



White*Paper*™

The Genius Comes from Asking the Right Question IIA CSA Conference Presentation

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Forward

This paper was presented at the Institute of Internal Auditors conference on Control Self Assessment, Chicago, August, 1998. Its focus and purpose is to improve self-assessment workshops where keypads have been added to the mix. However, most of the material is applicable to workshop processes and facilitation where similar outcomes are generated with more traditional workshop techniques.

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Introduction: Learning Objectives

What keypads do to group dynamics. There is no question about it! A workshop that involves polling via keypads creates group dynamics simply different from those that do not. Opportunities can be enhanced and pitfalls avoided by understanding the impact of bringing keypads into the meeting room.

An outcome-oriented way of designing workshops. Far too many workshops are designed and/or facilitated without a clear definition or understanding of the desired outcomes. Every activity in the workshop has an outcome and impact on the workshop itself and then on the client organization. These outcomes are either intended and managed, or left to chance. For better or for worse, in-meeting polling amplifies the outcomes and likewise the need to understand and manage them.

A wishful way of thinking. Almost by definition, CSA is a diagnostic process that discovers weaknesses. Wishful thinking changes the thought process from thinking about problems and weaknesses to thinking about solutions and successes. For any workshop with a goal of generating ideas of what to do about weaknesses, this way of thinking can make a tremendous difference, in both designing the process and facilitating a group working through it.

The art of asking The Right Question (TRQs). What do you think about this? vs. How do you feel about this? How are we doing on this? vs. Are we doing better or worse than before? How important is it to do this? vs. If we can only do two, is this one of them? What is stopping us? vs. What will we get if we do it? These seemingly subtle differences in questions not only generate different responses, they generate different ways of thinking, and they certainly generate a different climate in the workshop.

What to do with the responses to those questions. You have asked the right question. You have even generated a useful response. Now what? Asking the right question only creates the opportunity for genius. What is done with the response is what cinches it.

Keypads Change the Group Dynamic



This is a different kind of meeting. It is not often that participants, especially front-line folk, get invited to meetings where the focus is on their opinion about things. It is *really* a surprise when they see their collective, unfiltered opinion before anyone else does. As a result, they assume a new set of rules applies to their own behavior in the workshop, which may be quite different from what they might use in other meeting settings. This means processes should be designed and facilitated to promote the desired behaviors (for example, serious vs. somber, participant discussion vs. the facilitator talking, open & honest vs. careful and guarded). Since these patterns get crystallized in the first few minutes of the workshop, never underestimate the impact of the warm-up exercise.

TRQ (The Right Question): How can I exploit the novelty of the polling-results-discussion feedback loop to promote the participant behaviors I want?

Process design and facilitation gets amplified (for better or for worse). This effect is robust and applies to many aspects of the workshop. Here are some examples:

Bad: Your instructions for a poll get muddled and some participants are rating their department and others are rating the whole company. Or, your questions have different meanings for different participants.

Bad: They tell you something via polling and you ignore it. Instead you apply your own content expertise and subordinate your role as *process* facilitator.

Good or Bad, depending on what happens to the outcomes: Your workshop has produced some clear areas of concern and some clear solutions for dealing with them. Good when participants see corrective action happening after the workshop; bad when they don't.

TRQ: How can I utilize the amplification effect to improve the odds of achieving the outcomes intended for the workshop?

Discussion revolves around polling results. Much of the workshop will revolve around participant responses to polling questions. This is because the real value of the polling results is their ability to stimulate interpretation and explanation of audience opinions.

This means the facilitator must know how to show the results and lead discussion in the most effective way to promote the quality of discussion desired. It also means the participants leave the workshop thinking what you asked them about is important.

TRQ: What is the best way to show the polling results (when, and what graph type) to generate the discussion I am after?

TRQ: What is the best way for me to facilitate a discussion about the polling results to achieve the outcome I am after? What is the best way to make use of every possible way the participants may respond (since I really don't know how they will respond)?

