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## Inquiry: The Superpower for Transformation

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Disrupting the inequitable status quo starts with individuals asking new, compelling questions in ways that inspire others to do the same. From such humble beginnings, small groups of thoughtful, committed people change the world.

Inquiry – which I define as the dual act of asking new, compelling questions and listening deeply to the answers generated – is one of three critical skills that collaborative leaders use to catalyze community transformation. I refer to inquiry as the superpower of the three because it enhances our ability to exercise the other two skills: building trust and understanding context.

New, compelling questions help us to understand how we and others see the world, why we see it that way and how we might transform it. New, compelling questions and the answers they generate allow us to challenge our assumptions, deepen our understanding, explore new possibilities, and imagine a different future.

New, compelling questions are unnecessary if we are content with the status quo or if we desire to return to a mythical past. When protecting the “now” or longing for the “then,” we only need to ask old questions that assign blame, reinforce assumptions and protect turf. The divisions now tearing at the fabric of our nation and our communities are fueled by such old questions. If our desire is to shift away from division and destruction and focus on shared regeneration, then we begin that journey with new, compelling questions.

Even within communities eager for change, asking such questions is always risky business. Within every system are those that benefit from the status quo. They will fight against transformation, no matter the level of inequity or despair being generated by the system. Others will simply reject new questions because the uncertainty of transformation is less desirable than the familiar, yet disappointing now. Be aware of the risks but have faith in the superpower of inquiry.

My colleague Marcy Levy Shankman has helpfully identified three different types of compelling questions that can propel us through our transformation journey:

- **Foundational** questions help us clarify, focus and define the issues we want to explore.
- **Procedural** questions help us identify who and what might be necessary to achieve transformation.
- **Aspirational** questions help us imagine what it might look like after we disrupt the status quo and achieve our goals.

Asking new, compelling questions is a good practice for individuals and organizations looking to transform. I use inquiry to help communities catalyze enduring, positive change within critical civics systems. The term “system” has multiple meanings that can cause confusion when partners come together to explore community issues. We often associate “system” with an organized plan or procedure, such as: “The coach has system to teach defense.” The word “system” also means “a combination of things or parts forming a complex whole.” A “civic system” is a combination of organizations, institutions and programs that share the purpose of addressing a civic priority. Examples of civic systems within our community include the “education system,” which consists of a myriad of players including, pre-schools, public schools, higher education, tutoring programs and many more. These programs – as well as many other players within the system – collectively shape the education outcomes in our community. Each civic system is made up of a common cast of characters that includes funders, policymakers, service providers and the beneficiaries of those services.

Before we use inquiry to change our civic systems, we must appreciate two critical differences between civic systems and the organizations, individuals and institutions that make them up.

First, civic systems don’t have clear boundaries. The confines of a university or a school district are clear, but what’s included in an “education system?” Should it include mentoring programs or should its membership be limited to programs that occur inside a “school building?” Does it include pre-natal care (because studies show its relationship to educational outcomes)? What about adult education programs? And who decides the answers to such questions?

Second, unlike organizations, institutions and individuals, civic systems don’t have goals. Just as there is no one to decide what’s included in our community’s “education system,” there is no one to decide the goals of that system. Civic systems embody the reality of the old saying, often incorrectly attributed to W. Edwards Deming, “*Every system is perfectly designed to get the result that it gets.*” For those who want to transform civic systems, this reality prompts synonymous questions: How is a civic system designed? Why does the system get the results it gets?

The international consulting firm [FSG has identified six factors](#) that together design our civic systems and shape their results.

- 1. Policies:** Government, institutional and organizational rules, regulations, and priorities that guide an entity’s own and others’ actions.
- 2. Practices:** Activities of organizations, institutions and programs working to improve outcomes within the civic system. Includes the procedures, guidelines, or informal shared habits that comprise the work of each entity and program within the system.
- 3. Resource Flows:** How money, people, knowledge, information, and other assets such as infrastructure are allocated and distributed.
- 4. Relationships & Connections:** Quality of the connections and communication occurring among players in the system, especially among those with different roles, priorities, motivations, constraints and experiences.
- 5. Power Dynamics:** The distribution of decision-making power, authority, and both formal and informal influence among the players.

