what the children see and be embarrassed ..."

It was an original idea and clearly the idea was theirs. Everybody in that room had been asked a question about the preparation of their children for river-cleaning work. Could that question have had anything to do with the idea for the poster contest? I believe it did. And, because it was their idea, they had enthusiasm around it.

We have had poster contests almost every year since then. Five to eight hundred young people gather on the banks of the Ganges in poster-making competitions.

People need to come up with their own answers. Questioning can catalyze this process. Don't be disappointed if a great question does not have an answer right away. A powerful question will sit rattling in the mind for days or weeks as the person works on an answer. If the seed is planted, the answer will grow. Questions are alive!

Shaping Strategic Questions

Strategic questioning is the skill of asking the questions that will make a difference. Shaping a strategic question involves these key features:

A strategic question creates motion by asking, "How can we move?" They are dynamic and don't allow a situation to stay stuck. For example, Sally is having a hard time deciding whether to move to Sydney. I could say to her, "Why don't you just move to Sydney?" This question is really a suggestion pretending to be a question. A more strategic question would be, What places come to mind when you think of living happily? or What is the meaning of this move in your life? Sally is then encouraged to talk about the qualities she wants from her new home, to set new goals.

A strategic question creates options. If I ask, "Why don't you move to Sydney?" I have asked a question that is dynamic in one direction (Sydney). A strategic question opens the options up ... Where would you like to live? or What are three places that you feel connected to?

A strategic question digs deeper. Questions can be like a lever you use to pry open the stuck lid on a paint can. If we have a short lever, we can only just crack open that lid. But if we have a longer lever, or a more dynamic question, we can pry off the lid and really stir things up. Some people approach problems with their heads like a closed paint can. If the right question is applied and it digs deep enough, we can stir up creative solutions. A long-

lever question can stir up synthesis, motion, and energy: What needs to be changed? What is the meaning of this situation in your life? What aspects of it interest you most?

A strategic question avoids "Why." Most "why" questions force you to defend an existing decision or rationalize the present. "Why" questions can create resistance to change.

A strategic question avoids "yes" or "no" answers because these leave the person being asked in an uncreative and passive state.

A strategic question empowers. When I ask people in India, "What would you like to do to clean your river?" there is a confidence expressed that they can contribute to designing the clean-up process.

A strategic question asks the unaskable questions. For every individual, group, or society, some questions are taboo. A strategic question often challenges the values that an issue rests upon. Asking taboo questions in a nonpartisan way can be a great service to anyone with an issue on which she or he is "stuck." For example, for the politician: What do you like about the other party's platform? For the workaholic: What do you do for joy? For the tree activist: How should we make building materials?

Go Forth and Question

We must accept the responsibility that whatever we do – or don't do – impacts the ways of life we all share. There is no way we are not involved in what is happening. How *best* can we be involved? We can start with deep and dynamic questioning and listening where solutions are limited only by our imagination. Our neighbors and co-workers have important strategical information. So do we. When we question deep into the heart where courage and intelligence live, strategies may be liberated into action.

Fran Peavey lives, writes, and organizes in Oakland, CA, and travels around the world learning from and advising other activists. This piece is excerpted from her book, By Life's Grace: Musings on the Essence of Social Change, published by New Society Publishers in 1994.

The Strategic Questioning Process

The First Level: Describing the Issue or Problem

1. Focus Questions gather information that is already known. When you look at the river, what do you see that concerns you?

2. Observation Questions
What do you see? What do you read about this situation? What information do you need to gather about this situation?

3. Analysis Questions (Thinking Questions)
What is the relationship of ... to ...? What are the main economic, political, cultural, and social structures that affect this situation?

4. Feeling Questions
How has this situation affected your body? Your feelings? How has it affected feelings about your family, community, the world?

The Second Level: Strategic Questions....Digging Deeper

Now we start asking questions that increase the motion. The mind takes off, creating new information, synthesizing, moving from what is known to the realm of what could be.

5. Visioning Questions are concerned with identifying one's ideals, values, and dreams. How would you like it to be? What is the meaning of this situation in your life?

6. Change Questions address how to get to a more ideal situation. How might changes you would like to see come about? Name as many ways as possible. What are changes you have seen or read about? Here you are trying to find the person's change view, which will greatly impact their strategies for change.

7. Considering All the Alternatives. What are all the possible ways you could accomplish these changes? How could you reach that goal? What are other ways? What would it take for you to do ...?

8. Consider The Consequences. How would your first alternative affect the others in the context? What would be the effect on the environment? What political effect would you anticipate from each alternative?

9. Consider the Obstacles. What would need to change in order for alternative "a" to be done? What keeps you from doing ...? Decisions become clear around this point. Are you getting a sense of what you want to do? What is in the way of clarity?

10. Personal Inventory and Support Questions: What support do you need? What support would you need to work for this change?

11. Personal Action Questions: Who do you need to talk to about your vision? How can you get others together to work on this?