



How to Help Your Members Ask Questions that Get Great Answers

TOP THREE TAKEAWAYS


Jeff Merrell shared his experiences empowering your audience to ask the questions that get them the information they need, and drive continued engagement.

Highlights include:

1. An examination of the importance of good questions
2. Defining the foundation of a good question
3. How to help members ask good questions

Jeff has noticed that the proper formatting of a question contributes to good answers. These formats consist of shorter length, clarity, being explicit and how-to type questions. There needs to be a balance between questions that garner high engagement and those questions that offer value, but very little engagement. Where this intersects equals good questions.

In Jeff’s research, there are different classifications of questions, such as objective questions, subjective questions, questions based in cultural and/or social connections, questions that ask for a favor and facilitation questions that help people to think critically about a topic and/or challenge an assumption. Perhaps knowing the classification type of a question would help people to ask better questions.

 SNAPSHOT
SPEAKERS Jeff Merrell (Northwestern University)
COMPETENCIES Community Management
MATURITY PHASES CMM1, CMM2, CMM3, CMM4

OVERVIEW

Background – Jeff Merrell:

Jeff is the Associate Director of the Masters Program at Northwestern. It is a specialized MBA program for professionals (those with 10-12 years of experience dealing with adult learners) who are interested in learning more about organizational change. Jeff is also one of the TheCR's Champions, which means that he helps to bring thought leadership topics into the Network.

- The very nature of the program encourages students to question everything and check assumptions by asking factual questions.
- The program has an online community that runs on Jive Instance.
- Jeff shared that they just recently published a paper on how informal learning happens. It examines the nature of the mix of questions and engagement across the community. For this community, questions have many components. In the end, it is all about how to facilitate a very engaging, strong and informal learning environment that sits above their formal learning environment.

Why are Good Questions Important to a Community?

Participants shared their thoughts:

- Good questions lead to good answers.
- It is important to ask a question in a way that everyone can understand it. As described by one participant, people in one business unit might know what the average person is talking about, but not the rest of the company.
- One participant felt that it was important to clarify underlying assumptions.
- Rachel believes that asking good questions shows proactive ownership of the solution. This means that the person is moving towards seeking out a solution vs. acceptance of the current situation.
- Good questions prove the value of a community, i.e. that it is a viable source of information. This, in turn, spurs increased adoption.

BEST PRACTICES

Consider the Working Out Loud Framework: Hillary shared that TheCR has been working with the Working Out Loud Framework:

