OUTCOME-DIRECTED THINKING: QUESTIONS THAT TURN THINGS AROUND

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"To ask questions is to be on the road to discovery...our minds operate very well in terms of questions...Questions turn things around..." adapted from Sam Keen

INTRODUCTION

Where is your focus in your life or at work right now? On what you want -- your possibilities, opportunities? Or on what’s wrong--your problems, limitations, constraints? Where you direct your attention and how you focus your thinking affects your ability to work effectively and achieve successful results.

Highly effective people invest little energy on their existing problem situations. Instead, they focus their attention and energy on their desired outcome or on what they want instead of these problems. They consistently see opportunities where others don't and get through and around obstacles that may stop moderately successful individuals (Garfield, 1980). A key reason for their ability to do this is that they direct their attention and see the world from the OUTCOME FRAME.

This mode of thinking is often referred to as "outcome thinking" (Fisher, 1981; Cashman, 1986; Bostrom, 1988) or being “goal-directed” (Locke and Lantham, 1990). High performers tend to naturally think in an outcome or goal-directed way (Garfield, 1988; Locke and Lantham, 1990; LaBorde, 1983). Outcome-directed thinking, as we call it, is one of the most powerful organizing processes one can learn. It is a process of asking internal or external questions which direct our or another’s mind, attention, and energy from a set of obstacles to a set of choices.

For example, if you ask "What's wrong?" or "What's the problem?" you will be focused on just that--the problem. If, on the other hand, you ask "What do I want?" or "What do I want instead of this problem?" both your behavior and your intentions are directed toward other possibilities or what you want instead of the problem.

A number of researchers and practitioners (Cameron-Bandler, Gordon, Lebeau, 1985; Andreas, 1988 and 1990; Fisher, 1981, 1988; Bostrom, 1988; Cashman, 1988; Clawson and Bostrom, 1991) have spend time modeling the outcome-directed thinking process used by high performers across a variety of fields. Such explorations have included looking carefully at the thinking patterns, strategies and behaviors of excellent therapists, Olympic athletes, effective facilitators, managers, leaders and teams. A key to high performance across all these contexts has been the ability to develop, articulate and stay focused on a compelling outcome.

This research, as well as, our own experience has indicated that outcome-directed thinking patterns are exceedingly learnable and applicable in any context. Let’s try a short learning exercise now and see how outcome-directed thinking works!
PROBLEM VS. OUTCOME-DIRECTED THINKING

The Exercise

Think of a problem that you have at work or home. For purposes of this exercise, make the problem one that has been disconcerting, but not so overwhelming that you will have to drop this article and go see a therapist!! On an emotional scale of 1-10, make the problem a 3-5. The idea here is to experience both sets of questions and note the differences in your behavior and in your feelings when you are answering them. Okay are you ready? Using the problem you selected above, answer the two sets of questions below either in your mind or on a sheet of paper. Simply answer the questions and pay attention to how you feel as you answer each question.

**Question Set I: Think of your problem and answer questions below.**

1. Why do you have this problem?
2. Who caused this problem?
3. Who is to blame for this problem?
4. What are the roadblocks or obstacles to solving this problem?
5. How hopeful are you that this problem will be solved?

Now take a few seconds to remember what it felt like answering these questions. Next take a deep breath and with the same problem in mind, answer the second set of questions in your head.

**Question Set II: Think of same problem and answer questions below.**

1. What do you want instead of this problem? (Your response will be your desired outcome.)
2. How will you know you have achieved this outcome? What will you see, hear, and feel to know you have achieved this outcome?
3. Imagine it is sometime in the future and you have the outcome you want. What have you gained by achieving this outcome? What have you lost?
4. What resources will you have to activate or acquire to achieve this outcome?
5. What is the first step you will take to achieve this outcome?

Take a few seconds now to notice how you were feeling and thinking when answering this second set of questions. Now compare your thinking process. How were your feelings and behavior different between question set I and II? What did you experience as you answered each set?

Most people report that they feel more positive when answering the second set of questions and that the first set of questions leaves them feeling “stuck” and bogged down. Was this your experience? It is interesting that simply asking a few different questions can have such a powerful effect on our experience! Let's explore why this happened.

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**Problem Thinking vs. Outcome-Directed Thinking**

The first set of questions is representative of **PROBLEM THINKING**.