Everyone participates a little more easily. During polling, of course it is easy for everyone to respond and participate by giving their quantitative opinion. It is also easier to stimulate rich discussion. When the graphs appear, it is a little easier for the non-talkers to talk “about the data,” and a little harder for the “talkers” to do so. Once the non-talkers find they see things much like their peers do, it makes it easier for them to express an opinion verbally (the opposite can be true too). For example, if a poll indicates most participants gave a negative rating about a sensitive area, it is easier to explain and interpret *why* they feel this way once they know *that* they feel this way (and that they are not alone).



We often say traditional meeting processes spend 80% of the time finding out *what* people believe, leaving only 20% to determine what it means and what to do about it. Polling can reverse this; it is easy and fast to determine *what* participants believe, leaving the remainder to interpret what it means and what to do about it.

TRQ: What is the best way for me to draw out the non-talkers and quiet down the talkers (if necessary)? How can I draw out discussion about an outlier (i.e., when only one or two participants express a minority opinion)? What is the best way to

close off discussion when it is time to move on? What is the best way to reign in tangential discussion?

Participants have higher expectations for outcomes. For example:

You conduct a poll to profile the strengths and weaknesses of the control climate and your participants indicate quite clearly that something is amiss. Now they know, and they know that *you* know, and they wait to see if anything will happen after the workshop. This is quite different than a one-on-one interview where they don't know what others are saying, or a general discussion that brings something up. With polling, they *know* you and your computer "have the information." Now post-workshop follow up becomes critical.

A well-designed, competently facilitated self-assessment workshop brings out a level of honesty and self-exposure that is rare in the corporate world. Your participants are essentially making an emotional deal with you: "I can see you take this risk and control stuff very seriously and that it is, indeed, serious stuff. Additionally, you (as an auditor) are someone I can trust, so I will be more forthcoming and daring than I would ever be in, say, a department meeting. I do this because I want to make a difference. I want to improve our company and preserve my future in it. I will do this once and see what happens. If the "what happens" is nothing or comes back on me negatively in some way, I will never expose myself again...get it?"

***TRQ:** How can I make it clear to my participants what will happen to the results of the workshop? How can I ensure that bad things will not happen to them personally because of their honesty? How can I ensure they will see something good happen in their workplace because of the information they provided?*

Participants enjoy seeing their collective beliefs about things they care about. Probably the most pervasive finding in workshops that involve polling is how much participants enjoy the experience. Psychology theorists go as far as to say that we humans have an innate need to know how we (and our beliefs) compare to others; that we feel more comfortable as we know more about how we fit in. Rapid-feedback polling on meaningful material is tremendous for supplying this information.

You can count on high ratings and you can count on most participants being comfortable enough to contribute to discussions. You can also count on them talking about what they learned about the beliefs of their workshop group as soon as they get the opportunity. Be prepared for a grapevine with high velocity.

***TRQ:** How can I make use of the fact they will enjoy the workshop experience and feel quite comfortable in talking openly? Since they will be talking about the experience, and even the results, shortly after with their colleagues, how can I increase the odds the lunchroom talk will result in good, rather than bad, things for the client organization?*

An Outcome-Oriented Way to Design Workshops

All activities, including the invitations and venue, have outcomes...manage them.

Every activity surrounding the workshop creates an outcome that is either managed for effectiveness or left to chance. For example, when the invitations to the workshop are received by participants, expectations about the workshop are created...that is an outcome. Did the Division President, the General Auditor, or their Supervisor issue the invitation? Does it say why they were invited and what their role is? Does it say who else is invited and why? Does it include the purpose of the workshop and the outcomes expected? Is the venue a special off-site location or the usual meeting room off the cafeteria?

