



Design deliberate open-ended questions

Our 18 principles

Asking, listening,  
learning and doing



CircleLytics

**"Open-ended questions lead to better decision-making, understanding of our impact, and higher employee engagement."**

**- Royal Haskoning DHV -**

Let's take you through the principles of open-ended questions design. The open answer truly reveals what is going on, making way for the possibility to improve, to understand, to change.

We designed 1,000s of deliberate open-ended questions for over 2,000 dialogues with 300+ organizations in recent years. We learned from 100,000s of participants with how much enthusiasm and attention they deal with open-ended questions. How deep people dig to give their best answer. We built up rich data on the power of deliberate open-ended questions. As a result, we can now share with you and your organization the principles for designing solid open-ended questions. You can make better-informed decisions, be confident about the support from your stakeholders, eg. employees, and make more impact on themes such as:

- truly increasing inclusion & diversity
- successful retention policy and lower absenteeism
- monitoring & steering hybrid work
- developing a learning organization
- designing strategy
- increasing listening capacity
- reacting faster and anticipating the market
- strengthening collaboration.

We wish you much wisdom and reading pleasure and now... let's start!

**"Asking our 3,800-strong workforce deliberate open-ended questions turns out to be a real goldmine. For them as well! It brings out the best in people."**

**- Director of a government organization -**

## Introduction

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Every change, every result starts with coming up with the right question or questions. Asking questions provides answers. Asking powerful questions yields great insights, strong commitment and greater trust.

How do you ask the right questions? And what do you do with these insights? Are you prepared to learn from the answers of others? Do you even engage in a dialogue? Do you have the courage to admit that you don't know everything and do you therefore open yourself to the perspectives of others? You have to be confident to ask deliberate open-ended questions; you open yourself up to something new, something that is still unknown. And designing open-ended questions takes a bit more of your time. After that, everything just speeds up!

**"One of the most important factors for people to feel involved, with all the positive consequences, is that their opinion visibly matters."**

- Research company Gallup -

## Design principles

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### 1. Ask for what you are willing to listen to

If you ask deliberate open-ended questions, the answer is unknown. So ask questions about subjects that you can deal with and that give you the courage to embrace these uncertain, new insights. If you want to increase retention and keep your employees on board, you can ask for a striking reason why employees want to work here, or consider leaving. Or what they know about the reasons why others left, or their reason for working here still in 5-10 year's time. If retention is an issue in your organization, you'll be working with these kinds of specific questions, and you're open for the answers. If you want people to answer your questions, make sure they trust your willingness to act.

"The mind that opens to a new idea never returns to its original size."

- Albert Einstein -  
(theoretical physicist)



### 2. Give the exact available degrees of freedom to people

Timing is important. You're probably very busy and so are the people around you. So spend everyone's time carefully. Give space if there is space, and dare to limit it where necessary. Some decisions are about to be made or have already been made. So, instead of asking people for ideas, you should ask them how you can achieve smart implementation, the milestones they can set, how to make adjustments in due course, what you have learned together, what are removable obstacles, etc. If decisions haven't been made yet, you can ask questions that have to do with that preliminary phase. A few examples; what has changed most in the market in the past few months? Which customer demand do we most often say no to and shouldn't want? How can a newcomer in our market really surprise us? How can we accelerate our project? How do you think we can save 10% time per month? Some important deliberate open-ended questions. Make sure you imagine their answers: how will you then free up space in the organization to get started with the outcome? If that space is limited, then limit the questions just as much.

"Interviews and workshops of many hours with small groups, are rarely as powerful as that one, deliberate open-ended questions. I spend a lot of time preparing that one question. I preferably present this question to large groups of employees or stakeholders first. This gives me unique insights and my follow-up workshops more depth."