Answering these problem questions directs your attention on what is wrong, on the past history and background of the problem. Problem thinking keeps people focused on where they have been, a procedure that is tedious, difficult and generally leads to limited movement. It is like driving your car by looking through the rear-view mirror, always looking at where you have been and never really knowing where you are going!

Although problem questions like the ones in Set I can be useful in clarifying a present problem situation, if all of one's efforts are focused only on the problem, most people report that problem thinking results in low energy, discouragement, frustration, "stuck" feeling, and a lack of confidence that the problem can be solved.

By contrast, **OUTCOME-DIRECTED THINKING**, which is represented by the second set of questions, keeps people focused on what they want or what they want instead of the problem. Rather than focusing on moving away from a problem, these outcome questions direct people to move positively toward what is wanted. Generally, using outcome-directed thinking makes one feel positive, motivated, full of energy and confident that the barriers or obstacles that might get in the way of a desired outcome can be removed. Rather than feeling stuck in a problem, the OUTCOME-DIRECTED THINKING process helps build useful compelling desired outcomes and helps create the actions and energy (motivations) to accomplish them.

The key difference between problem and outcome-directed thinking is this ability to GO FOR THE OUTCOME -- to move toward a compelling desired state and not get stuck in the problem state or simply move away from the problem. Another way to look at this is that the brain is an incredibly powerful honing mechanism. The brain will direct its energy and effort toward where we focus our attention. It will deploy all your resources to obtain what you want. If the outcomes are not clear, the brain gets confused. As you experienced in our little mental exercise above, being focused on the outcome or being in the outcome frame is a much better place to be both cognitively and emotionally!

**THE OUTCOME-DIRECTED THINKING MODEL AND QUESTIONS**

Outcome-directed thinking is a thought-action process used by high performers to build strong compelling outcomes and to get around the problems or obstacles that get in the way of their desired outcomes. The types of questions high performers ask themselves to remain in this outcome perspective or frame are represented by the sample questions we asked you in question Set II.
Questions are powerful guides that direct us to think in certain ways. Every question creates an internal frame of reference or perspective simply by the words used to ask it and by the way and context in which it is delivered. Questions also elicit some type of emotional reaction. Thus, the questions we ask and how we ask them will focus both attention and emotions in a certain way.

For example, we can ask the questions "Can we get the report done by Friday?" vs. "What will it take to get the report done by Friday?" Similar words, yet each inquiry directs us to think differently. The first question directs us to answer yes or no. The second question presupposes that the report will be done and that there are a series of steps we can take together to get it done. Notice we are using similar words, yet the second question presupposes we will attain our outcome and keeps us moving towards it! Now think about the questions we asked you in our little exercise, “What caused the problem?” vs. “What do you want instead of the problem?” and remember how those words directed us to think and feel differently. Questions are powerful guides, indeed. They can literally turn our mind, attention and world around!

The questions that make up the outcome-directed thinking process provide guides to focus on wants, possibilities, and opportunities rather than on limitations or obstacles. Individuals applying outcome-directed thinking build strong outcome images in their mind that are positive, precise, under their control, worthwhile and in “the right place to tap” to move them toward their desired state in a series of steps.

The OUTCOME-DIRECTED THINKING MODEL depicted in Figure 1 presents the outcome picture and outlines the four basic thinking patterns and the questions that high performers use to stay outcome focused, to keep moving toward what they want and to accomplish their desired state. These four key thinking patterns are flipping, well-formed, worthwhile, and the right outcome or what we call “where to tap” or mapping. The model presents these patterns in a somewhat linear fashion, although the patterns do not have to be utilized in a linear way once they are learned. Each thinking pattern is presented in depth next.

Thinking Pattern #1: Flipping Questions

The first thinking pattern is called FLIPPING. It is made up of questions which move or “flip” a person from focusing on the problem in their brain to building an image of a desired state or outcome.

The key Flipping question is "What do you want instead (of this problem)?" When we ask ourselves this question, we immediately have to stop thinking about our problem and start thinking about what we really want instead of the "mess". This question literally “flips” the individual from focusing on the problem to focusing on the desired state.
Figure 1: Outcome-Directed Thinking Model

Problem State (What’s Wrong)

Desired Outcome (What’s Wanted)

Resource

Flip: Want instead? Want?
As if have it - What have?