Then, when they arrive at the workshop, is someone there to greet them? Are refreshments available? Do you start on time or wait for late arrivals? How long do you wait? Do you have arranged seating with name cards? Are handouts or flip-charts available or visible that orient them to the purpose or methods of the workshop? Does someone else kick off the workshop or are you on your own? What outcome is that someone else trying to achieve when she kicks off the meeting?

***TRQ:** For every design and facilitation decision I need to make, what can I do to create an outcome that will support the overall outcomes I need from the workshop?*

Every outcome combines to influence the next activity. The point of the examples above is that the workshop designer makes every one of these decisions and does so either thoughtfully, with the desired outcome in mind, or casually, not really thinking about the outcome of the decision. Notice the actual workshop has not even begun, but the outcomes of these decisions have already set the stage in terms of participant expectations, even biasing how the participants will interact with each other and with the facilitator. When the workshop actually begins, the outcomes of each activity become even more important to the success of whatever follows.

Consider the first activity after the workshop actually begins...the first words to be uttered by the facilitator or kick-off person. Is it a greeting? Is it serious or humorous? Is it a lecture? Is it a question? Is the first activity an orientation to the agenda and objectives? Does it include something like "We are auditors and we are here to audit you?" Does it communicate the role of the participants?

These early activities establish the "rules of engagement" for the duration of the workshop, from the rapport (and trust level) the facilitator has with the participants to whether participants think their role is to mostly talk or to mostly listen.

For example, most workshops that use polling include an early "warm up" question. But consider the outcome of this early activity. A "funny" question may break the "social ice" (outcome), teach them how to use the keypads (outcome), make sure the equipment is working (outcome), and introduce the poll-results feedback loop (outcome). But has it

generated all the outcomes you want? Has it set the right tone for the meeting (e.g., light vs. serious)? Does it include participant discussion of the results? Does it make it a little easier for participants to talk about sensitive issues with others watching and listening? Does it make it clear their role is to talk and yours is to listen?

***TRQ:** How can I manage the outcomes of all prior activities to increase the odds of the optimal communication climate and the right cognitive framework being in place for the activities that follow?*

Outcomes come in two flavors: Hard and Soft. Hard outcomes are the “deliverables” you take from the workshop; things like a control climate profile, a prioritized list of solutions, or a report describing the findings of the workshop. The “harder” the outcome, usually the easier it is to make sure it is clear and well defined before you get started. For example, the quantitative results of a control climate polling series is “very hard” and is often designed so the results can be combined with similar results from other workshops and even tracked over time. A less “hard” outcome is a list of concerns or list of solutions where some interpretation on the part of the meeting facilitator (or observer) is required to make them useful (e.g., “it looked like most participants were supportive of...”).

Soft outcomes, on the other hand, are what your *participants* take away from the workshop in terms of feelings and behaviors, and these too can be managed. When designing a workshop, **TRQ** is “*How are participants feeling at the end of the workshop?*” and/or “*What are they saying to each other as they walk back to work?*” and/or “*What are they saying to their colleagues when they are asked ‘What was that all about?’*”

***TRQ:** How can I define and select my outcomes, both hard and soft, so there is no confusion about what they are and whether or not we delivered them?*

How participants will respond is just a guess. The primary difference between interactive workshops and presentation, training, or other information-dissemination meetings is the source of the information. In CSA workshops, the information predominantly comes from the participants and you can only guess about what they will come up with, or how they will respond to your queries and activities.

Therefore you must be prepared (i.e., have a plan and method) for dealing with every possible way the results may come out.