**6. Mental Models:** Habits of thought—deeply held beliefs, assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we communicate.

The confluence of these six factors across multiple players and the interconnections of those players is the “design” of the civic system and that “design” determines the system’s outcomes. New, compelling questions help us to better understand that confluence. While we may begin asking these questions alone, eventually we need to engage others in the process if we want to catalyze enduring, positive change.

Ultimately, we need to engage others to give these complex civic systems something resembling a goal or purpose. Because that is when transformation is possible. As the pioneering systems thinker Donella H. Meadows wrote in “Thinking in Systems,” *“A change in purpose changes a system profoundly, even if every element and interconnection remains the same.”*

Imagine if community leaders (ranging from residents to CEOs to educators) came together to give their education system a goal and truly committed to achieving that goal. Every element and interconnection within the system could remain the same, but the behaviors of the individuals would change dramatically to align with achieving the goal and the outcomes would change profoundly, as well.

Absent such unity around shared goals, systems evolve based on the changes within the elements and interconnections. They get the results their designed to get.

If we want to transform those results, our inquiry must explore some foundational questions about the civic system.

## Foundational Questions

Foundational questions help us define the boundaries of the civic system(s) where we want to focus our transformation work. Meadows emphasized the importance of defining such boundaries when she wrote:

*“There is no single, legitimate boundary to draw around a system. We have to invent boundaries for clarity and sanity; and boundaries can produce problems when we forget that we’ve artificially created them.”*

In short, we need to decide what’s in the system and what’s not, because without such boundaries we’ll be working on everything and no matter how united we are we cannot do everything. And we must accept that forces outside our defined boundaries may disrupt our ability to transform because we’ve chosen to only work on a part of the system.

There are many types of boundaries within our civic systems. The two most common are political and programmatic. In most of our communities political boundaries have great influence over civic systems. For example, the civic economic development system of Columbus, Ohio, looks very different from that system in Cleveland, Ohio, because Columbus annexed many of its surrounding communities decades ago as the urban core sprawled across central Ohio. Now, one governmental entity oversees much of the urban area. In contrast, Greater Cleveland’s urban area encompasses dozens of separate political jurisdictions and four separate counties. Just convening the public sector players in Greater Cleveland’s economic development system is much more complicated than in Columbus.

Programmatic boundaries also need to be clarified in civic system work. For example, does the workforce development system include the ability of job seekers to get to-and-from work? Or should our system efforts focus more on preparing job seekers for success and then ask those focused on our community's "transportation system" to deal with the reality that many workers don't have affordable or convenient transportation options? If we draw our programmatic boundaries too narrow our system change efforts may not be ambitious enough to achieve our goals, if we draw them too broadly we may spin our wheels trying to accommodate too many priorities.

Through inquiry we can sort through the challenges of where and how to draw the boundaries of the system to frame and focus our work. Defined boundaries allow us to identify the key policies, practices and funding flows within those boundaries. We can create a partial map (we can never build a complete map and shouldn't waste time trying) that illustrates how those policies, practices and funding flows are connected, how they relate to each other and the power dynamics that influence them.

A system map can help us explore one of the most powerful foundational questions of all, as identified by David Peter Stroh, in his vital book *Systems Thinking for Social Change*: "Why, despite all of our best efforts, have we been unable to generate the results we desire from this system?"

When we explore this question, we must first examine our own role in the system. "How do my actions and/or my organization's actions contribute to the inequitable/undesirable results of the system?" Too often champions of community change assume that others need to change their behavior. To transform systems, everyone in the system needs to change. And those with the most influence over the six factors of system change must change the most.

