

Science of Asking Powerful Questions

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We are wired to connect. We are trying to connect. On average, we spend about [10 hours per day](#) “connected” through a screen. Sherry Turkle, researcher at MIT, reminds us that the reality is that all these “sips” of online connection never actually add up to a “gulp” of human connection.

With the rise of infinite amounts of always-available information being just a click or tap away, answers have become cheap. Cheap answers have contributed to a National Curiosity Deficit—as we call it. Our research is finding that questions are becoming the new currency. One of our ongoing clients at a major university orientation program said it best,

“*Even student leaders are struggling with the question ‘what do we say?’ While waiting in line for food or walking between classes, ‘what do we say?’*”

Forget about “saying” and telling for a moment, what about asking? This National Curiosity Deficit fuels division and separation and prevents us from building trusting, healthy connections. With the sounding board of social media, it seems we speak more in declarative or exclamatory statements and less in questions. Let’s use our mental muscles to bend our exclamation points into question marks. Right! I mean...right? Questions are like keys that unlock the lifetime of un-Googleable experience we walk around with each day. Asking powerful questions opens a window into these experiences, commonalities, differences, and possible contributions or collaborations that we each carry in our minds. For example, think of a colleague that may be difficult to get along with. What might happen if you were to ask, “what brings you joy?” If we let go of

assumptions just for a moment, what might we learn?

David Whyte, a renowned English poet, once said that “no self survives a conversation.” Data about how our brains respond to curiosity and questions would tend to agree.

What is the downside to *creating conversations that matter* offline and in-person? There is no backspace, no “undo send” and no ability to draft a communication and consider the ramifications for a couple hours. Face-to-face, live conversation introduces us to social and emotional risk. Our brains are wired to avoid social and emotional risk in the same way we used to avoid saber tooth tigers. Neuroscientists have even found that [“social pain” and physical pain activate the same regions in the brain](#). It’s easier to avoid social pain than it is to take the chance of connection.

But data suggests that the *reward* sitting on the other side of the social *risk* required to ask powerful questions is massive.

For the leaders and learners reading this book who want to know about the science behind the “art” of asking powerful questions, we have inserted gray boxes (like the one below) where you will find fascinating facts and nuances of neuroscience that have been researched with rigor and packaged in a digestible way.

Woven throughout the text, each gray box will unpack a bit of the research that makes the Asking Powerful Questions Pyramid™ such a robust, evidence-based framework for building relationships of trust, boosting engagement, reducing prejudice, and improving performance. Now, more than ever, the world needs brain-based skills that lead to more effective communication that amplify a culture of connection, belonging, and trust. For readability, you’ll find full citations for all the research at the end of the book in case you want to dive deeper.

Did you know?

Research published in Harvard Business Review from the Center for Talent Innovation found that when people feel like they belong at work, they are more productive, motivated, engaged and [3.5 times more likely to contribute to their fullest potential](#). However, only [49% of full-time workers](#) say that they had “a great deal of trust” in those working above and alongside them. That said...

- Companies with highly effective communication practices enjoy [47% higher total returns](#) to shareholders compared with the firms that are least effective at communicating.

- AND -

- Connected and engaged employees are [87% less likely to leave an organization](#). This is huge when turnover costs can be as high as 100-300% of an employee’s base salary.

As we’ll continue to discover throughout the book, the impact of effective, brain-based communication has far reaches across companies, universities, non-profits, schools, and community groups. How we connect matters.

One of our favorite findings comes from Google—the nearly 100,000 employee company, not just the search engine we ask to find out how far Kathmandu is from Timbuktu. 5,594 miles by the way—as the crow flies.

[Google internally launched a massive research study called Project Aristotle](#) in a quest to find the characteristics of the highest performing teams. It uncovered that the number one indicator of a high-performing, innovative team is the degree of psychological safety in that team. This is the academic way of saying “interpersonal trust.” That trust and sense of safety develops largely through social and personal connections. The tools and

framework in this book was specifically designed and created to establish those social and personal connections at work—and at home.

This also aligns with [eight decades of landmark research](#) from the Harvard Study of Adult Development about the role of human connection to our overall well-being. The director of this ongoing study, Dr. Waldinger, says that “people who are more socially connected to family, friends, and community are happier, healthier and live longer than people who are less well connected.” Happy and healthy employees also tend to be loyal and productive employees.

The [Association for Psychological Science](#) published a study on over 20,000 audio recordings which found that people who had more authentic, substantive conversations also tended to be happier. Creating conversations that matter isn’t just fun, it’s actually essential to our health and well-being.

There is a [decade of research](#) in education and learning theory that says knowledge of personal backgrounds of others leads to shortcuts for effective communication. How can we access information about people’s personal backgrounds? By asking. Conveniently, the rest of the book is all about asking intentional, empathetic questions that are rooted in our natural, genuine curiosity and followed up with deep listening.

To break down communication barriers and increase connection, engagement, and trust in your teams and communities, *what if we started speaking less in periods and more in question marks?*



Find **free** tips, tools, and resources to build and sustain a **culture of connection** at:

www.weand.me/ideas