

The Wicked Question Game

In a playful way, people ask each other only question after question for a short hour, thus transform the questions they started with and digging into the deeper meaning of life and work that brought them together.

Where does it come from? A short history

This game is a true Art of Hosting creation. Called to illustrate the power of good questions, three participants of an Art of Hosting training in Belgium in 2006 invented this little format. All three were very keen practitioners of Action Learning. So what they developed was also Action Learning “in a nutshell”. Rainer was present at this training and became the early adopter, the first follower who brought the game into his workshops and trainings on consulting, coaching, life-long development and of course, further Art of Hosting trainings. It has become a standard process in Austrian trainings. Since 2011 we experiment with the game as group interventions. We invited researchers into deepening research questions with the game, or we started the “Congress of integral politics and policies” with over 100 participants with the game.

How it works

The purpose of the whole game is that every participant, now sitting or standing, will leave the game with a very much improved version of their question they start the game with. At the end, all will have a moment to note down the new questions so that one can compare the before-after effect.

The group starts in a circle of chairs. Everyone receives a card and a pen. The hosts ask the participants to write down what matters to them most at this moment, in form of a question. That question doesn't need to be any perfect, as the following game will help to improve that question. The hosts may expand a little to underline the value of good open-ended questions that as such will offer direction, while the answers that one finds along the way will be the building stones on the journey of developing. Once the questions formulated, the large group split in groups of four to five. Each small group has three chairs in a small triangle-circle, two (or one) other participant standing next to the chairs.

Now the game can begin. Here are the rules:

- **Conversation rules**

People sitting on a chair have a conversation to question the questions. They may speak, however only in question form. No statements allowed. If someone makes a statement, they will be asked: “what is the question behind your statement?”

People standing must not talk. They listen to the conversation, hold space for it through their attention and see whether the moment calls for their intervention.

They can intervene only in one way: They touch the shoulder of someone sitting. That person then stops immediately their participation in the conversation, gets up and becomes a standing participant. The person that stood there before now takes the chair and participates in the conversation.

The game ends when the hosts call it over (typically after 50 minutes), or when the small group has exhausted all its questions and there is no need for it to explore them any further at this stage.

- **Ending and harvest**

The game ends when the game hosts call it to the end. Every participant gets a new card (preferably with a different color than the first card) to now write down the question they ask now.

Participants bring both their cards to a wall where one can see the questions that were asked before and after the game.

This is the minimal harvest from it. You can take it much further by allowing people to have a conversation about their experience during the game. We often do a learning circle, like: what did you learn about ... ? and are regularly amazed by the richness and depth of reflections that come up.

- There are no other rules.

Sometimes people feel the need to think the rules are more rigid than they are, or to invent further restrictions. We encourage you to refrain from this and allow some confusion among the participants that they can creatively walk through by themselves rather than wanting to ensure a “perfect” result.

Strategies for players

As this game has now been played a lot, we have learned a few good strategies for playing it with pleasure and good results in a natural flow.

- Distinguishing and using different types of questions

In the beginning, it might feel a bit awkward to just ask questions. It helps to explain that there are different types of questions you might use in the game:

Process questions: Who wants to start and read their question for us to explore? Do you want more of our questions or could we move on? Is there no one standing out there who could tap my shoulder? Etc.

Substance questions: What is the thing all about? What would happen, if the question is fully solved? Etc.

Questions about the relationship of the asking person to their question: What makes you ask that question? What is the question you are avoiding by focusing on the one you did ask?

- Interchanging between standing and sitting participation

The people that are standing most often have a very different experience and viewpoint than those sitting. By interchanging often, these viewpoints can enter the conversation and enrich it.

Changing yourselves into the circle from the margin might have many other positive effects. You can get that one dominating speaker out of the conversation that prevented any one else to say something. You might release the person whose question was in the center of conversation and allow her to observe the conversation from the margin rather than be part of it. You may bring in that question that was so obvious that no one saw it. You may bring an endless quest to an end, and ask people to listen to the new question you want to be explored. And so on.

- Giving time

It's good conversation practice to listen rather than searching to look smart by talking all the time. Silence is a time of collective reflection and generative for even better, more wicked and deeper questions.

Sometimes people played the game with the instruction that for every participant there should be some 10 minutes reserved to ‘give equal share’ to all. We don't do this any more as we found that the questions build on each other and every question gets deepened by the collective energy and intelligence that starts to fill the whole room. So trust the process and keep the flow, just have in mind that **all** questions are in need of transformation, and that all participants need to get something out of the experience.

Tips for Hosts

When you introduce the Wicked Question Game for large groups for the first time, it requires some very specific wording and clarity. People learn it faster and with so

much more fun when you do it with humor and lightness. The deeper and serious things are, the more humor will help.

It often helps to demonstrate the setting of the small groups with a group in the center of the large circle. You explain the rules. As the group then starts you can introduce the various strategies so that the circle gets the idea of the game.

Where to use it?

You can use it well any time the full presence and contribution of every individual participant is required, and the individual is actually important for the further steps after the event. We see it well happen in Community of Practice meetings or network gatherings.

Any training benefits highly from the game, where the systemic nature of interventions and consulting is not only illustrated by the game but experienced in the body and mind of the participants.

Where not to use it?

Any time your gathering follows a very much pre-set agenda. The diversity and personal involvement that the game would produce might get into the way of the smooth implementation. The game will feel artificial when the individual contributions do not need to be much distinct.

We hesitate to play the game with people that need a lot of safety and a very close container. Questions tend to open people, some feel unsafe with this.

Be aware of the specific culture into which you position the game. In some contexts people tend to ask questions only to demolish other positions or people, and the game might need some preparation before it can land well in such a place.