



Introduction

One summer afternoon, shortly after the first edition of this book was published, I answered my office phone to hear a man's booming voice announce, "You don't know me, but I'm Ben." He laughed, and I laughed along with him because I knew exactly what he was referring to. Ben is the main character in *Change Your Questions*, *Change Your Life*, and this caller identified with him so much that he thought I could also help him and his organization.

By now, Ben is almost legendary for many of my readers. Proud of being the "Answer Man," he believes he must always have the answers and must always be right. In the

story—a business fable through which readers experience the practical power of *Question Thinking*—Ben is floundering in his new leadership position. But that isn't all. He's also having trouble at home. His relationship with Grace, his wife of less than a year, is growing increasingly tense. When we first meet him, Ben is one unhappy guy.

Since that first telephone call from a “Ben,” I've received many similar messages from both men and women. One reader, David, wrote me that like Ben, he'd been in trouble at work, especially with his team. After reading *Change Your Questions* he changed his own questions and, in the process, changed his leadership style. He was ultimately so successful that the results were included in an article in *Inc. Magazine*. You'll find the reference for that article in the notes at the end of this book.

Change Your Questions has struck a chord with so many readers that it has become a bestseller. The first inkling I had of its impact occurred when the senior manager at a large pharmaceutical company called me with an invitation to a discussion group featuring my book. She had sent copies to the 50 members of her globally dispersed team with just one instruction: “Come to the book discussion with one example of *something you've done differently* as a result of reading this book.” On the day of the meeting I was ushered into a conference room with about thirty people seated around a large table. Others joined us by speakerphone. I listened in amazement as person after person described the

results they'd achieved. One man told us he was leading his team more successfully, a woman shared that her relationship with a direct report had improved significantly, and a plant manager in Brazil explained how reading the book helped him recognize and correct a problem in his plant.

Since then, I've given results-focused Question Thinking presentations at some of the world's largest corporations, at major federal agencies, at nonprofits, and in communities. Largely through word of mouth, *Change Your Questions* has become required reading in leadership development programs, executive coach trainings, and college courses. It is used by teams in companies and government agencies, by health care professionals in major hospitals, and by Human Resource professionals as well as those in sales. It's used in church-sponsored marriage enrichment workshops, in decision-making programs in prisons, and as part of creativity and innovation initiatives in organizations large and small. Community leaders have used it to find constructive responses to tough challenges in inner cities. Coaches and mediators give it to their clients. People share it with their partners, their adult and teenage children, and their friends and colleagues.

One might wonder why *Change Your Questions* has gained such widespread traction. Question Thinking (QT), the heart of the book, takes on an age-old issue — our ability to be in charge of our own thinking, moment by moment by moment. QT provides skills for observing and assessing our

present thinking—including the questions we’re asking ourselves—and then guides us in designing new questions for getting better results. In other words, QT helps us think productively rather than reactively, and to choose wisely rather than simply react. Building such a reliable capacity for thinking is central to the skills required for intentional and sustainable change, whether that change is sought in our professional or personal lives. Without these skills, our goals for change may be only wistful slogans that will never come to fruition.

Question Thinking began with an important moment of discovery in my own life. I was a determined young graduate student working away on my Ph.D. dissertation. Not only did I endure a ruthless inner critic, but criticisms from others often left me in tears. One fateful day, expecting high praise from my advisor for some work I felt great about, I instead heard from him, “Marilee, this is just not acceptable.” At that moment something new happened. Instead of tearfully wondering what was wrong with me, I took a deep breath, and becoming calm and curious, simply asked him, “OK, how do I fix it?” That simple shift took me from feeling powerless to being confident enough to take constructive action. Afterward I wondered, *Could this seeming miracle be turned into a reliable method for myself and others?* And so I began.

In spite of its power for bringing about genuine, sustainable change, the tools and skills of Question Thinking are both simple and practical. Readers say that QT provides a natural “how to” they find missing in many books on

business and personal development. Again and again, readers like David tell me that Ben's story succeeds in showing them how to make real changes so that their own lives are distinctly different and better. Nothing could be more satisfying to an author!