- Strategy & culture consultant -

### **3. Listening to answers to your question does not mean that you should carry them out; you do have to follow up on them**

Listening, to employees, citizens or customers, does not mean simply doing what is said. Imagine that you pose your questions not to one person, but to dozens, or even thousands of people. They have 1,000s of opinions. And if you let them talk to each other, their opinions change too. So it's not easy to ask the right questions.... The first two principles already set the boundaries. Tell the other person, whether it's one person or 1,000, what your intention is with your questions. "I'll take it to our MT meeting next week" is different than "I'll start working on your answers today". Both can be valid. Build your reputation carefully and show that you go beyond listening. Listening is only step 1. Learning from how people respond to your questions is the most important next step. Doing something with it comes afterwards. Another example: "We would like to enter into a dialogue with you, learn from each other and take this as input for the new quarterly plan. Our deliberate open-ended questions is therefore: What do you currently see as the greatest change in customer needs that we should or could do something about?" Provide context for your follow-up and for you and others.



"The power of deliberate open-ended questions is something we underestimated. You open doors and windows and really come up with new ideas and insights together."

- Managing director, retail chain -

**4. Do not make your deliberate open-ended questions smaller or simpler than reality. They will notice this immediately and you will lose their attention and trust**

If something is not going well, name it and ask what others see as the cause and as an area for improvement. Don't hide it. When projects stagnate, ask for obstacles that can be removed, together. If there are conflicts between departments, ask what can be changed today. If a subject is complex, ask questions that show you are open to the brainpower of others. You don't want people to answer in automatic pilot mode; let them beaver away at your question if the subject requires it. People like that more than you think. The more difficult, the more sensitive, the more complex: for every angle of approach, there is a fitting, rock-solid question. Be, in other words, straightforward.



"We must leave room for doubt or there is no progress and there is no learning. There is no learning without having to pose a question. And a question requires doubt."

- Richard Feynman -  
(theoretical physicist)

### **5. Slow down: take time for your question. Deliberate open-ended questions design confronts you with understanding the essence**

This may take time. Lead time. Mental time. You have to slow yourself down, even though you're probably in a hurry. This also requires that you rise above your own 'busyness' and give priority to thinking about the essence of your issue. Which questions give structure to the approach or solution of your problem? Slowing down now means speeding up later. Bad questions now, result in fake involvement of others and weak insights. Make sure you test your questions with others, and answer your own questions as well. Another tip, make sure the question is closed, and then convert it back into an open question.

**"Asking deliberate open-ended questions is a sign of leadership, self-confidence and trust. It proves awareness and acceptance of temporary ignorance."**

**- Maurik Dippel -**

### **6. Give those to whom you ask your deliberate open-ended questions time to think about your question(s)**

Give them a chance to slow down, to think about your deliberate open-ended questions. They and your question deserve that. Don't forget that you have also taken time to arrive at rock deliberate open-ended questions. Show patience and willingness to let them reflect on your question. If you design deliberate open-ended questions with in mind that people must respond quickly (because your issue cannot wait), you might be taking short-cuts and asking weaker questions. It's likely that your questions will become too simple, closed, or you will end up not asking them at all and making assumptions or filling in for others. That can bounce back hard later, so take your time and give others time. It is often smarter to approach those you ask the questions to online, so there is no unwanted time pressure, nor social pressure. The brain likes to sleep for a night. It is a proven fact that thinking and creativity need time to get going.



"It's the questions that leadership didn't ask that often come back to haunt them. These "unknown unknowns" are business threats that can come out of nowhere."

- Hal Gregersen (INSEAD) -

**7. Focus on the essence. Which one question makes the difference? And dare to leave it at that**

The rest is a waste of their attention and your time. You are not conducting a survey with many closed-end questions. You want to draw serious attention, and that requires a serious, rock-solid question that hits the mark. Spend the rest of your time listening to and learning from people's answers, and how to have a dialogue through them. Because you limit yourself to the essence, you can fine-tune your question, sync with your business agenda and work in a very focused way. For a next topic, you simply enter into a new dialogue with people, and design new questions for that new event. Example. "What is that one distinctive point, in your opinion, why we lost 5% market share in the last 12 months to competitor ABC? "As a newcomer to the organization, what is your number one recommendation for keeping colleagues loyal to our organization for longer?". "What rule hinders us the most in putting the customer first more than we do now? Focus on a rule that you think isn't relevant (anymore)." Focus on the essence.