***TRQ:** For every activity in my workshop where we are eliciting information from our participants, and for every possible way in which they may respond, what is the best way to facilitate the results to achieve the outcomes we are after?*

Very simply, what is the outcome we are trying to achieve (and where does it leave us?) Again, every activity has an outcome and it should be clear what you are trying to achieve by it. But you also need to consider where the activity will leave the

group emotionally and cognitively. If you use the keypads to ask a question or series of questions, you should be able to answer **TRQ**: “*Why am I asking them? What outcome am I after?*”

Billiards and pool players refer to a “leave” as their position for the next shot following their last, successful shot. Similarly, golfers refer to their “lie” as their position for their next shot. Individual workshop activities also create a “leave” or “lie” for the next activity and can make or break it. A good example of a bad “leave” in polling exercises is to conceptually reverse the scale on the next activity (for example, on prior polls high responses meant positive ratings, but on this one they mean negative ratings).

TRQ: *How can I design and arrange the workshop activities sequentially to optimize my “leave” for the next activity?*

A Wishful Way of Thinking

Our default way of thinking is “What’s wrong?” And “*Is there anything we should be concerned about?*”, “*What is getting in the way of...?*”, or “*What is the risk of...?*” are just variations on the same question. Add to this the fact that your participants expect you (as an auditor) to only be interested in this sort of thing (“*What might be bad around here?*”) and you have the optimal environment for *problem-based thinking*.

Once we start with a problem-based orientation, our thinking naturally progresses through a “*Why do we have a problem?*”, “*What or who is causing it?*”, “*What or who is to blame?*”, “*Why can’t we fix it?*”, and “*What are the odds we will fix it?*”.

Note that a control climate self-assessment profile is usually designed to create a gap between what is and what could or should be. If only the weaknesses get focused on and discussed, you are strengthening the tendency to engage in problem-based thinking.

This is not to say problem-based thinking is bad. It is even pretty good for diagnosing what is wrong.

TRQ: *Where should I use a problem-based approach because it is good for diagnosing weaknesses?*

The most constructive way we can think is “What I wish for is...”. In many ways this method is similar to visualization practices many athletes use to help them perform at their best. Rather than focus on the pain of training, how tough the competition is, or how difficult the road ahead, instead they visualize crossing the finish line first, holding the prize in their hand, or calling mom to share in their success.

To translate this method into workshop terms, let’s say your participants have identified (diagnosed) a serious weakness in plant safety. The facilitator flips this around by asking what the participants wish for instead, to which they come up with something like

“We wish for a safe plant.” The facilitator then helps everyone envision a safe plant and what it would be like to work in one and what it would do for the company. Once the the image is firmly in place, the discussion focuses on what it *took* (note past tense) to get there.

TRQ: Where should I use a wishful thinking approach because it is good for generating creative solutions?

One is good for diagnosis, the other for solutions. These two methods need to be used in tandem unless your outcomes do not include solutions. However, you should not rush to solutions until you diagnose. So, if your outcome does include solutions, you will need a diagnosis phase as well.

TRQ: How can I use problem-oriented methods and wishful-thinking methods in tandem to complement the outcomes of either method?

A Wishful Way of Thinking (The Steps)

Here are the steps to engage wishful thinking:

Get the prerequisite motivational gap in place. You cannot easily engage wishful thinking unless your participants wish for something different than the current situation. In other words, are they concerned (dissatisfied) enough about the current state of affairs that they wish for a better way? Until they wish for a better way, they will not engage their brains creatively to find one.

This is why it is relatively easy to get lots of energy and solutions around objectives *they* care about and a lot harder around objectives only *someone else* cares about. It is also why many CSA workshops include an activity whose outcome is to make a COSO model or management’s objectives relevant to the participants.

TRQ: Is the gap between what is and what should be wide enough that it can motivate change? What can I do to help them care about the weaknesses enough to generate creative solutions?

Visualize the wished-for state, the more vividly the better. Continuing with the safe plant example, close your eyes for a moment and imagine a perfectly safe plant. You come to work each day knowing you and your colleagues don’t have to worry about an accident outside of your control. When you walked in today you took pride in the “1000 days without an accident” signs posted all over the place. *You*, along with your plant manager and some other colleagues are getting an award today for making it happen: “The Best-of-the-Best.” How does it feel? **Wonderful**. How do you feel? **Proud**. What has it done for us? **Wow!** What problems went away? **Wow!!** What else is now possible? **Wow!!!**

TRQ: What can I do to make the wished-for image as vivid and compelling as possible in the minds of the participants?