Action

Map? Stuck?

Where to Tap? Right Size?

- [Having outcome] Do for me/us? (Larger Outcomes)

- Stops me/us? [from having outcome]? Want instead? (Smaller Outcomes)

Well Formed?

- Positive?
- Under my/our control?
- Evidence?

Worthwhile?

- Gains/losses?
- Resources?
- Lead to higher level outcomes?

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There are two other ways to get someone to focus on outcomes. We can ask them directly: "What do you want?" Often when you ask someone directly, they still may give you a problem or what they really don’t want. Whenever someone is focusing on a problem, the key question to ask is “What do you want instead?” This question respects where they are in their mind/experience at the moment, focusing on the problem. If you ask someone “What to you want?” when they are focusing on a problem, the question may not make sense or confuse them.

A third way to get to an outcome is using an “As If” time switch. High performers have the ability to construct a full, rich image (what they see, hear, feel) of what they want. Their image is so vivid and compelling that they can literally project themselves into the future situation and visualize themselves getting what they want! For example, when planning a meeting, people who naturally use outcome-directed thinking patterns tend to "see" themselves sitting in the meeting; they "see" people responding favorably; they "hear" the dialogue taking place; they anticipate rough spots and conflicts, etc. In other words, they can act "As If" they have already facilitated the meeting. This “As If” technique is another way of flipping from the problem and directing attention and energy toward the desired outcome. To use this technique, pretend “As If” it is the future and you have already obtained your outcome. Then ask “What did you attain?”

Thinking Pattern # 2: Where To Tap: The “Right ” Outcome

There is another set of questions outcome-directed thinkers ask themselves in developing compelling and useful outcomes. This thinking pattern helps them work on or “tap” the right outcome. The “right” outcome is the outcome that will provide the most movement or leverage for the system (person, department, team, etc.) to move toward the desired state. Sometimes an outcome is positive and specific, yet the individual feels stuck—not sure how to proceed, or the person is overwhelmed by the outcome or is just not motivated to do anything about it.

The mapping questions are listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHERE TO TAP: RIGHT OUTCOME</th>
<th>KEY QUESTIONS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• More (larger) Options (Larger Frame, focus on higher level outcomes)</td>
<td>• What will having this outcome do for me/us?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fewer (smaller) options (Smaller Frame, Focus on lower level outcomes)</td>
<td>• What stop me/us from getting this outcome? (results in problem or obstacle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do I/we want instead? (flip to outcome)</td>
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High performing individuals have an outcome space/map in their minds which represents relationships between outcomes. If people focus on and use this outcome space, they will rarely be stuck because they have the ability to ask questions which direct them to expand their options (moving to larger frame/higher level outcomes) when they are not motivated or to limit their options (moving to smaller frame outcomes) when they feel overwhelmed.

Most often, if an individual cannot achieve or move on an outcome it is because the person is focused on one outcome and has not thought about or “mapped” the whole “outcome space”. Thinking about and looking at the entire outcome space is a useful technique for mapping out the "big" picture and finding the right place (outcome) to tap. The where to tap /up and down questions can be used to build an outcome map that represents the outcome space. When people develop and use outcome maps, they will: never be stuck, always have a useful outcome to work on; be flexible, determined and focused; and be more motivated and resourceful.

**Moving to a Higher Level Outcome**

Einstein once noted that it is difficult to solve a problem at the same level from which the problem was created. One of the underlying premises of Outcome-Directed Thinking is that every outcome exists in a larger context. If an individual or group is stuck at one level, simply enlarging the outcome or moving up to a larger frame or higher level outcomes creates more options. In the larger frame, one is more likely to discover higher level wants that can be satisfied by a variety of options and not just by the original outcome alone.

The key question outcome-directed thinkers ask themselves to move up to larger frame outcome is "If I get this outcome, what will having this outcome do for me?" We call this the “UP” question. The response to this question is a larger frame, higher level outcome. This higher frame outcome is what is even more important than the original outcome. The higher level outcome is the outcome the current outcome I am focusing on helps me achieve. In other words, the higher level outcome is the motivation behind the current outcome, or what motivates me to move toward the current outcome. Notice that each time we ask the up question, “What will having that do for me?” we are really discovering the higher level or motivation for accomplishing the current outcome.

