

# *Wicked Questions*

## The Basic Idea

Wicked questions are used to expose the assumptions which we hold about an issue or situation. Articulating these assumptions provides an opportunity to see the patterns of thought and surface the differences in a group. These patterns and differences can be used to discover common ground or to find creative alternatives for stubborn problems.

Wicked questions invite participation in both forming the questions and searching for solutions to address them.

## Potential Context for use:

- to change the role of leadership from having the answers to having the questions
- when innovative solutions are needed for 'stuck' problems
- when there are polarized positions in a group and there seem to be only either-or answers
- to open up possibilities which are not intuitively obvious
- to bring in new information to a problem or issue by exposing the differences
- to openly contrast goals and actual circumstances
- to promote ongoing inquiry
- when the context seems overwhelming and confusing and the group needs an approach to make sense of the patterns
- to make the 'undiscussable' discussable - to articulate the assumptions held by members in a group

## Description:

Wicked questions do not have an obvious answer. They are used to expose the assumptions which shape our actions and choices. They are questions that articulate the embedded and often contradictory assumptions we hold about an issue, context or organization.

A question is 'wicked' if there is an embedded paradox or tension in the question. The embedded tension or paradox is an opportunity to tune to edge of chaos. This is an area of great creativity and innovation.

A wicked question is not a trick question. With a trick question, someone knows the answer. Wicked questions do not have obvious answers. Their value lies in their capacity to open up options, inquiry and surface the fundamental issues that need to be addressed.

The paradoxes or tensions are often found in the implicit assumptions we hold about a context, issue or person. Exposing these assumptions in a question is often both uncomfortable and a relief. It is uncomfortable because the myths we create to bury our assumptions often seem more acceptable and defensible. They are the right thing to say. For example, it is popular today to talk about empowered front-line people. But in many cases, these words are not really accurate. We have created policies or procedures, such as needing supervisory approval for minor expenditures, which are the antithesis of empowerment.

Wicked questions invite participation in both forming the questions and searching for solutions to address them. Leaders can create the questions which can be used to promote a search for local solutions. They can be used to create the conditions for inquiry and innovation at all levels of the organization.

For Example:

*A Children's Mental Health Centre in Canada argued that their purpose was about preventing mental health problems in children. They also believed in being customer focused. They asked themselves this wicked question: "How does focusing on our clients limit the impact of what we do?"*

### **Wicked Questions for Tonight's FEED Session:**

- **How can our busy lives and crowded schedules greatly enhance our ability and willingness to serve as mentors?**
- **How is it that being in the center of the vortex of clinical education sharpens one's vision for serving as a mentor?**