"Only since we have approached our employees with deliberate open-ended questions have we really been able to make steps and impact with their engagement and retention. Deliberate open-ended questions continue where surveys and workshops end."

- Director of People & Culture -





## 8. Your deliberate open-ended questions increases the awareness of the other person

What do you think your deliberate open-ended questions does to the other person? Put yourself in the other person's shoes. What answers do you expect? Does that make you want to adapt your question? Is your question too broad, too narrow or are there other principles from this White Paper against which you want to test your question again? Your question informs the other person. Make conscious use of this and inform the other person(s), especially if you want to pose your questions to more people. Introduce your question. For example: "We want to monitor how things are going with working from home. Since we have developed a policy on this, in dialogue with all employees, we want to check with you every quarter to see how things are going. You can find the policy via this link ..... . We have three questions for you. What surprises you about working from home? What falls between the cracks at the moment in terms of the quality of our work? What will we be proud of in a few years' time?" Another example. "We have fallen a long way behind with project ABC. This is a very important project with which we want to achieve ..... Therefore, the MT is asking you the following. ...". Add context, raise awareness.

**"Our full understanding requires aggregating multiple independent perspectives. Privacy (anonymity) is of the essence and have people speak up."**

**- Lorenzo Barberis Canonico -  
(Ph.D, researcher, Stanford University)**

## 9. Questions are always guiding and provide direction

There is no example of a non-directive question. Your question structures the other person's thinking, which is precisely the intention. Questions that use the words what, how, with which, when, why, etc. differ from the outset by the choice of these words and guide the other in a certain direction. However, do not incorporate your preference for a certain answer into the question. This is suggestive and can lead to distrust and rejection of your question, the subject, or of you. It can also lead to answers that are not representative of what the other person(s) means. Formulate your question in a neutral, unbiased way. For example, don't ask: "Do you agree that ABC was not launched strongly by marketing, and why?" Instead ask: "What is the best lesson we learned from the launch of ABC and can you explain it?" If you want the other person to choose from your answers, use a multiple choice or closed question. Don't be surprised that, with your closed question, you won't find out a lot and you won't be able to speak nor listen to the other person with an open mind. In that case, at least ask for 'their explanation'. That way you will still learn a lot and open up to their opinions. In addition, you can ask a follow-up question: "What do you think is missing from the aforementioned list of possibilities and why?" or even "What do we have to do to speed up XYZ? This is inviting and calls for action. So, even a closed answer question can be combined with asking about the why, how to improve, etc. Never waste a chance to learn from other people's perspectives!

**10. Divert attention if you want the other person(s) to focus on something completely different, ie if you want to stimulate out-of-the-box thinking with your deliberate open-ended questions**

In your deliberate open-ended questions, already mention the usual answers and challenge them to come up with something new. You can also help people on their way by starting your question with "Imagine this" or "What if" or "How would..." and sketching a situation that does not exist now. This takes people out of the hustle and bustle of the day and stimulates their imagination. It also allows you to develop scenarios with others through your questioning. The beautiful, additional effect is that the brain becomes more comfortable with new things and gets used to them. And that means: less resistance to change. Open questions can change people's perceptions.



**"One good deliberate open-ended questions can give rise to several layers of answers, and can prompt changes in entrenched thinking."**

**- Stuart Firestein -  
(PhD, Biological Sciences at Columbia University)**

**11. A deliberate open-ended questionsn is a behavioural intervention**

Deliberate open-ended questions stimulate thinking and give a sense of direction. You can ask: "What is your most important recommendation to management about ABC and why?", but you can also ask: "What can you do about ABC?". Or this one: "What have you already improved most in your department or in your team regarding ABC?". These are completely different questions each time. Of course, you can also ask questions that are specifically about behaviour. For example: "With which of our values do you see colleagues or yourself struggling the most and why?". "What do you think the increased workload has meant for the vitality of our colleagues? Or: "What is needed most from all of us in order to achieve"? Or when it comes to setting boundaries, psychological safety, cooperation, etc. Extra tip: add the word together to your question. "How can we best achieve together that ..... ?" By adding these kinds of words, you can get people to look at your question with a different perspective.

"Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question."

- E. E. Cummings -

## 12. Use unambiguous, simple words and short sentences

And ... use positive words. And ... preferably don't look back. For example, don't ask: "Why did project ABC go badly?" instead ask: "What do we learn most from project ABC for new projects?" Or if you want to know what employees think of the feedback culture, it's better not to ask: "How do you judge our feedback culture of the past year", instead ask: "How can we make our feedback culture stronger going forward? Use language that your organization and people know, speak and listen to. Language that everyone recognizes; not language that makes someone feel 'not smart enough' to respond to your question. A tip is to compose questions that you would ask each other if you met spontaneously. Language locks people out, or in. You want the latter.

"Our employees feel (and become!) really involved through the deliberate open-ended questions we ask them. Even 36,000 at once. We take them seriously and they notice that. Much stronger than checking off traditional surveys with closed questions that left them numb."

- National Postal Services -



### 13. Ask for someone's single answer. Not a whole list

Limitation is powerful. Ask for someone's "best argument", "most striking example", "strongest substantiation", "most surprising solution", "most important suggestion", etc. A tip from us is to use recruiting adjectives. Enumeration results in loss of focus, and people become lazier. Limitation creates focus. Do give them enough time for reflection however (Principle 6). Consider whether the other person(s) likes to list a lot of points. If so, consider (Principle 10) inviting them to "name something other than the familiar arguments."



"Real dialogue is where two or more people become willing to suspend their certainty in each other's presence."

- David Bohm -

### 14. Consciously ask for someone's feeling, thinking, instinctive response, expertise, estimation, etc. with your question

Compare these examples. "What feeling does working at home give you that you don't have at the office?" and "How is working at home for you versus at the office?". Or these: "What is your feeling about changed customer needs?" versus "Can you cite a concrete, recent example of changed customer needs?" Another example: "What can you imagine happens with.... in 3 years and why?"; this question especially invites the creative people, with imagination. Another example: "How do you see, with your experience with complex projects, that we can accelerate project ABC?". This question explicitly invites experienced people only. What is the tone of voice when you ask your question; at what level (thinking, feeling, doing, etc.), appropriate to the topic, to our culture and to the interviewees?

**"Those who seek advice, are perceived as more competent than those who do not."**

**-Francesca Gino and Alison Wood Brooks -  
(Ph.D, Harvard Business School Professor)**

### **15. Use the power of "time" in your questions**

Ask combinations of deliberate open-ended questions about the past, present and (near and distant) future. An example. "What is a remarkable reason why colleagues left recently?" This allows you to look back and learn for the future. Next: "What is a remarkable reason why colleagues are considering leaving, say next 6 months?" And a future-oriented version: "What is a decisive reason for you to still work here in five years' time?". You also make people aware of why they stay or leave. You can use the results to enter into a dialogue with people and adjust your policy accordingly. Listening, learning and doing. This is only possible with specific, open-ended questions, not generic (survey) questions. Other examples of future-oriented questions, where you want to move others towards that future:

"What will make the work of a manager (even) more attractive in three years' time than it is now?"

"How can we increase the career opportunities for everyone equally?"

"What can surprise us in our market in the next five years?"

"Which competitor do you see suddenly becoming stronger than us in the next 3-5 years, considering our pace of innovation?"

"Where will our sales be in three years and what do you think about that?"

"What surprise can technological development have for us in ten years' time?"