Let’s take an example where the problem is “I have a messy, chaotic office”. Asking the flip question “What do you want instead?” gives us an initial outcome “I want a clean, organized office.” If I move up to a larger frame outcome and ask "What will having a clean, organized office do for me?" I might answer, it would "give me more access to information". Then if I move up to the next higher level and ask "and what would having more access to information do for me?" I might answer "Improve response time to clients and colleagues". And if I ask, "What will having better response time do for me?" I might then answer "Gives me a sense of accomplishment." Finally, if I ask the up question one more time, “What does a sense of accomplishment do for me? I might respond: it makes me feel that "I have made an impact/difference”. See Figure 2 for the outcome map capturing the answers to these questions.
Figure 2
Outcome Map: A Personal Example

Impact/Make a Difference

Higher Level Outcome
Sense of Accomplishment

Higher Level Outcome
Improved Response Time to Colleagues & Clients

WHAT WILL HAVING THAT DO FOR ME/US?

Higher Level Outcome
Improved Access to Information

The “UP” Questions

WHAT WILL HAVING THAT DO FOR ME/US?

Want Clean, Organized Office

Stops Us?
No File Cabinet

Want Instead?
File Cabinet

Stops Us?
No Folks to help move

Want Instead?
Contact-get Movers

Stops Us?
No Dumpster To Put Trash

Want Instead?
Dumpster

Stops Us?
Have not Contacted City

Want Instead?
Contact City

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When to Ask the UP Questions

There are times when moving up to a larger frame outcome can be useful. It is helpful to ask the Up question when: 1) you do not feel motivated to do something you want or need to do, 2) you feel boxed in or you see no alternatives to get you moving, 3) you know what's best, yet can't seem to move forward on it or, 4) when you find yourself in a conflict situation.

How Far to move Up

When asking the Up question to enlarge an outcome or to move to a higher level outcome, how do you know when you have moved up to a high enough outcome? Generally there are two rules of thumb applied by outcome-directed thinkers: 1) When you can generate new alternatives readily in order to move toward the larger frame outcome and/or 2) When you "feel" motivated to take action. Once you have reached a larger frame/higher outcome that fits one of these two rules, you can begin to explore that larger frame outcome.

Notice whenever you ask the UP question, you are getting to the outcomes that are really important to people -- what motivates them to go after that outcome. So when you continue to ask the Up question you will usually get answers like "satisfaction," "accomplishment", "impact", "challenge". These are higher level outcomes that represent core values of the person. The outcomes below an outcome represent a series of choices for attaining that outcome. For example, now there might be many more ways other than having a clean organized office that will give me a sense of accomplishment. Thus, asking the Up question, "What will having that do for me?", gives you more options or alternatives. (See Figure 2)

Moving to a Smaller Frame Outcome

High performing individuals consistently get through and around obstacles or barriers to their outcome. When they are faced with an overwhelming obstacle, they will move to a smaller frame outcome by asking themselves questions that make their outcomes less overwhelming. In other words, they break down their overwhelming outcome into more manageable pieces or smaller outcomes.

To move around obstacles to an outcome, outcome-directed thinkers ask themselves two “down” questions. The first down question is "What stops me/us from getting this outcome?" Notice the answer to that question will be an obstacle or problem that gets in the way of the outcome one is trying to accomplish.

Once this obstacle or problem is identified, outcome thinkers will ask the second down question or flip question to turn this smaller problem into a smaller outcome. "Now what do I/we want instead (of this problem/obstacle)?" The answer to this question actually moves an individual to a smaller frame outcome or a smaller step to accomplishing the original outcome. Asking the down questions helps people not feel so overwhelmed by the obstacles or barriers to their outcome. It also helps people stay focused on only those obstacles that get in the way of the
desired outcome, rather than every problem they have!

Let’s continue with our clean organized office example, if we ask the first **down** question,  
**“What stops me from having a clean organized office?”** I might answer with the following list of obstacles: no file cabinet, no folks to help me move furniture, no dumpster!  Then when we ask, the second **down** question, **"What do you want instead of these obstacles?"** I might answer: A file cabinet from Check Equipment; two guys to help me move furniture; and a dumpster from the city on my property for two weeks.