What was done to get there? And which of these really made the difference? The consistent use of the past tense of these verbs is critical to maintaining the wished-for image. But, with that in mind, the first task is to generate ideas of what was done to make the plant the award winner for the Best-of-the-best.

*TRQ: What **did** we do to become the best of the best?* This is a bit more than TRQ. It implies TRP (the right process) which, in this case, is brainstorming or brainwriting or sticky wall or some other version of nominal group technique where ideas about what we did freely flow and are not criticized (yet).

Once the “what we did” (solutions) list has been generated, a subsequent step filters the ideas. First the solutions are organized and reworded to eliminate redundancy, create verbal consistency, and create conceptual “scope equality”. Scope equality means your list should not include solutions as different as “provide training in how to lift” and “provide training in all aspects of plant safety.” Once the list of solutions has been created:

*TRQ: Imagine you are at the Best-of-the-Best award celebration having a drink with the plant supervisor. She says, “You know, we did a lot of things to make our plant the best, but looking back on it, wh at **really** made the difference?”*

Now when you run through a poll to select the critical few, those solutions that *made* the biggest impact, you want to continue the wish-for state as the criterion against which they will judge the solutions.

TRQ: Is this the solution really make the difference?”

What was the first step that got things moving? Unfortunately, most organizations have a tough time getting change initiatives started. One of the benefits of this phase is not only to find a good first step, but to clearly define whether or not it is something under their control (or their department’s), or if it is something that needs to be done by someone else (e.g., the first step toward plant safety might have been for top management to have become aware that our plant was knowingly sacrificing safety to gain productivity).

You will want to go through a similar process as the last phase to find the best first step, although it will go much more quickly and probably be based on one of the solutions.

TRQ: Looking back, what was the first step that was the lynch pin that got things moving?

The Art of Asking the Right Question

The right setup. Every query takes place in a context which includes all information the *participants* think is relevant to their task of answering. Everything that has transpired in the workshop, plus whatever you do to frame up this particular question, combines to create the setup.

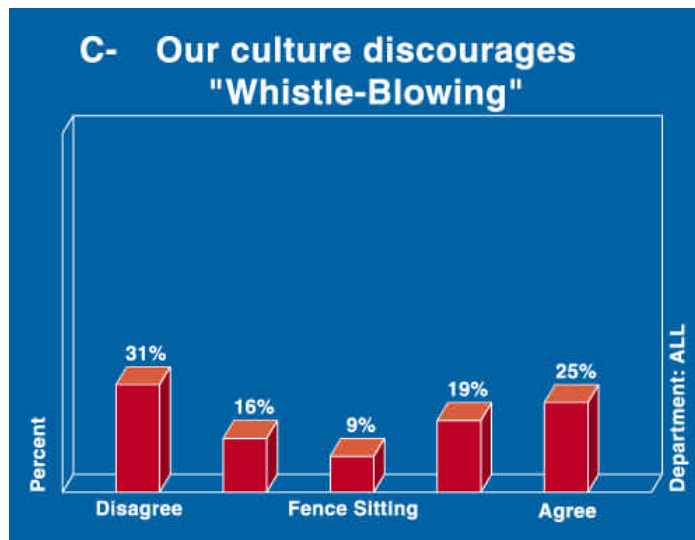
The wishful thinking method is a setup, but so are all questions preceded by “*What if...?*”, “*Just suppose...*”, and the like.

When setting up for polling exercises, the setup is the instruction given. Because the setup is so important, we recommend you *always* write out the instructions and either memorize them or read them.

