

Questions that Matter: A Tool for Working In Complex Situations

The following questions are designed to help evaluators, planners, and implementers of change initiatives as they work with complex situations and systems. The questions draw attention to multiple dynamics, perspectives, and paradigms within complex systems/situations.

Conditions for Adaptive Systems	Example Questions to Ask
Boundaries: Boundaries are demarcations that create a region or entity. Boundaries can refer to physical entities, organizational identity, social systems, rules of conduct, and other demarcations. Boundaries are often permeable to allow exchange with the environment and also impermeable in that they distinguish the system or other entity from its environment.	What boundaries are changing or need to change between the work/project and its context?
	How are the boundaries changing among the organized, self-organizing, and unorganized dynamics of the work?
	What changes in boundaries would bring new creative energy or stabilizing energy into the work?
Relationships (interconnections): Relationships refers to the connections and exchanges that exist among bounded parts of a system. Interconnections/relationships tend to be key aspects of forming patterns.. The connections may be as, or more, important than the entities making up a system. Some relationships form systems such as hierarchical systems, networks, families, communities, and social groups. Cause and effect relationships are another type of relationship.	What relationships appear to be contributing to meaningful results or conditions?
	What are the relationships/connections among the stakeholders?
	How might changes in relationships affect the short and long term outcomes or general direction of the work?
	What feedback loops are built into the project/initiative and the larger system?
Differences/diversity/energy: Differences create energy. It may be negative or positive from various perspectives but the energy gives the potential for movement. Diversity tends to create energy. When looking for differences that matter, look for the nature of the energy within a bounded region.	Is there sufficient diversity in the self-organizing units to stimulate creative ways of addressing challenging issues?
	What are the important power dynamics in the work or between the work and the context?
	Where is energy being created? Where is it stagnating?
	Where could scattered energy be consolidated and directed to the desired end?
Perspectives: Perspectives refers to world views and purposes. Different stakeholders may have different perspectives on a given situation although all those within a given stakeholder group do not necessarily has the same perspective.	What variation in perspectives (worldviews and purposes) are present within the work and what are the patterns of where they exist?
	What variations exist in whose expertise is valued?
	What shifts are occurring in the acceptance and spread of new project philosophies?
	Are stakeholders missing or avoiding an important perspective?
Focus/direction: Focus may refer to specific short and/or long term outcomes that are sought, a general direction in which a system is moving, or some combination of these.	What short and long term outcomes are being sought? How do they vary across time and location?
	When is it important to seek a general direction rather than

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	specific short and long term outcomes?
	Are the criteria for success changing?
	What new desired outcomes or directions are being identified?
	What are the few important things to focus on for the next phase of the work?
Resources: Resources refers to the human, financial, physical, and other resources that can be used to move in a desired direction.	What resources are available to contribute to the desired direction?
	What shifts are needed in resources to continue toward the goal and/or in a desired manner?
Time and Location: Change happens over time and may vary depending on the location in which it is occurring.	What is the rate and nature of changes/differences in patterns or conditions across time?
	What is the variation in rate and the nature of changes/differences in patterns or conditions in different locations?

Questions that Matter: A Tool for Working in Complex Situations is part of a series of tools developed by InSites (www.insites.org). The series is designed to support those engaged in learning, inquiry, and practice within complex social settings.

Reference:

Parsons, B. and Jessup, P. (2009). "Questions that Matter: A Tool for Working in Complex Situations". Ft. Collins, CO: InSites.