We can continue this process with the smaller outcomes. For example, the obstacle that stops me from having a dumpster is that I have not contacted the city.  **“What do I want instead?”** is to contact the city. These answers are smaller frame more manageable outcomes I can begin to accomplish to move me towards the original outcome of a clean, organized office. (See Figure 2)

You can continue to ask these two **down** questions until you identify a smaller outcome that is a more manageable step to your desired outcome.  The idea here is to keep moving toward your outcome, even though it may require smaller steps to get there.

When asking the **down** questions to make the outcome smaller, how do you know when your outcome is small enough?  Generally you need to repeat the down questions until you reach a smaller outcome that seems (feels) manageable to you and provides an opportunity to keep moving.

**When to Ask the “Down” Questions**

There are a number of times when asking the down questions to create a smaller frame outcomes is useful. It is helpful when: 1) your original outcome seems too big, too vague, or too overwhelming; 2) you feel the outcome is unmanageable; or 3) you are really motivated yet you can't seem to get started or don't know where to start, 4) or if your original outcome seems totally out of your control.

**Mapping the Outcome Space: Finding Where to Tap**

Outcome-directed thinkers use these **up and down** questions to **map** an outcome space such as the one in Figure 2.  **“Mapping the outcome space”** means to literally create a visual map or picture of the set of outcomes, which includes the motivation or energy for doing outcome, those outcomes above the initial outcome; and the solution steps or smaller outcomes, those below the initial outcome that will lead to the initial outcome. If you pick any outcome in an outcome map, the outcomes above it that it is linked to, the outcome’s higher level outcomes, are the motivation for doing this outcome. For example, one of the reasons a clean, organized offices is wanted is because it provides better access to information. Similarly, the outcomes below it are solutions or action steps for accomplishing the outcome. For example, getting a file cabinet will help me achieve a clean organized office.
When someone is trying to accomplish any outcome, mapping the space around that outcome can be a useful way of identifying and exploring where the leverage points are (knowing where to tap the system to get it moving). In other words, when outcome-directed thinkers map the outcome space, they are really looking for the “best” or right outcome to work on -- that is the outcome that creates movement towards their desired state outcome.

Figure 2 presents an example of an outcome map for the initial outcome "a clean, organized office". You will notice that by mapping the outcome space you also uncover outcome chains or the linkages between the outcomes. For example, an outcome chain would be: “getting file cabinet” leads to “a clean, organized office” which leads to "access to information", which leads to "improved response time for clients and colleagues", which leads to "sense of accomplishment", which leads to "having impact/making a difference".

With an outcome map, you can begin to see more clearly what leads to what or what gets in the way of the outcome. It is also important to note here that this is an example of an outcome map - do not be limited by the numbers of boxes on this map. You may add as many "up" and "down" or lateral boxes as you need to map a particular outcome space.

Once you have built an outcome map like Figure 2 which outcome do I choose to focus on? In the previous sections, we have outlined when you want to move to higher level outcomes from current outcome you are focusing on, or move to lower level outcomes. For example, if you were unmotivated to pursue an outcome, you would look at higher outcomes to clarify your motivation and open new choices. In Figure 2, if I am not motivated to clean my office, I can remind myself that this is important because it will provide me with better access to information. I can also explore other ways to improve access to information besides cleaning my office. If you are overwhelmed or just can’t see how you can accomplish something you want, you need to move down the map and focus on smaller outcomes that will get you what you want. Cleaning our offices is very overwhelming to us. Thus, we immediately start focusing on smaller outcomes that will lead to clean office such as buying a new file cabinet. In general, once you construct a map, you want to focus on the outcome that will have the most impact. It will be the outcome that has the most positive energy/emotion associated with it.

Thinking Pattern #3: The Well-Formed Check

Thinking patterns 1 and/or 2 provide us with an initial outcome to focus on. The last two patterns make sure that this outcome is stated in a form that leads to compelling action. The third thinking pattern is called the WELL-FORMED CHECK. Outcome-directed thinkers “check” their outcomes to make sure that they are structured (written or stated) in a way that will help them attain their outcomes. An outcome is most useful and obtainable or WELL-FORMED if it meets the following checks:
The **POSITIVE** check means that the outcome is stated in positive language. For example, if I have a messy office and someone asks me "What do you want instead?" and I answer, "I don't want a messy office" what I represent in my head based on that negative statement is still "a messy office"---exactly what I don't want. Rather, for an outcome to be well-formed, it must be stated in positive language. So what I want is "a clean, organized office". Stated in these positive terms, what I represent in my brain is exactly that---an image of a well organized clean office space! Thus, the key well-formed question here is "**Is the outcome stated in positive language?**" If the outcome is not stated in positive language, ask the **flip** question ... "Now we know what you don't want (don't want messy office), so what do you want instead (of a messy office)?"

