



CITY 101

Keep It Clean

The following are some examples of questions, adapted from Don Swartz at the Effectiveness Resource Group, that harness or hinder open conversation:

OPEN AND CLEAN

- What is important to you about that idea?

- What do you mean?
- What is it that you value about the current approach?

- To what extent am I (are we) contributing to the very problem we are trying to solve?

UNHELPFUL OR DIRTY

- When are you going to stop...?
- What are you going to do about your problem?
- Don't you believe...?
- Don't you think it would be a good idea if...?

STEVE BYERS, *Helping Human Systems*

ASK, AND YOU SHALL RENEW

HOW CITIES COMMUNICATE HELPS DEFINE THEIR ABILITY TO LEAD.

WHAT IS REQUIRED for a human system, such as a city staff, to renew itself in a creative and sustainable way? What kind of leadership is needed?

There are many ways to make a change. Leaders with positional authority might change a policy, or “reorganize” and shake things up, or fire and hire. These kinds of changes are usually about fixing or blaming. Fixing simply restores the status quo, and blaming only leads to a downward spiral. Instead, cities should focus on changes that embrace possibility, or what they might create together as a human system to take them beyond the weekly brush fire.

But how can a city shift from talking about problems and placing blame to introducing a new conversation about creating what we want in our organizations and communities? First, we have to stop having the “old conversation.” This requires leadership from somewhere in the organization. Shifting the conversation is a key leadership activity to foster renewal.

We can begin by asking better questions. The practice of asking open and clean questions during meetings and other complex interactions is a powerful way to begin to shift the existing conversation.

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We all recognize an *open* question: one that cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” or any other single word that ends the conversation. A *clean* question is open and flows from a genuine intention to learn or help. Questions that are not clean (or “dirty” questions) seek instead to lead, to tie or bind, to imply or suggest, or to give advice. “Why do you always...?” implies guilt and is a dirty question. “Why is that important to you?” expresses the asker’s intent to learn more and is thus clean. (See “Keep It Clean,” at left, for more examples.) Context and tone are important, which is why I present this idea as a practice rather than a recipe. We have to be fully present to get it right!

Shaping a better question in some complex circumstance means that we’ve slowed down, are more aware of our surroundings, and are resisting the drive to come to a rapid conclusion or solution, which together can enable us to have a different kind of conversation in which we respond rather than react. The conversations generated by genuine questions will be less defensive, will strengthen relationships, and will allow a group to move from a cycle of blame to the creation of something new.

Those are the kinds of conversations we all deserve. **C**

Steve Byers is a consultant who works with leaders, leadership teams, organizations, and other communities seeking to renew their essential conversation.

