



# Developing Driving Questions for Meetings

By

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**Driving questions are used to focus the attention and energy of groups holding discussions about complex topics.** They should be **developed in advance** of any meeting and are almost mandatory when facilitating decision-making meetings, focus group research sessions, and organizational dispute intervention. Carefully planned and crafted **driving questions can be the difference between meeting failure and success...** between the group gaining agreement on an area of concern or direction, or continued divisiveness and conflict. Poorly developed driving questions will lead groups into **circular thinking and significant frustration.**

When creating driving questions, keep in mind the following:

- ▲ The overall driving question should be **broad enough** to cover the full range of topics, but **detailed enough** to focus the group's discussion. Most driving questions are followed by **subordinate questions**. These subordinate questions are also written with care following the suggestions outlined below, and logically fall from the driving question. Consider subordinate questions as "mini" driving questions. If the topic is sufficiently broad, or if there is a need to generate detailed information from the group, you can create **multiple levels of subordinate questions**.
- ▲ A driving question should **frame the outcomes and decisions** you want to make at the end of your discussion. It should give participants **clear, unambiguous boundaries** regarding what is within **discussion limits** and what is not.
- ▲ A driving question **should not lead or steer** the group toward a predetermined answer.
- ▲ Taken together, all the driving and subordinate questions should **weave a theme** through the fabric of the meeting.

To write good driving and subordinate questions, you need to:

- ▲ **Assess** the level of **understanding of participants** about the specific topic. The driving question can be more specific and detailed if the overall understanding of the participants about the subject matter is higher. Driving questions can survey for facts and concrete analysis of those facts. If, however, the group has little or not understanding of the topic, then the driving questions need to be global and built around perceptions, beliefs and feelings.
- ▲ Keep the questions **straight-forward and simple**. Make each question **compact**. Use as few words as possible.
- ▲ **Avoid questions** that the group can answer with a simple "yes" or "no". **Open ended** questions stated in **neutral terms** are best. Don't create questions where the **answer is**

**obvious.** Likewise, there would be very few instances where **rhetorical questions** would be appropriate.

- ▲ Prior to the meeting, **rehearse** the ways you will ask the driving questions. Make sure the questions are understandable to the participants. Listen to how the questions sound. Will vocal inflections give the impression that you want a predetermined answer? Will cadence or pacing affect the group's response?
- ▲ Put the **questions in writing** and allow participants to not only hear but see the words as you read them. If possible, place the driving questions on flip-charts, overhead slides or storyboards so they can be displayed at appropriate times during the discussion. This will visually help participants focus their comments.
- ▲ If working in **multiple sessions**, with more than one facilitator or conducting ongoing focus group research, make sure all groups are addressing the same questions worded in the same way. Because words have such tremendous power, even the slightest change in wording can make a big difference in the meaning of the question to the listener.
- ▲ During the meeting, use the **driving questions like anchors** to keep the group's attention focused on the topic. Repeat it frequently. When the discussion goes too far astray, ask the group, "How does your conversation help us answer the driving question?"

Here is a practical, step-by-step method to help you develop driving questions:

- 1 - On one flip-chart, **list the information** you need to generate as a result of the group's work.
- 2 - On a separate flip-chart, quickly **brainstorm some specific questions** that you might want to answer by the end of the meeting. Leave lots of space between your questions so you can "word smith" them later.
- 3 - Ask yourself, "Are there similarities between the questions? What links can we find between the two flip-charts? **What themes can we see emerging?**" Give each of the themes you've identified a descriptive name and write a broad driving question that reflects the theme. Develop **subordinate questions that fall logically** from each of the driving questions. Continue this process until you've reached a level of detail appropriate to your meeting goals.
- 4 - Find someone familiar with the topic to act as a "**guinea pig**". Try each of your questions on the test participant to determine if they are clear, simple, direct and focused. Rewrite any questions that fail the test.
- 5 - Look at all the questions you've developed. Place them in a **logical sequence** so that the answer to one will give participants a basis for answering the next. If you have any concerns about running out of time, **prioritize** the driving questions. During the session be prepared to **eliminate** subordinate questions that are nice to have answered but not necessary to the final product.

The **cost of today's business meetings** and research sessions can mount up to **thousands of dollars** in salaries and forgone opportunities. For this reason it is important to make the most of the limited time groups have to decide important issues by creating clear, focused driving questions. **Developing high quality driving questions is more time consuming than difficult, but the process requires something most managers and supervisors don't do enough ... planning.**