The **EVIDENCE** or measurement check helps create the “proof” or evidence that one will see, hear, and feel when the outcome is achieved. A useful outcome must include specific, concrete evidence or measurements. In other words, you must state what you will specifically see, hear, or feel to know that the outcome has been accomplished. For instance, returning to the example above, if my outcome is "I want a clean, organized office" then my **EVIDENCE** is that I will **see** a clear desktop, files and books removed from the floor and placed in file cabinets and bookshelves, I will **hear** myself say "what a clean office--what a difference, and I will **feel** a sense of relief. The key **EVIDENCE** questions are is "**How will I know when I have my outcome?**" "**What will I see, hear, and feel to know that I have accomplished my outcome?**"

The **CONTROL** check means you must state your outcome in terms of something you (or your group) can actually do, change, or directly influence. So continuing with the example, I would ask myself “Is having a clean and organized office under my direct control? Can I do it, change it, or influence it in someway?” The answer, of course, is absolutely--it's my office, my mess and I am can definitely fix it. Thus the key **CONTROL** question is "**Is this outcome within my (or your) control?**"
If the outcome is not within my own or the group's control, then I must reestablish an outcome which I can change, directly influence, or have control over. For example, I cannot make an employee or associate act/behave in a certain way. ("I want Mary to change.") I can, however, change the way I respond to Mary when she does X behavior, i.e. I want to change the way I respond to Mary. This outcome is under my control. A good source for identifying outcomes that are under your control is to examine the outcome map for possible outcomes.

Thinking Pattern # 4: The Worthwhile Check

The 4th core thinking pattern of Outcome-Directed Thinking is the WORTHWHILE CHECK. The questions that make up the Worthwhile Check are essential for creating the motivation or emotional energy which will help move an individual or group in the direction of the desired state. In other words, if something is really worth it, we will do it! The critical checks and questions of the worthwhile pattern are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORTHWHILE CHECKS</th>
<th>KEY QUESTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Gains and Losses</td>
<td>• Pretend as if it is sometime in the future and you and obtained your outcome. What did I/We gain? What have I/We lost?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lead to higher level outcomes?</td>
<td>• Will this outcome lead to my higher outcomes? Check higher level outcomes on map.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Resources</td>
<td>• What will it take to get this outcome? What resources must I acquire or activate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Time Frame</td>
<td>• Can I accomplish the outcome within the time frame?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• IS THIS OUTCOME REALLY WORTH HAVING?</td>
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The key question here is "Is this outcome really worth it?" In order to answer that question, several other questions must be asked. The first worthwhile check question to ask would be "What will I gain or lose if I get what I want?" When asking the questions about gains and losses, it is critical to really step into the outcome/desired state “as if” you are already there.

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Now look at the gains and losses from this perspective ... I already have my outcome ...

What have I gained? Lost? Putting yourself fully into your desired outcomes using AS IF helps you clearly see the opportunities and consequences of what it might be like actually getting the outcome! Create a list of gains and losses.

For example, when I have cleaned and organized my office, I would gain 1) efficiency--the ability to lay my hands on things more quickly 2) effectiveness--the ability to respond to my colleagues and clients more fully and 3) time--not having to spend the extra time unearthing the treasures I need for the completion of a project or training design!! What I might potentially lose are 1) the sense of familiarity---the comfort of piles of information, and 2) the time cleaning.

Additionally, finding out if this outcome is really worth it in the larger scheme of things is essential. If you have created an outcome map, check higher level outcomes on map. **Will this current outcome really lead to my/our higher level outcomes?** If you have not created map, ask the up question: "What will getting this outcome do for me/us?" Some of the answers you get from gains and losses analysis will be higher level outcomes. Looking at them in terms of an outcome map allows you to look at gains/benefits in terms of their relationship to each other.

