

Questions for Change

People typically are not aware of their internal questions or of the profound power they exert in shaping and directing their experiences and lives. By changing those questions, one can set in motion a different process leading to a different result.

David Rock and Linda J. Page

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.

You see, Ben is almost legendary for many of my readers. Proud of being the "Answer Man," he believes he must always be the one with 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

2 Introduction

tense. When we first meet him, Ben is one unhappy guy. As the story continues, we learn how he advances in his professional life and deepens his bond with his wife, as he develops the skills of Question Thinking with the help of his coach and mentor, Joseph S. Edwards.

Since that first telephone call from a “Ben,” I’ve received many similar messages from men and women from a wide variety of backgrounds. One reader, David, wrote 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—and others—in the notes at the end of this book.

The first inkling I had of the impact made by *Change Your Questions* 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 30 people seated around a large table. Others joined 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 said that her relationship with a colleague had improved significantly; and a plant manager in Brazil explained how reading the book helped him to recognize and correct a problem in his plant.

Change Your Questions has struck a chord with so many readers that it has become an international bestseller, providing me opportunities to give workshops and keynote presentations in Canada, Europe, and Asia. Largely through word of mouth, the book has become required reading in leadership development programs, coach training institutes, and at universities. It is used by teams in companies and government agencies, by health care professionals in major hospitals, and by Human Resource and Organizational Development professionals. It's used in mediation, marriage enrichment workshops, and in change initiatives with organizations large and small. Readers report that it complements mindfulness practices and emotional intelligence, as well as Appreciative Inquiry, Action Learning, and positive psychology. People share *Change Your Questions* with their partners and children, and with their friends and colleagues.

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—especially the questions we're asking ourselves—and then guides us in designing new questions for getting better

4 Introduction

results. QT helps us think mindfully rather than reactively, leading to more astute choices for productive outcomes, even under pressure. Building reliable capacities for constructive thought is vital for intentional and sustainable change, in both our professional and personal lives. Without this skill, our goals for change may remain only wistful slogans that never come to fruition.

Question Thinking began with an important moment of discovery in my 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. Soon I was rewriting the section he had wanted me to change, and to my surprise my inner critic seemed to be taking a rest.

Of course, I had to wonder, “What had happened?! What was so different this time?” I realized that my familiar old judgmental questions about what was wrong and *not good enough* about me seemed to have evaporated. Rather than getting stuck in that quagmire of self-judgment, I had instead focused on the future with the goal of having my

writing really work. I had reminded myself of all the good, hard work I had turned in before and that my advisor was on my side.

Was that change of mine just a fluke? Was there a way to turn this seeming miracle into a reliable method for me and others? From such modest beginnings bloomed this body of work that today I call Question Thinking—which points to how we think with questions and how the form of our questions affects our life experiences as well as the results we get. In their book *Coaching with the Brain in Mind: Foundations for Practice*, coauthors David Rock and Linda J. Page described one of the core benefits of my work: “Even what we see as a possibility or action is influenced by our mindset or state of mind. Thus, becoming conscious of and changing our self-questioning is a powerful way to take control of changing our behavior.”

Question Thinking provides tools that can help us take charge of our thinking, our emotions, and our behavior not only in our jobs and professions but in every area of our lives. If you’re a coach, teaching the QT methodology can become an integral part of each session, providing clients with tools for self-coaching and greater self-awareness. This seamless process is made possible because the tools and methods are highly intuitive and practical.

In the story you’ll be reading in the pages ahead, Joseph coaches Ben, who is bumping up against limitations in his leadership skills. Even as Ben moves beyond his limitations,

6 Introduction

guided by QT principles and tools, Joseph is teaching him how to do this on his own. Thus Ben learns to *self-coach*, a skill that continues to weave its way throughout his life even as he reaps its many benefits.

Change Your Questions is a self-coaching guide for you as much it is for Ben. I've written this book with an emphasis on self-coaching so you can integrate the lessons of QT as you follow Ben's story. Because the book has proven to be so effective for teaching self-coaching, many people in the coaching professions encourage their clients to read it.

But what are the results of this work in the real world, including in organizational life? The most eloquent evidence I can provide are stories shared by my clients and readers. One such story was reported in the *Wharton@Work Newsletter*, which I reference in the Notes at the back of the book. Flextronics is a global leader in electronics manufacturing and distribution in about 30 countries. With goals of culture and behavioral change, Carmella Granado, Senior Director of Organizational Effectiveness, coached the leaders of a poorly performing operations site of about 700 people in the principles of Question Thinking. Before this, the site had had the lowest scores of the 14 others in their division. Carmella assigned the team leaders to read *Change Your Questions* and share the book with their teams. She also coached them with Question Thinking tools to help them brainstorm solutions to current problems.

Within three months, the QT-based coaching that

Carmella provided was credited with the site's dramatic turn-around. They moved to the #1 spot in their division and have maintained a position among the top sites year after year.

People often talk about taking Question Thinking skills home to their families after learning these skills for work. Jason, a workshop participant, told about coming home to find his wife Pam in a panic in his basement office. Water poured down from above, threatening his computer and media equipment. Jason told us, "The old me would have snapped into blame mode." Instead, his Question Thinking skills kicked in. He took a deep breath and told himself, "this is not about blame . . . just figure out what we need to do right now." He quickly shut off the water and called the plumber. Downstairs, a soggy Pam sobbed, "This was your whole world, Jason. And I nearly ruined it." Thanks to learning Question Thinking, Jason said he had the presence of mind to reply, "No, Baby, *you're* my whole world." He later told me, "At that moment I knew it was time to let go of what I'd collected and never let anything get in the way of what was *really* important in my life."

Stories like Ben's, Carmella's, and Jason's help to confirm QT's effectiveness for making significant changes in our personal lives and for growing in our professional lives in positive and sustainable ways. What could be more gratifying for an author than to discover that her work really does make a difference in other people's lives!

When my publisher asked me to write a third edition

8 Introduction

of this book, I saw it as a wonderful opportunity to include what I'd learned from my clients, students, and workshop participants. Their contributions have been invaluable on so many different levels, sometimes helping me to see applications of QT I hadn't seen before and often enriching me personally as well.

In many cases I've woven what they've taught me into the book in the form of stories and anecdotes, or used this new knowledge to clarify or enhance the QT tools. Also, in the workbook following the story, you'll find two new tools—one that applies to leadership development and the other to coaching.

In my first book, *The Art of the Question*, I wrote that “with our questions we make the world.” Questions open our minds, our eyes, and our hearts. With our questions we learn, connect, and create. We are smarter, more productive, and able to get better results. We shift our orientation from fixed opinions and easy answers to curiosity, thoughtful questions, and open-minded conversations, lighting the way to collaboration, exploration, discovery, and innovation. I have a vision of workplaces and a society—of individuals, families, organizations, and communities—that are vibrant with the spirit of inquiry and possibility.

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