TRQ: *What can I do to set up the question(s) so the response contributes positively to the outcome I need?*

The right timing. This is part of the right setup, but has more to do with the mood and emotional climate of your participants. For example, before you begin asking questions about sensitive issues, you need to have the trust of your participants or you cannot expect good information to flow freely.

TRQ: *What can I do to make sure my participants are emotionally prepared to deal with this next question?*



Graph of Polling Results

The right valence. Sometimes your questions are looking for what is wrong and other times for what is right. Too many questions (or activities) framed negatively can create a “woe is us” climate that is hard to overcome. Likewise, too much framed positively can create a “Pollyanna” atmosphere which is just as hard to overcome. The trick is to balance the valence of your questions and activities.

TRQ: *Is it time for me to frame my questions and activities positively, or is it time to frame them negatively?*

The right projection. Every time you verbalize a question, the message comes from the actual words combined with your projection of them. Projection includes your tone of voice, the amount of energy or emotion you pump into it, the volume, etc. You can easily project seriousness, sarcasm, humor, disgust, excitement, importance, boredom, and any number of other emotions.

TRQ: What is the best projection for this question at this time?

The right response set. Every question also includes the communication of the type of answer you will accept. You either put the response set out there explicitly, or you let your participants guess about what it is. During polling activities the response choices are clear (although they may say the right choice is not up there), but during brainstorming or brainwriting activities they need to be made explicit. There is not much you can do that is more damaging to your group process than to ask a question without a clear response set, then reject one response after another with “that is not *exactly* what I am looking for.”

In polling activities, the response set dramatically changes how the discussion will go. For example, many CSA workshops have taken to a 1-to-9 or 1-to-10 point unlabeled scale for assessments of control climate. When the results of, say 12 participant responses show a few at 6, a few at 7, a few more at 8, and the rest at 9, what is there for participants to discuss? Contrast that with a shorter, labeled scale where a 1 means “This does not describe us at all”, a 5 means “This describes us to a “T”, and a 3 means “This is us about half the time.” Now you know what they said when they responded, and so do they.

TRQ: What is the best response set to deliver the outcome I need?

Type of TRQs

Think vs. Feel. “What do you think about...?” creates a different outcome than “How do you feel about...?”. For one thing, everyone is entitled to their feelings without criticism, whereas thinking is there for debate, criticism and/or further analysis.

Divergent vs. Convergent. “What, *generally*, will this do for us?” expands the domain and opens up the discussion. Compare this to “What, *specifically*, will this do for us?” which constricts the domain and focuses the discussion. By nature, brainstorming and brainwriting activities are divergent, whereas polling to select the critical few is convergent.

Generally, you want your workshop to move in and out of divergent and convergent phases.

Absolutely so? Vs. Relatively so? “How important is this to achieving our goal?” asks for an absolute judgment and many workshop activities have already filtered things down to where *only* the important are on the list. This leads to everything being rated as

being important. This produces a quite different outcome from a setup that says we can't do everything so, "If we can only do a few, which should we do to produce the highest leverage in achieving our goal?".

Another type of relative judgment compares performance now to performance at some other point in time. "*What is our performance on this factor?*" provides good data about performance right now, but "*How does our performance today compare to 1 year ago?*" tells us whether things are getting better, staying the same, or getting worse. And "*How much do we need to improve to accomplish...?*" tells us how big the gap is. All are good methods; as usual, it depends on the outcome you are after.

Polling vs. Discussing. You ask for opinion through the keypads and you ask for it through discussion. Generally, the results of polling activities serve as a setup to good discussion about the meaning of the results.

Remember, polling creates convergence and discussion is usually divergent. When facilitating the discussion, you can use the results of polling to refocus discussion, creating convergence when you need it.

Theirs vs. Yours. Is your question important to you or is it important to your participants? If you can do it, you always want to transfer importance / relevance / ownership from you to them.