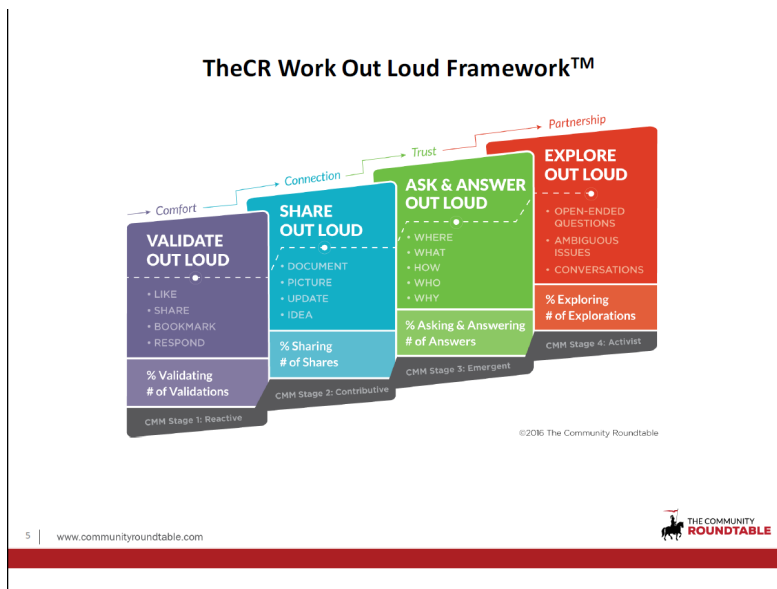


Figure 1 - Working Out Loud Framework – Slide 5

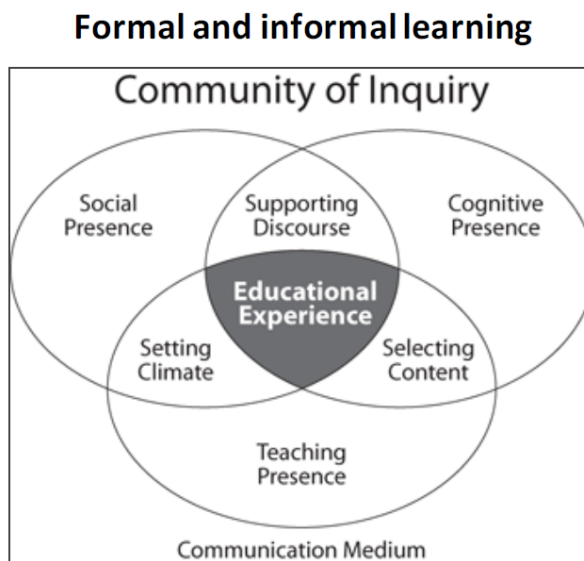
When organizations decide to launch a community, their vision is to create trust and partnership. As seen in the graph above, that exists in the later stages. A community cannot start off in these stages. It takes baby steps of engagement to move towards a collaborative value that comes from a mature community.

Oftentimes, communities can fall flat because the expectation is for the members in the community to ask tough, intricate questions without ever having worked their way up to them. Hillary likened it to attending a dinner party and not knowing anyone. The host has not made any introductions and has not offered any opportunity for conversation, but has then asked you to give a toast.

When it comes to asking good questions, Hillary believes that it is about getting from the connection phase to the trust phase of this model. In the past, there has been much conversation about getting to the comfort phase. This is the next step in helping people to get to the value phase with their questions.

BEST PRACTICES, CONT.

Consider the “Community of Inquiry” Framework: At Northwestern, Jeff shared that they use a framework called “The Community of Inquiry” as a guide.



From the work of Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson and Walter Archer

Figure 2 - Formal and Informal Learning - Slide 7

This framework includes social presence, supporting discourse, cognitive presence, setting climate, selecting content and teaching presence. Where it all intersects in the middle creates inquiry, i.e. an educational experience. The way that Northwestern approaches learning revolves around questions and the conversations that it then drives.

BEST PRACTICES, CONT.

Understand the Formatting Behind Questions that Get Good Answers: In Jeff's research, there are a few themes behind those questions that get good answers:

- Shorter length.
- Clarity, i.e. clearly worded questions that people can immediately understand. This helps people identify the type of question being asked. It helps the answerer to distinguish if the questioner is asking for a factual question, a request for a social connection, a group discussion, etc.
- Programmers ask very explicit, "how-to" types of questions. A type of question where they shared discrepancies also seemed to get a lot of answers. There is something about asking questions that are baked into various examples of the type of work being performed that elicit good answers. This made Jeff think that perhaps certain groups are, again, innately good at asking good questions, such as engineers or HR practitioners. They ask questions that are recognizable to other practitioners in terms of understanding and instantly recognizing unexpected behaviors.
- Research that is specific to ESN knowledge workers has shown that the answers that come from the weak ties tend to be more highly valued than the answers that come from people that the questioner knows. That is a theme that cuts across many different scenarios.
 - One participant shared that this last statement resonated with her. The answers from people that the questioner has never met come from different geographies and/or different companies. These people have different experiences than the known responders and, therefore, can offer different insights. The beauty of it is that the questioner can get all of these variant answers and then pull them together. Sometimes each response will have a piece of the solution that they can put together for a more complete answer.

