



Asking Compelling Questions in Gracious Space

A compelling question is one that invites people to delve more deeply into relationships and the journey of learning and change. Compelling questions can:

- Stimulate storytelling from participants
- Build the relational field
- Help hold discomfort
- Foster possibilities that bridge differences

Questions that stimulate storytelling

These questions lead to relationship building in the group. When people share stories about their lives, it connects them at a deeper level and brings out more of what matters most to them. At their core, people share a great deal in common.

Examples:

- Rural community representatives with contention around race and class gather to build a better economic future.
What do you love about your community? What about your community makes you feel most connected?
- An organization anticipates the need for major changes and planning for the next year.
When have you experienced a successful change project in an organization or community?
- A middle school holds a session on ethics and values.
What goes on inside you when you see someone being bullied or treated meanly?
- A group plans an event with the Dalai Lama on compassion.
When have you experienced compassion? How did it affect you? What did you learn?

Questions that build the relational field

Asking a progression of questions to create the initial invitation and build capacity for more risk taking is often described as “creating a relational field.” The relational field is the energy we develop when we are in a group. How do you tap into, open up and build this field of energy so it can support the work of the group?

Examples:

- Middle school Ethics/Values class
*What goes on inside you as you see someone being bullied and treated meanly?
What could people do to help in this situation?
What helps you decide what the right thing to do is in this situation?
What happens to you when you do not step up, even if you believe it is the right thing to do?*



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- Business work place experiencing mistrust and low morale
What attracted you to this work place and why do you stay?
When were you in a group that clicked and worked well?
What elements made it work?
What values are important to how we work together?
What does each value look like when it is present? Not present?
Where are you currently in this organization on a 1 to 5 scale of trust?

Questions that help probe and hold discomfort

In Gracious Space, the moments of discomfort when someone shares an experience of pain, anger, despair, or accusation, can be an opportunity for the group to shift to deeper work.

Examples:

- In an intergenerational peace making circle, a young woman says, “I don’t know how to forgive and I am not sure I want to forgive some people.” The group addresses the question: *How do I learn to forgive?*
- In a work group with little trust, we asked: *What does trust look like when it is present in the work place? What does it look like when it is not present?*
- In a gathering focused on becoming more powerful change agents, a participant indicates he does not feel invited to participate in some of the change work of others. His compelling question: *What am I feeling at this moment in this group? From what do I feel excluded?* The group’s action: *Take the next 20 minutes to have the conversations you want to have in this room. Bring your reflections back to the large group.*
- In Wyoming, local residents have tortured and killed a local gay man, and the community is in great pain. Some gather to ask: *How could this happen in our community?*
- In a group where two individuals are in a painful moment of strained relationship, reflect on: *How can we hold these two with compassion as they deal with their pain?*
- In a board meeting, where board and staff representatives get caught in unproductive conversations, they consider: *Where do we get stuck? What are the patterns that don’t work well? What patterns are working?* If the patterns can be identified, perhaps they can be changed.

Other examples:

- *How do you find hope in the midst of overwhelming despair?*
- *How willing are you to be influenced by others? Where do you meet people who can open up your thinking and learning?*
- *Witnessing the pain in this group, where do we need to bear witness and bring healing? What needs to be named?*
- *When people feel left out and invisible, what helps people feel heard, seen and loved?*



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- *Where do we, as people of goodwill, dispirit each other? How could we inspire each other?*
- *How can you transform anger into compassion?*

Questions that creatively bridge differences and open up possibilities

A question that bridges does the following:

- Identifies the things/values you care about
- Includes those values, builds on them and bridges between them
- Radiates possibility
- Remains focused enough to lead to smart negotiations, but open enough to allow unknown outcomes

Examples:

A school must decide whether or not to keep the image of an American Indian as mascot. Young Indians identified with it and felt proud, whites liked the tradition. Older Native Americans felt offended. Their compelling question: *How can we have a mascot that builds strong community and identity for all of us?*

A community group in Montana is addressing its energy needs for the future. Dams have been opened up, contributing to the loss of cheap energy. A coal plant may move in, but others seek new, cleaner alternatives. Their compelling question: *How do we take charge of our energy future while protecting the environment from unmonitored development and retaining our sense of a small and friendly community?*

A group is stuck in the seemingly insurmountable and contentious issue: some want to end abortion altogether, some insist on the woman's right to choose. Their compelling question: *How can we cut in half the number of abortions over the next ten years?* This goal keeps the action voluntary but works to reduce abortions overall.

A conservative Christian group whose members were harassed for their faith partner with a gay and lesbian group whose members were being harassed and assaulted at school. Their compelling question: *How do we make school a safe environment for all of our kids?*

Many people see the urgency of addressing climate change and at the same time there is great concern over creating a rigid governmental approach that hampers personal choice and the economy. A compelling question: *How do we deal with global climate change in a way that doesn't create big government?*

Gathering to build dialogue across differences, Palestinians and Israelis have great fear, animosity, and must cope with the daily realities of sharing a small space of land. Checkpoints are a difficult daily challenge. A compelling question: *What would a useful check point look like?*