

FACILITATING THE QUESTION FORMULATION TECHNIQUE (QFT)

The Question Formulation Technique (QFT) is a step-by-step process that allows all people to produce their own questions, work with different types of questions, and strategize on how to use their questions. This guide helps you, the facilitator, lead an individual participant or a group of participants through the process.

It is designed to be a very simple process. But as simple as it is, you may discover that leading the process, or, as we call it, “facilitating” the process, requires some changes in the way you may be used to leading a process or the way you may help people by giving explanations. The process will also feel different for participants, who will be doing a lot of the thinking on their own.

Two roles in this process:

- 1. Facilitator:** the person who just leads the process that allows people to ASK THEIR OWN QUESTIONS.
- 2. Participant:** the person you are leading through the process. Their role at each stage of the QFT is to do ALL the thinking work.

How will you know you are facilitating the process well?

- You have one role: to give instructions for each step. *If you are just giving the instructions and not explaining or suggesting ideas or questions, you are facilitating the process correctly.*
- This might be difficult for you and it might be difficult for the participants as well. They may want you to explain what you want them to ask or say. You may want to be helpful by giving examples or commenting on their questions. However, the QFT is designed so that the participants do the thinking for themselves and not depend on you for suggestions or approval. Even if participants struggle at first, they should be doing all the thinking, asking the questions and talking, except for when you are giving instructions.
- The QFT is designed so that *participants* build their own question-asking muscles.

Facilitation Timeframes for Individuals and Groups

When you use the QFT with one person, you can do it quickly in 15 minutes or less.

- Use the template “Asking Your Own Questions”

When you use the QFT with groups of people, you can go through the whole process in 30-40 minutes.

- You may want to use chart paper so participants can follow the work being done with the questions. Have one person in the group be the “scribe” and write the questions.
- Here are some estimates of the time you will need for each part of the process:
 - Discussing the rules, 2 minutes;
 - Producing questions, 4-5 minutes;
 - Working with closed and open-ended questions, 5 minutes;
 - Prioritizing questions, 4 minutes;
 - Creating an action plan, 4 minutes (optional);
 - Sharing the work, 5 minutes (optional);
 - Reflection, 4-5 minutes.

STEPS TO FACILITATE THE QUESTION FORMULATION TECHNIQUE

1. DEVELOP A QUESTION FOCUS

A Question Focus (QFocus) is a brief statement, problem, or concern that serves as a “focus” for participants to ask questions about. It can be a topic you want to discuss with participants or can be a concern that participants may want to think about and understand better.

Here are examples of a QFocus:

- At the doctor’s office: My stomach is hurting.
- At the school: My child is struggling in school.
- Getting benefits: Applying for healthcare benefits.

One very important rule to make the process work: *the QFocus should NOT be a question.*

If the QFocus is a question, participants may try to answer it instead of coming up with their own questions.

Developing QFocus:

- Designing a QFocus yourself: If you are leading a session or have a specific goal for using the QFT, you will probably design a QFocus ahead of time. You can create one that will get participants easily asking questions about the topic or concern you want them to be thinking about.
- Creating a QFocus with participant: When you use the QFT with an individual, it may be best to hear from them about what they want to talk about or why they came to the office/program where you are working. That concern can then serve as the QFocus.

2. INTRODUCE THE PROCESS

Let the participants know you will be sharing a simple process for asking more and better questions.

- If the participants are coming up with the QFocus, do that step now. Say, *what would you like to ask questions about?* Then, go to step B. and introduce the rules for producing questions (see below).
- If, instead, YOU are providing them with the QFocus, tell them you will be providing a topic for asking questions. But before you give them the QFocus, go to step B. and introduce the rules for producing questions (see below).

3. INTRODUCE THE RULES FOR PRODUCING QUESTIONS

Say to your participant,

I want to share four rules that will make it much easier to come up with some questions.

1. Ask as many questions as you can.

2. Do not stop to answer, judge, or discuss questions.

3. Write down every question exactly as stated.

4. Change any statements into questions.

A COUPLE OF TIPS FOR WHEN YOU'RE WORKING WITH INDIVIDUALS:

- For rule #3, ask the participant to write the questions exactly as they come to mind.
 - You can write down the questions or ask participants to write them. Make sure the participant feels comfortable writing the questions.
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TIP FOR WHEN YOU'RE WORKING WITH GROUPS:

- For rule #3, the scribe (the person chosen to write all the questions) should not edit the questions that people contribute. If the scribe is a participant, they should also add questions to the list.
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Give participants a moment to think about and discuss one or both of these questions:

- *What might be difficult about following these rules?*
- *Which of these rules might be difficult for you to follow? Why?*

4. PRODUCING QUESTIONS

State the Question Focus.

Instruct participants to ask as many questions as possible about the Question Focus, to follow the rules, and to number the questions.

SOME TIPS:

- It is VERY important that you do not give examples of questions.
 - Do not explain the Question Focus when introducing it.
 - Allow time for participants to generate as many questions as possible.
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Don't worry if people are not coming up with a lot of questions. This may be the first time that they are doing this kind of thinking. If you notice that they are not coming up with many questions, help them focus on a word or two in the Question Focus and to ask questions related to those words.

5. IMPROVING QUESTIONS

Now you will facilitate some work with closed and open-ended questions.

- Provide definitions for two types of questions: closed and open-ended.
 - **Closed-ended questions** - can be answered with **"yes"** or **"no"** or with one word. It may be helpful to explain that closed-ended questions often begin with **"is"**, **"does"**, **"can"**, and **"are"**.
 - **Open-ended questions** - require an explanation. It may be helpful to explain that open-ended questions often begin with **"why"**, **"how"**, and **"what"**.
- Ask participants to categorize the questions as closed or open-ended by marking them with a **"C"** or an **"O"**.
- Ask participants each of these questions, one at a time:
 - *What are some advantages of closed-ended questions?*
 - *What are some disadvantages?*
 - *What are some advantages of open-ended questions?*
 - *What are some disadvantages?*

If you have more than one group of participants, you can ask these questions to the entire group. A couple of responses to each question will be enough.

- Ask participants to practice changing questions from one type to another as follows:
 - Change one closed-ended question into an open-ended question.
 - Change one open-ended question into a closed-ended question.

6. PRIORITIZING QUESTIONS

Instruct participants to review the list and choose the three most important questions to them—their three priority question—while keeping in mind the Question Focus.

Sometimes you will want to change your prioritization instructions. For example, you may want to ask them to think about what questions they need answers to first, or what questions they want to ask of a particular person.

7. CREATING AN ACTION PLAN (OPTIONAL STEP)

Discuss with participants or have them work on what they want to do next and how they will use their questions. *What will be done with the priority questions?* What information would they like to get? How will they go about getting it?

TIP FOR WHEN YOU'RE WORKING WITH GROUPS:

- Ask participants to name the specific piece of information followed immediately by what they will do to get it.
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8. SHARING THE WORK (OPTIONAL STEP - ONLY FOR USE IN GROUP SETTINGS)

If you have divided participants into groups, ask each group to share with the whole group or with another group:

- The questions they changed from open to closed and from closed to open
- Their three priority questions and the reasons they chose those questions
- Their action plan, if included in the process

9. REFLECTING

Ask participants to think about what they learned and how they can use it. This step is VERY important—make sure not to skip it. When participants name for themselves what they have learned it deepens their understanding of all the thinking they've done. Ask one question at a time.

- *What did you learn?*
- *How can you use what you learned?*

You have just given the people with whom you work a rare opportunity to spend time learning how to ask better questions. They can now take this skill with them wherever they go.
