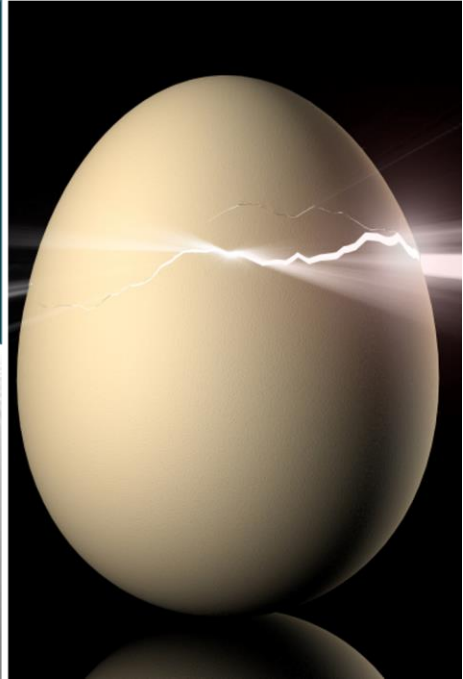


IT'S ABOUT THE QUESTIONS



One of the key differentiators separating High Impact practitioners from others in the field is their approach to questions. Adequate change practitioners tend to look at questions merely as vehicles to reach the right answers. When they find these answers, their thirst is quenched. They strive for efficiency in their search, which leads to binary thinking: they want to make good/bad, up/down, left/right, black/white determinations with the least time and resource investment possible. They value linear processing, low ambiguity, the permanent nature of things, and speedy decision-making. Ultimately, their self-image is often based primarily on what they have accomplished.

High Impact practitioners, on the other hand, usually focus as much on the questions themselves as the answers. Of course, they seek answers to their questions and apply whatever is learned but then they are on to the next, often more penetrating questions that the last answers uncovered. They value iterative processing, uncertainty, the transient nature of things, and implementable decision-making. Unlike Adequate practitioners, they tend to define themselves by what they are working toward, not what they have already attained.

In short, Adequate change professionals seek the comfort of answers, while those in the High Impact realm find the discomfort and uncertainty of “staying in the question” Far more productive.

What It Takes to “Stay in the Question”

Rainer Maria Rilke describes “staying in the question” like this:

Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart... Try to love the questions themselves... Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them—and the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers.

“Staying in the question” is anything but efficient. Some answers may come fully intact with great fanfare, but more often than not, answers are packaged in small, faint glimmers that must be pieced together like a multi-tiered jigsaw puzzle. Then, as if this process isn’t challenging enough, some pieces never materialize, thus requiring insightful inferences in order to build as complete an answer as possible.

To remain engaged with or “stay in” the question—no matter how or when answers appear—entails valuing the process of ongoing discovery. It requires perseverance, vigilance and accepting that even when answers emerge, they are often short-lived; new questions are quick to surface from what appeared to be definitive answers, and the unending journey continues.

A story told by Jane Hirshfield illustrates the value of “staying in the question”:

A man has a burning question. He decides to seek out a famous Hasidic teacher, a man everyone says is the wisest person of his era. For a long time he walks by foot, carrying his question. He gets rained on; he gets hungry. He keeps walking. Finally, he arrives in the village where the teacher lives. The students, though, won't let him into the study house. How can this man's question be serious, when he has just arrived? They've been working for years to be found worthy of the teacher's attention. Finally, the man's question is stronger than his politeness. He breaks in, corners the teacher and asks, "What is the essence of truth?" The teacher studies him for a moment, slaps him hard and returns to his book. The stunned man goes to a tavern across the road, complaining loudly about his mistreatment. Finally, one of the teacher's disciples takes pity on him, and explains: "The teacher slapped you out of great kindness. He was saying, 'Never surrender a good question for a mere answer.'"

Choosing Questions Worth Pursuing

While it is important to stay in the question, not every question is created equal. High Impact change practitioners don’t waste time and effort on just any inquiry; they are drawn to the ones they consider especially deserving. For example, “What are the best facilitation techniques to use when working with a dysfunctional team?” might be less compelling than “Why am I pulling back from telling the CEO that he is a key contributor to the team’s dysfunction?”