The material in this book aligns well with other philosophies and systems for change such as Appreciative Inquiry, Positive Psychology, and Emotional Intelligence (EQ). I've given Question Thinking workshops for groups that employ Action Learning programs and in companies committed to becoming better learning organizations. I've talked about it on radio and television. I've also presented this work to my peers in many professional associations, including the American Society for Training and Development, the International Coach Federation, the Organizational Development Network, and the Society for Human Resource Managers.

Readers and people in those audiences resonate with the core message of Question Thinking—that *real change always begins with a change in thinking*—and most specifically in the questions we ask ourselves. Stories like this one about Susan help them understand how practical and specific this can be. Susan was a participant in one of my corporate Inquiry Workshops and asked for help with a dilemma at work. She loved her work, but conflicts with her boss left her wondering if she should quit her job. When I asked what questions she was asking herself about him, she

replied, with an edge to her voice, “What’s he going to do wrong *now?*” and “How’s he going to make *me* look bad?” Clearly, whatever the source of the conflict, Susan’s current thinking would render any satisfying resolution nearly impossible.

I realized that Susan needed to change her questions if she wanted a better result. When I suggested a new one for her to ask herself—“What can *I* do to make my boss look *good?*” — she looked completely startled. This question was clearly outside the mindset with which Susan had been viewing her boss! Even so, she agreed to give it a try.

When I ran into Susan and her husband months later, she gave me a huge smile and asked if I wanted to hear about the “miracles” that had occurred at work since we had talked. “I kept my job *and* got a promotion and a raise,” she reported proudly. “But the most amazing thing is that my boss and I volunteered to work on a committee together, even though we used to avoid being in the same room. And it turned out great.” Then Susan’s husband commented that the positive changes had not all been at work. Smiling at his wife he explained, “My life is easier since Susan stopped complaining about her boss every night!”

While *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* is a business fable, its impact is much broader than the world of work. You will find, just as Ben — and Susan — did, that the same principles that are so successful in business situations can also help us greatly improve relationships in our personal lives.

Ted, a senior engineer attending an Inquiring Leadership workshop at a Fortune 100 company, took seriously my assignment to practice switching from being judgmental to taking a creative learning attitude. The result? That night at dinner he and his 16-year-old son had their best conversation in over a year. The next morning Ted told us, “My son has an uncanny ability to ‘push my buttons,’ and usually my reaction is like what you call a Judger hijacking. But last night was totally different. I didn’t take the bait, didn’t yell at him and we didn’t end up in a fight like we usually do.” Ted looked quite pleased with himself as he mentioned that his son had smiled, rolled his eyes, and quipped, “What happened to *you*?!”

When my publisher asked me to write a second edition of *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life*, I saw it as a wonderful opportunity to add new material that my clients and workshop participants have found particularly helpful. Some chapters have new titles and there are also some new chapters: “We’re All Recovering Judgers” (You can laugh at this truth—others do, too!), “Learner Teams and Judger Teams,” and “Q-Storming to the Rescue.” In addition, there are new tools in the Question Thinking Tools Section following Ben’s story.

In my first book, *The Art of the Question*, I wrote that “questions are like treasures hidden in broad daylight.” My goal with *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life* is to provide an easy-to-follow map so you can quickly find

that treasure and make it your own. I also use storytelling to make it possible for readers to experience what Question Thinking can bring to their lives. Questions open our minds, our eyes, and our hearts. With them, we learn, connect, and create. And with them, we can create better futures and better results. I hope that Ben's story shows you, in a practical way, how a world of questions really can lead to those kinds of possibilities.

There are many important implications in exploring the territory I've termed Question Thinking. For example, imagine the difference these perspectives and tools could make in education, in parenting, and in health care. We might even wonder, "What might taking a Question Thinking perspective make possible for us as human beings who yearn to create positive futures for ourselves as individuals, families, organizations, and our world?"

I have a vision of workplaces and a society — of individuals, families, institutions, and communities — that are vibrant with the spirit of inquiry. Our orientation would shift from one of fixed opinions and easy answers to one of curiosity and thoughtful questions. This is the path that lights the way for open-minded and successful collaboration, for exploration, discovery, and innovation — and for the real possibility of a desirable future for us all.

Now it's time to meet Ben and discover, along with him, how changing your questions really can change your life.