

The Four Questions

A Structured Brainstorming Approach

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A couple of years ago, when I was employed by one of the Department of Defense's industry partners and managing the organization's continuous improvement activities, we were struggling with how to get the most productive output from our yearly operations offsite. I'm confident that if you've been in the defense business for any length of time, you've participated in an end- (or beginning-) of-year offsite to set goals for the upcoming year. In fact, during my U.S. Air Force career, I attended and/or led a number of such events with either an all-government or a mixed government/contractor team. While the events were always beneficial, we would typically lose focus at some point and go off on a tangent.

The same thing happened repeatedly with the industry operations leadership team of which I was a member. During the course of our offsite, we'd make some strides; however, inevitably, we'd march down some unintended road. Follow-through on those areas we did address was also lacking—much like following up on my many well-intentioned New Year's resolutions. It was in this environment that a colleague and I, along with our supervisor, stumbled upon what we ended up calling the Four Questions approach. It was nothing magical, just a nicely structured approach to brainstorming that, with proper facilitation, kept our team focused. It actually took its roots from an excellent book we were all reading on the importance of trust in an organization, *The Speed of Trust*, by Stephen M. R. Covey, which lists a version of the four questions in the section on trust-building behaviors. What follows



is an outline of the five stages of the Four Questions approach, which can help structure your team's ideas/brainstorming sessions.

Stage 1—Pre-Event Survey

As the continuous improvement gurus teach us, the best ideas usually come from the people closest to the work. So prior to the event, whether it was an end-of-year off-site or a skip-level meeting (which means a meeting with the workers' boss's boss—you "skip" the next-level supervisor), we'd ask the attendees to anonymously fill out a survey asking these four basic continuous improvement questions:

- What should we stop doing (to eliminate waste)?
- What should we start doing (to add value)?
- What should we continue doing? (What are we doing well now?)

- What would it take for us to be the best? (This question was to encourage big thoughts.)

This is where a facilitator can really pay off. Without bias (or, perhaps more important, without any perceived bias), that individual can organize and consolidate the survey responses prior to the event. The facilitator can also ensure that the inputs remain anonymous. In addition, he can facilitate the actual event and record the results—providing a product that can lead to better follow-through.

After participating, facilitating, or leading a number of such events, with participation ranging from six to 20-plus employees, I have found that the responses can typically be consolidated into six or fewer discrete notions for each of the four questions, although the notions vary from team to team.

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Stage 2—Clarification

At the actual event—whether it be an offsite, skip-level meeting, or similar event—all participants should review each question's responses, including consolidations the facilitator has made before the event. Participants need to understand and agree upon what each response means, and all ambiguities need to be clarified prior to moving on to the next stage. For example, at a skip-level meeting at a manufacturing facility, one of the discussion topics was how to provide better tools. Participants needed to determine exactly what tools needed to be better. Was the survey response referring to simple hand tools, which are relatively inexpensive, or major capital equipment, which would require an extensive budgeting process? In order to get a fair assessment from the team, knowledge of the ballpark cost was very beneficial.

After each response has been clarified, and combined where appropriate, the facilitator adheres them to a wall under the appropriate question (start, stop, continue, be the best) in preparation for the next stage.

Stage 3—The Multi-Vote

There are many variations of multi-voting; however, it is usually a process in which each attendee is given two or more votes to be distributed among several alternatives. In our industry offsite, we multi-voted by giving each participant two to three votes per category, dependent on the number of attendees we had. (We color-coded the responses for the four questions to ensure the voting was distributed equally among the categories.) Typically, people are allowed to allocate their votes as they see fit. Within each category, they may vote for their top choice with all three votes or distribute them among three different ideas.

Multi-voting allows for the broad range of ideas to be further refined, with the leading vote-winners receiving more focused attention. That's not to say all the other ideas should be discarded; however, only those lower-ranked ideas that require few or no resources and have no unintended negative consequences are given the opportunity to be implemented. The

strength of the multi-voting process is that it quickly engages all the attendees and doesn't allow for one particular attendee (or the boss) to dominate the process. While the participants are on a break, the facilitator can tally the votes and present the results when everyone returns.

Stage 4—Focused Discussion/Action Plan

In this stage, the ideas have been narrowed and prioritized through the multi-voting process, and the team can concentrate on the top vote-getters—those ideas that the participants think have the most merit or that they care about the most. That's not to say that all the ideas that receive the most votes can be implemented. Sometimes the resources required or policies in place won't allow for implementation; however, at a minimum, it allows leadership to address concerns and explain why a particular idea cannot be employed. For example, we used the Four Questions technique for a skip-level meeting with a paint hangar team that fell under my responsibilities when I was with industry. Their number-one vote-getter was "better raises and more promotions." I was able to explain to them the promotion and raise process, and show them in general terms how their organization actually did well in both areas based on the dollars allocated to our facility by the corporation—and all based on their superior performance during the past year. While they weren't thrilled that no additional raises or promotions were coming their way, they could see that based upon what I had to work with, they had received their fair share in accordance with their collective performance. If not for the session with the team, I wouldn't have known about their concerns in that area and wouldn't have taken the time to explain to them the process. As a result, communications increased, and I had a better understanding of a potential morale issue.

One area we could tackle was the second-place vote-getter: "look into better sealant." It seemed that the paint hangar team was having mixing and curing problems with the sealant they had been using for years. Through the clarification and focused discussion portion of our Four Questions session, we were able to determine exactly what their issues were and put an action plan in place to solve them.

As with any good action plan, you need a responsible person (actionee) and a suspense date. One of the team members in the session, the paint hangar team lead, agreed to take action on the sealant, and we settled on a suspense date. We also agreed to not make changes to the sealant until we clarified any unintended consequences from switching sealants, including incurring additional cost.

We pursued similar discussions on the top two to three vote-getters in each category, and we reviewed the rest quickly to see if we had any JDIs (just do it's) in the group. Because we had previously distributed and collected the surveys in advance, the entire Four Questions session with the paint hangar took about two hours. In contrast, we used the Four Questions approach with our annual operations leadership offsite—an

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all-day event—with more in-depth conversations and detailed exploration of potential unintended consequences.

Stage 5—Follow-Through

For this approach (or any approach involving brainstorming and employee participation) to be successful, it is critical to get the participants back together and provide the team feedback on progress made and ideas implemented. A session should be planned for after the last suspense date. If you don't get the team together and/or don't follow through on the implementation, word will spread that the events are a waste of time, and participant engagement will suffer.

For the operations leadership team, follow-through was easy because we had scheduled weekly meetings; however, we also scheduled a monthly two- to three-hour review of any initiatives resulting from our offsite to track status and ensure completion. We weren't perfect, but it did prove effective. For the skip-level meetings, like the one with the paint hangar team, we brought the team back together three months later to review our progress and demonstrate leadership commitment to executing their ideas. We also discussed any failed implementation, providing solid rationale for why we couldn't follow through (such as current budget realities not allowing for implementation).

It Doesn't Take Magic

After reading this article, you are probably thinking, "Hey, this is nothing magical!" Yes, you're right! That's the beauty of it. The method brings structure and focus to what can sometimes be a chaotic process—a process that can easily get tangential. Why not give the Four Questions approach a try? Perhaps you can use it for your goal-setting offsite, or to tackle a particular issue with your contractor team.

After a 20-year U.S. Air Force career and several years working with industry, **Riel** joined DAU as a professor of program management. Riel is happy to provide further examples, sample formats, and facilitation advice. The author welcomes comments and questions and can be contacted at david.riel@dau.mil.



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