The first two worthwhile check questions look at gains and losses while the next two focus on the resources it will take to get the outcome. The third worthwhile question addresses the resources it would take to get the outcome: "What will it take--resources--to get it?" For example, going for the outcome of a clean organized office would require that I obtain the following resources: a filing cabinet, a large trash container and arranging for several folks to help move furniture. The final worthwhile question addresses the resource of time: is it possible to accomplish the outcome within a particular time frame -- "Can I really get this done in this time frame?"

After answering all of the questions outlined, return to the overall question "Is this outcome really worthwhile or worth having?" At this stage you should have a "yes" or "no" answer based on your answers to the four questions: are the gains/higher level outcomes greater than losses and resources it will take to accomplish the outcome. The questions in the worthwhile pattern are critical in exploring the level of commitment and emotional energy one is willing to expend to accomplish the outcome. Without such committed energy, even the best outcomes cannot be accomplished!

**HOW TO BEGIN OUTCOME-DIRECTED THINKING**

Table 2 presents a summary of the general outcome questions we have been discussing. Generally, people present you with a problem or issue and therefore the flipping question is a good starting point. Once you have flipped someone to an outcome, you can begin to ask if it is well-formed and worthwhile or move directly to building an outcome map. Many times you may realize that the outcome "seems" too big or too small right off the bat. If this is the case, creating an outcome map in your head or on paper by asking the up and down questions can help you find a more appropriate outcome.

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TABLE 2
GENERAL OUTCOME QUESTIONS

**Statement-Flip**
**Outcome:** What do I want?
  What do I want instead?

**Well-Formed Questions**
**Positive:** Is the outcome stated in positive terms?
**Control:** Is the outcome within my/our control?
**Evidence:** How will I know when I have my outcome?
  What will I see, hear, and feel to know I have it?

**Worthwhile Questions**
**Gains/Losses:** What will happen if I get this outcome? [AS IF have it]
  What did I gain? What did I lose?
**Resources:** What will it take to get this outcome? Worth the effort? Is it possible in time frame?
**Representative:** Check larger outcomes? Will this outcome lead to my higher-level outcomes?

**Where to Tap: Right Outcome (Stuck---Map)**
**Larger (Higher level outcomes):** What will having this outcome do for me?
**Smaller (Lower level outcomes):** What stops me?
  What do I want instead?
Once you have learned and practiced the outcome-directed thinking process, you will find your "own words" for asking questions. You do not have to use the exact words we use. However, you need to make sure your question will gather the right information. You will also develop the skill for sequencing questions to fit each situation or context. Remember, outcome-directed thinking is a generative, adaptable model. The four core thinking patterns, two pictures (outcome model, Figure 1; and outcome map, Figure 2), and the outcome questions that go with them can be used across many contexts and in many ways. Be creative!

Facilitating With Outcome-Directed Thinking -- An Example

Outcome-directed thinking is applicable everywhere! It is especially useful in interactions where you are helping other people identify and accomplish what they want. For example, it is very useful in designing outcomes for a meeting. It is also useful in facilitating a meeting too. This example illustrates how outcome-directed thinking can be use in facilitating a meeting or any interaction.

The two facilitation scenarios below are built upon the same facts and the players are the same. The only difference is the frame the facilitator employs in responding to the meeting situation -- the problem frame vs. the outcome frame.

Scenario One: The Problem Frame

The facilitator walks into the meeting room, opens the project meeting and asks the group:

Facilitator: "How's it going?"

Group Member: "Oh, really not so well."

Facilitator: "What's wrong?"

Group Member: "The project, that's what's wrong."

Facilitator: "What is it this time?"

Group Leader: "We're just not moving forward. Max still isn't following procedures to get us the requirements so we can move to the next project stage. We've told him over and over ... etc., etc." (Max is the primary user of the system the project team is developing.)

There follows a discussion of all the things Max is doing wrong, has ever done wrong, how he doesn't listen, doesn't try, isn't motivated, all the things the group has tried that haven't worked. (Sound familiar?) Finally, the facilitator scans the crowded meeting room and, sighs.

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Facilitator: "Well, I guess you have a real problem. We'll have to talk to Max again. It may not do much good, but I guess that's the next step. Let's set up a time to do this."

End of Project Meeting.

The group may feel temporarily less irritated (and less responsible), but they also feel vaguely dissatisfied because the situation hasn't really been handled. The facilitator, on the other hand, isn't very thrilled with the group, either. The group is still stuck on the project, and she wonders how the group will ever resolve this ongoing issue. Both have a nagging feeling that "talking to Max" probably won't do much good.