**"The key to wisdom is this – constant and frequent questioning, for by doubting we are led to question, by questioning we arrive at the truth."**

**- Peter Abelard -**

### **16. Pose your deliberate open-ended questions to more rather than fewer people**

Two know more than one. And the beautiful thing is, as soon as you ask more people and they listen to each other's answers, everyone learns from everyone else. People have different perspectives, different backgrounds, different starting points. So increase the diversity of answers and make one big brain out of a group of people. This quickly produces 20-60% more intelligence. Moreover, you will avoid bias because now you are basing your answers on the answers of many people and that's smarter! Asking only one or a few people can be - unintentionally or intentionally - very misleading. With a diversity of answers and perspectives, triggered by your rock-solid questions, you solve your questions sustainably, completely, quickly and deeply.

**"You will involve people in the organizational design process not by asking questions once, but by repeating them. Collecting needs at the start, generating ideas during the process, and testing your organization design at the end of the process. That is true added value! Everything starts with rock-solid, open questions."**

**- Mark Nijssen -**

### **17. Keep asking deliberate open-ended questions**

Stay hungry. Stay curious. Keep asking questions. Keep discovering, improving, innovating. Markets and societies change. Cultures are in motion. People don't sit still either. By continuing to ask questions, you are constantly learning, adapting and in the driver's seat, hence, leading with the people, together!

### **18. Ask your deliberate open-ended questions preferably anonymously and online**

You already know this. Designing rock deliberate open-ended questions requires you to take many things into account. That takes time. Answering them also takes time (Principle 6). Moreover, to get the most honest answers, to really get to the bottom of things, anonymity and respect for privacy are essential. Certainly when it comes to subjects that involve dependency, or a power relationship such as hierarchy in an organization. If the persons you ask your questions think that their opinion is different, too creative or not 'smart enough', it may be that people prefer to avoid your questions or answer them in an automatic pilot mode. Soon, social desirability will play a negative, yet avoidable role. They may also blame you for putting them under unpleasant pressure or not providing real space for their answers. Give your rock-solid, open-ended questions the chance to produce rock-solid answers. In combination with the - in most cases - required anonymity, our advice is to ask your questions online.



## The Dialogue & CircleLytics

Reflection and learning from others: conditions of a dialogue

Good, deliberate open-ended questions open up a conversation, a dialogue. A dialogue can only be said to exist when people are prepared to seek out different perspectives to arrive at improved points of view together. CircleLytics has developed the online dialogue to enable small to (very) large groups of 10,000s of people to enter into dialogue safely and confidentially. Principles 6 and 16 are very important; give people time to reflect, the brain requires it, your question deserves it, and preferably submit your questions to larger groups to increase diversity and insight.

How does the CircleLytics dialogue work?

CircleLytics facilitates asking rock deliberate open-ended questions to any group size, and aggregates the results in real-time. You can also add closed scales. The combination can be very powerful. The CircleLytics dialogue takes place in 2 asynchronous rounds in order to achieve reflection and time to 'learn from each other'. It works as follows: the answers from the 1st round are returned by means of a sophisticated algorithm, divided among all respondents. They (gladly!) get to work on that. In the second round, where the dialogue lies, respondents will once again get to work on your open-ended questions, but this time from the perspective of others. They will enrich the answers of others, say whether they support and appreciate them or not. They give scores to clarify this (sentiment and strength of their sentiment), they may click on important words from other people's opinions, and explain why. This dialogue round is enormously enriching, clarifying, and unprecedentedly instructive for the respondents themselves. It turns out that people enjoy reading and appreciating opinions that differ from their own. On reflection, people think differently about your question than they did at the start. That is why the reflection time is so important. You can achieve this, for your important topics and questions, in a dialogue process, without time pressure and with one or more nights of sleep. This is how our brain works best. And this is how you forge people into one big brain and your questions are answered in depth. Dialogue and your open-ended questions together form an indispensable approach to achieving continuous improvement. So keep asking open-ended questions and keep up the dialogue!



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Interested to know more about the CircleLytics Dialogue? Watch our [short video](#) or request a [demo](#) today.



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