What constitutes a deeply meaningful question is in the eye of the beholder. For one person, a particular inquiry might be mundane or even meaningless, while someone else can be struck by how significant it is. That said, profound queries generally have certain characteristics. They:

- Appear relevant to issues or circumstances considered important
- Increase awareness of previously unseen implications (positive or negative)
- Open a corridor to one’s true nature and predispositions
- Penetrate personal defenses, consequently triggering anxiety, agitation and/or intrigue
- Expose a degree of vulnerability (risk of some nature, relative to self or others)
- Are disruptive to the normal way of perceiving, thinking, and/or acting
- Are destabilizing to emotional equilibrium (in positive or negatives ways)
- Linger and/or resurface time and time again
- Create a degree of struggle (they require considerable mindshare and effort to engage with them)
- Are catalysts to significant (though perhaps subtle) changes in thought or behavior patterns

Questions possessing these characteristics create wakes that extend far beyond any initial answers generated. It's not just that answers to these questions foster new questions, which then lead to more answers; the nature of this ebb and flow uncovers implications of great importance. Engaging profound questions leads to discovering significant, meaningful conclusions—and sometimes not the ones we expect.

Questions that Define *Who We Are*

As High Impact practitioners select questions worth pursuing, they will inevitably come up against profound self-discovery questions that help define *who we are*. Examples of profound quires are the kinds of questions High Impact practitioners ask themselves about how they show up when relating to clients:

- *What is the fundamental nature of your character?*

When you strip away all pretense, what is left is the essence of who you really are. This is the unvarnished you that lies beneath your efforts to dial back your true nature so that clients feel more comfortable and you are more accepted.

- *Does the presence you convey authentically reflect the truth of your character?*

When clients experience a practitioner's presence as genuinely reflecting who he/she is, they tend to pay attention. They may or may not agree with what is being said, but projecting the full truth of *who you are* is rare among professional change practitioners, and many clients find it compelling. It draws them in...even if they disagree with the points being made.

- *To what extent do you intentionally leverage your character and presence as part of the value you provide clients?*

When you focus your attention on clients who can gain the most from what you have to offer—those clients who value both *what you do* and *who you are*—you open the possibility for generating maximum impact.

These are the kinds of profound questions that are worthy of exploration by those who are and aspire to be part of the 10%. They require both persistence and vulnerability, and they ultimately lead to answers that will significantly improve a change professional's practice. Yet every conclusion inevitably raises new questions, leading the practitioner toward an ever-distant horizon where absolute answers stay just out of reach.

Similar to how physicists must accept the paradoxical nature of the wave/particle thesis, true 10%ers must be comfortable with both closure and discontinuity. They must accept that answers are sometimes concrete, sometimes elusive, sometimes both, and sometimes neither at all. As Albert Einstein said of his theory: "*It seems as though we must use sometimes the one theory and sometimes the other, while at times we may use either. We are faced with a new kind of difficulty. We have two contradictory pictures of reality; separately neither of them fully explains the phenomena of light, but together they do.*"

The Unending Path

Seeking mastery is about the pursuit of the ever-evolving yin and yang of inquiry. High Impact practitioners aren't satisfied unless they find answers to profound questions, and yet they are equally dissatisfied if those answers don't produce more profound questions. By definition, being part of the most influential 10% in our profession requires that you not just tolerate but thrive on the creative tension that comes from answering questions that only breed new questions. Therefore, for those wanting to advance further along their mastery journey and for those who aspire to start the voyage, it is imperative to embrace "staying in the question." Only by doing this, will practitioners advance toward—or remain at—the High Impact level.

What does it take to be a High Impact change practitioner?

1. Extended time working in an area of specialty
2. Advanced knowledge and skills
3. Track record of delivering value
4. Contextual awareness
5. Unique perspectives surfacing valuable insights
6. The ability to boldly bring viewpoints & recommendations forward, whether or not they will be well received