This scenario is an illustration of the problem frame. Both the group and facilitator are focused on what is wrong -- on the problem. It is as though they have both mentally placed a big caption reading "We have problem" across their situation -- and everything they discuss is framed by this perspective.

The facilitator has helped set this frame by asking the question, "What's wrong?" This invites the group to dump a long story about present and past manifestations of the problem, history, reasons why it happens, who's to blame, what has been tried and has not worked. The problem frame helps both facilitator and group dig themselves in deeper -- making less progress than ever. In their discouragement, it is harder to see any good alternatives, so the facilitator resorts to having a "group talk with Max" a strategy that has not worked before.

Contrast the scenario above now with Scenario Two, which is the same situation, except the facilitator sets an Outcome Frame, which takes the meeting off in a radically different direction.

**Scenario Two: The Outcome Frame**

Facilitator: "How's it going?"

Group Member: "Well, really, not so well."

Facilitator: (probes, but without problem focus): "Really? What's happening?"

Group Leader: "Max messed up the project again. We're at our wits end. We talked to him about the procedure before and getting the requirements to us and he just doesn't listen."

Facilitator: (First offers understanding, then shifts to outcome focus): "Sounds really frustrating. But tell me, what is it that the group wants Max to do that he's not doing now?" (What do you want instead?)

Group: "We want him to be able to follow procedures and get the requirements in on time."
The group continues to discuss which procedures specifically Max needs to follow, and what he needs to do to move the project forward. They also discuss what might be stopping Max from getting these things done and what are some smaller outcomes he could work on. They also ask the question “What would following these procedures do for Max?” to determine what might motivate Max. They may use this information to build an outcome map. Once the outcomes are clear, the facilitator shifts to what the group can do, and what resources are available to help the group try a new approach with Max to get him to follow procedures and get the requirements to them.

Finally:

Facilitator: "Okay, to backtrack what we've been talking about ... We know that Max has not been following our procedures and that he has not returned the revised list of the requirements as we requested. So given this situation, what we want Max to do is follow our procedures and give us the requirements, right? Of course we cannot make Max behave in that way (we don't control Max). However, we have outlined a number of approaches that are within our control. First, Barry and Alice are going to go over our procedures with Max to make sure he is informed and he understands them. Second, Alan is going to find out what stops Max from turning in the revised requirements. We have some ideas about what might be getting in the way but not real information on this from Max directly.

Does this about sum it up?

Group Leader: "Right. I think this has a chance of helping Max. Of course, he's got to cooperate, but we want to do all we can to help him succeed and meet our deadline. We can start this afternoon."

It is obvious that the group could have had other outcomes for Max, as well. Maybe Max needs to be re-trained; or given a warning; or "replaced." After all, the larger outcome here is to finish the project and to satisfy the customers Max represents.

In Scenario Two, both the facilitator and the group are moving in a constructive direction toward a specific outcome. They waste no energy on bemoaning the problem or placing blame. They simply acknowledge the problem, and then immediately ask. "Okay, what do we want to have happening here instead?"

And they answer the question with specific, positive outcomes that are achievable -- that is, they have some influence, control or resources to make them happen. This starts to help them see options they might have overlooked. And they place the outcome in the larger perspective of customer satisfaction. Also they keep in mind that if, after they've done their best, and if Max just doesn't work out, there are still other ways to achieve the larger outcome.

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SUMMARY AND CLOSING COMMENTS

As we noted in Sam Keen's quotation at the beginning of this article "to ask questions" truly places us on "the road to discovery" and can absolutely "turn things around". To ask outcome questions turns our attention and energy toward where we want to go--our desired state and keeps the journey achievable using a series of small, compelling steps. Consistently operating in the outcome frame is one of the most important facilitative competencies you can learn. It is a core competency for managing effective interactions in any situation.

The Outcome-Directed Thinking model can help direct an individual or group to move positively toward what they want. Developing the capability to utilize the outcome frame and ask the outcome questions may be the most powerful skills we can master for both our personal and organizational lives!

So what will you be focusing on when you put down this article, your problems or What you want instead? This simple and powerful question along with the other outcome questions has the potential to turn your life and work around!!

REFERENCES


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