Recognize the Components of a Good Question

The following slide offers a visual for recognizing the components of a good question:

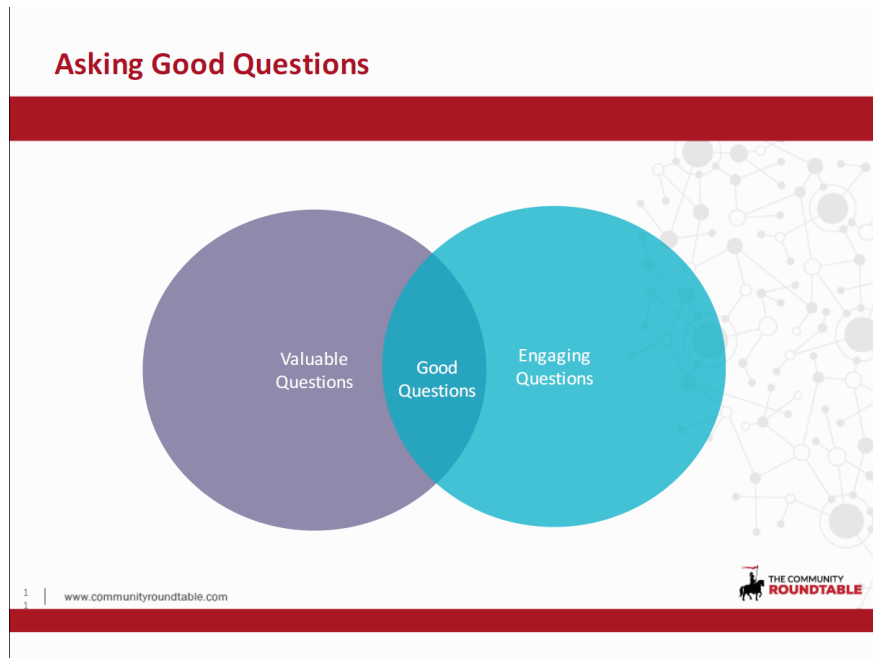


Figure 3 - Asking Good Questions - Slide 11

The right side represents the engaging questions, usually spurred by the super low hanging fruit. The next side is the valuable questions that are very straight-forward, but too dry to start any engagement. The ideal question lies in-between. It has some of those points of being very clear, but open-ended enough to create engagement

Hillary shared an example of a question that she used within TheCR that fell in the middle section of this Venn diagram. She asked: “Who do you have an intellectual crush on?” This question was engaging enough to spur several responses and the responses were valuable enough to contribute to the Network. The question offered an engaging way to surface knowledge – podcasts, books and thought leaders – that could then be shared with members.

Re-Post Unanswered Questions as a Different Question

Sometimes, a question gets lost in a mix of questions and goes unanswered. The questioner feels a certain sense of failure and may not be willing to post any further questions. The community manager can help curb that feeling of failure and create engagement by re-posting the question again. This time, re-phrase the question or tweak it slightly to bring it back to the top of the stream for answering.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Rachel shared that she comes from an academic culture having grown up in Cambridge, MA. Rachel wondered if that type of background and culture contributed to inquisitive behavior because the Socratic Method permeates an academic environment and becomes part of the culture.
- Jeff replied that, anecdotally, there are some in the student population that innately ask ridiculously good questions. However, by the end of the Masters Program, the academic experience creates a critical thinking skill set for all the students. That said, it is an interesting insight because some people are naturally good at asking the questions that challenge assumptions.
 - Rachel would like to know how to distribute this type of critical thinking because if it is cultural, it can be replicated. If it is personality, that is not as easy to do. It is probably a combination of both. Rachel has learned that as she is getting older, she is getting better at asking questions because she is more confident and comfortable in her own skin.
 - In a community setting that equates to comfort, which has a cultural component. That is where the Working Out Loud Framework is helpful. Her hypothesis is that people can become highly validated within a community and if the culture is supportive, people will be willing to ask questions, even those who are more hesitant. This is because the environment feels safe and they do not fear a hostile or confrontational response.
 - Jeff added that in the academic environment, people are there to learn. It is not work, so they do not have that fear of appearing uninformed. Therefore, they are more willing to share in the community. The responses are generally very respectful and that helps to build momentum.
- Jeff shared that in his research for understanding what makes a good question, he has found that there are different classifications of questions:
 - Objective questions look for a specific fact.
 - Subjective questions look for a recommendation or an opinion.
 - There are questions based in cultural and/or social connections.
 - Some questions ask for people who can perform a favor.
 - Facilitation questions help people to critically think about a topic and challenge assumptions.
 - Jeff wondered if knowing what type of question is being asked will help people to ask a good question.

LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

Participants shared the behaviors that they have noticed about asking questions:

- Engineers and technical audiences are even more hesitant to ask questions because they think they should know the answer given their education and income status.
- Rachel has noticed that the more value that is placed on knowledge in an organization, the harder it is to get engagement because knowledge is highly guarded and regulated.
- In Georgina's experience, the questions that get the best answers are those that have been asked in a way that suggests vulnerability. Rachel has also noticed this behavior. The irony is that in a work environment, no one wants to appear vulnerable. Yet, asking the question in a declarative or authoritative manner arrests engagement. There needs to be a fine balance between seeking help – and people are triggered by the need to help those who are seeking it – and not appearing unknowledgeable in the workplace.
- Georgina also shared that in her community – which is a fairly young community – questions that invite the member to be correct or receive social validation for the value that they have shared in responding are the most likely to receive responses and many of them. For Georgina, the formula for great questions is to be straight-forward, very specific and narrow in their scope.
- They are not necessarily open-ended, thought leadership questions. They are specific, help-based questions. However, they also have – for lack of a better word – an easy component to them that offers a low point of entry. So, one or two people will come in and answer the low hanging fruit portion of the question and once the ball starts rolling, others will jump in and begin to offer deeper, more thoughtful components to the answer.
- The first answer sets the tone. If someone answers too technically or too completely, it halts further engagement. Ironically, that is not the desired outcome. Varying responses from different people bring the different pieces to a higher level of discussion and value vs. having just one complete answer. Furthermore, sometimes the first answer can divert the question, no matter how well the question was asked. It can, unfortunately, change the entire stream of the conversation and never answer the initial question.
- A lesson learned for community managers is that recycling a question or doing something slightly different to re-engage the questioner has huge value. There can be increased engagement and the questioner will feel redeemed. Community managers are incredibly valuable in the question/answer process.

LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

Hillary asked participants to share how they help their communities to ask good questions:

- Show up in the community to help facilitate a question that has been asked. Ask further sub-questions to help pull out better answers.
- Re-state the question with the questioner to better understand what he/she is trying to ask, i.e. “What I’m hearing is that you’re experiencing XYZ”. This will help to ensure that any assumptions are correct. Sometimes in global communities, language is a barrier. Help to alleviate any language barriers for items that have been lost in translation.
- Rachel suggested answering the question for yourself to see if it is even an answerable question.
- Try creating the question in different ways to see which question is more specific, clearer and better formatted.
- Hillary does some behind the scenes coaching to help someone’s question. Sometimes she will re-post it in hopes that it will be viewed by the right people the second time around.
- Integrate a tutorial for asking better questions, i.e. guidelines for good, better and best ways to ask a question.

LESSONS LEARNED, CONT.

- Publish a short, introductory video as a way to help members ask better questions.
- Have people serve as question refiners. It is not as risky as asking a question, but will prove to be a valuable exercise for helping these people to pose better questions themselves. Stress the need to rephrase for clarification.
- Recognize that perfection is the enemy of engagement.
- Do not ask questions in a declarative or authoritative manner. This kills engagement.
- Use the “Intuitive Way” exercise, i.e. what you think is going to happen and then compare it to what actually happened. Taking the time to reflect helps to remove assumptions and expectations.
- Create roles and responsibilities that are more explicit for advocates. By giving people explicit roles, it gives them “permission” to do something that they need.
- Along the lines of the above, create an advocacy group with the sole responsibility of asking good questions and then provide the proper training.
- Show interest, i.e. “Did you mean...?” This creates interest and helps the questioner to avoid the failure experience of an unanswered question.
- Be supportive even if you do not have the answer, i.e. “I don’t know the answer, but we are experiencing the same thing.”
- Reduce the cognitive load within the question. Questions that make people think too hard will get passed over by members.
- Describe what the answer looks like before trying to formulate the question.