Other examples of foundational questions include:

- What outcomes – intended and unintended – are being generated by our current efforts?
- Who is benefiting the most from the inequitable outcomes?
- What might we need to give up/change to achieve our shared goals?

As we build our understanding of our own role in the design and outcomes of the system, we will then ask better procedural questions that can put us on the path toward collective action.

## Procedural Questions

Procedural questions help us to clarify the steps that need to be taken to journey down the transformation path. A persistent procedural question is: Who else needs to join me on this inquiry journey? It is a persistent question because as we listen deeply to the answers generated by other questions we are asking, the answers to it evolve. For example, if we learn that transportation is indeed a primary barrier preventing us from achieving our shared goal of increasing the number of adults in the workforce, then we need to make sure transportation interests join us on our journey.

If we're relatively alone in asking compelling questions, one of the early procedural questions to ask a potential partner in your journey is:

"What would it take for you to join me on this journey?" Variations of this question include:

- "What will I need to do differently for you believe that it's worth joining me?"
- "Who do you need to see at the table to believe this journey has potential?"

- “Who cannot be at the table for you to trust it is worth your time?”

Most systemic change efforts are fueled, in part, by long-standing frustration with the status quo. The problems are not new, and more than likely past attempts have been made to “solve” them. Procedural questions help us to explore: “How will this attempt be any different than what’s come before?”

“What will it take” questions help us get beyond “we tried that already and it doesn’t work.”

Sometimes, the answer to “what will it take” is “a change in leadership.” For example, when I asked different leaders within a community that struggled for decades with low economic growth what it would take for them to have confidence that a collective effort to improve economic growth would be worth their time, the answer was nearly unanimous: “A new leader at the helm of a key organization within the system.” The long-standing leader had plenty of strengths, but building trust with others wasn’t one of them. When the old leader retired, he was replaced with a trusted community leader and a new era of system change work began.

Many procedural questions boil down to a version of this question: “How do we decide how to decide?” While such a question is rarely asked within an organization where long-standing policies and procedures guide decision-making processes, that question is always on the mind of champions of system change. Those truly committed to transformation, will use the answers generated to these procedural questions to design decision-making processes that are transparent, inclusive and build trust.

When a trusted process is combined with compelling aspirational questions, commitment to the transformation journey grows.

## Aspirational Questions

Aspirational questions are the antidote to old, rotten questions that fuel unproductive conversations in our communities. For example, one community spent nearly a decade answering two rotten questions:

- Why aren’t there enough investors willing to take a risk on my new company?
- Why aren’t there enough entrepreneurs worthy of my investment?

The circular conversations generated by these two questions only produced heat and noise, while nothing meaningful change. Finally, after years of sound and fury, a new question emerged:

- What would our community look like when we had both more investors prepared to invest in early stage companies and more high-growth potential early-stage companies?

The answer to that question was so appealing that people began to ask procedural questions, such as:

“What would it take to attract more investors to our community?”

And foundational questions, such as:

“What are the critical factors that determine the success of early stage companies that aspire to high growth?”

Aspirational questions change the conversation. They change our understanding of what’s possible. They free us from the constraints of the status quo and embrace the unlimited possibilities of transformation.

Aspirational questions often start with phrases like:

- “How would we feel when”
- “What would others say about us when”
- “What else would be possible when”
- “What would our community look like when”

Communities stuck in the now or in the mythical past never give themselves the freedom to ask such questions. Those that benefit from the status quo work hard to dismiss or silence those that try to ask such questions. Champions of transformation need courage to ask such questions. And most of all they need to be able to listen deeply to the answers their new questions generate and commit to turning those answers into actions and outcomes.

## Conclusion

Inquiry alone won't result in transformation. But without new, compelling questions and the answers they spur we will be stuck in old conversations. New conversations push away from the familiar. They break us free from the forces that hold the status quo in place and enable us to begin to imagine a different design of our civic systems so that transformation is possible.