Consider a 20-element control climate profile based on some arcane (to them) COSO or COCO control model. Now you present the elements one at a time for them to judge; is this theirs or yours? If you merely show them the elements and explain the rationale and where the elements come from, you have set up the activity in a way that it is meaningful to them. You can *really* transfer ownership by inviting them to add to the elements if it appears something important has been left out.

We vs. You vs. They.

Watch your language!
Most effective facilitators create rapport with their participants by using "we" a lot. And you lose a lot by referring to yourself as me, I or us. You may not, in fact, ordinarily belong to the group who make up your audience. During the workshop however, *we* are all trying to achieve the same outcomes.



“You” is a funny word anyway. When you say “*What do you think about this?*”, are you referring to the group or to an individual (it probably gets interpreted depending on what your eyes are focused on at the time).

Worst of all is *they*. It means nothing but often serves as the scapegoat and stops constructive discussion. When you hear “they,” **TRQ** is “*Who, specifically is they?*”. Try your next solution-generating activity (wishful thinking) with “What did *we* do to win that Best-of-the-Best award?”

Scales

Offer fewer response choices. Polling results are more meaningful to participants when there are fewer choices. This is especially so in small workshops (8-15 participants). It helps the discussions flow when participants see several of them made the same choice. Lots of choices simply reduces the odds of that happening.

TRQ: How can I make this question work with fewer choices?

Create meaning for every choice. It helps to have clear verbal meaning attached to every response choice, or at least *most* choices. Then, when a graph shows 8 of 10 participants chose “This is us about a quarter of the time,” discussion about what it means becomes easy because it is clear to them what they said.

Compare this to what would happen on a 1-to-9 scale, where the low and high ends of the scale are anchored with “Does not describe us at all” and “Describes us precisely.” Conceptually similar responses would produce a few participants who choose 2, a few 3, a few more 4, etc. About the best you can say to describe what their responses is “it looks like we rated toward the low end” or “the average is a 3.5...toward the low end.”

This change from a frame of “8 of 10 of us responded this describes us about 1/4 of the time” to “most of us are on the low end” simply makes things less factual and more ambiguous. Now the facilitator must work to make the results meaningful to participants.

TRQ: How can I select response choices, then label those choices to make the graphs of polling results clear and unambiguous?

Use ordinary language. As you can see, good scales are all about creating as much meaning during polling (input) and in the results (output) as you can. Remember, garbage in means garbage out, and the easiest way to create garbage is to use a secret language the participants don’t understand, or don’t have the same meaning for as you have.

Here you need to be careful of your professional expertise (usually full of secret jargon like “risk” and “control”) as well as guru advice (i.e., conceptual models and words worked mostly by high priests like COCO and COSO). Maybe the most secret language

of all (since it means something different to every single person), is “On a 7 point scale, how do you feel about...?”).

***TRQ:** Have I used words and concepts that mean the same things to the participants? Do they mean the same thing to me?*

Make high scores mean positive things. For most of us, high scores mean positive things and participants often find themselves responding to polls that way even when the polling screen *clearly and in big letters* is telling them the opposite. Furthermore, as a facilitator you would have to remind your audience that low scores are good scores (like golf). Why fight it?

***TRQ:** How can I word this scale so high choices mean positive things?*

This can become conceptually tricky when compounded with double negatives. For example, the question stem is “Don’t require so much overtime” and the polling choices have a low end of “endorse” and a high end of “oppose”. This mistake almost guarantees near random responses.

Think consistency. Whatever scale you select, be consistent and introduce as few new scales and response choices as you can get away with. If several activities can use the same scale, polling is quicker and results are perceived and interpreted by the participants more quickly.

Reversing scale directionality, using 5-point scales in some places and 6-point in others, using Yes-maybe-no in some places and Yes-no-maybe in others, etc. all conspire to slow things down, increase the odds of erroneous responses, and make it more difficult to use the graphs to open up discussion. Again, why fight it?

***TRQ:** How can I achieve consistency both within and across activities ? How can I take advantage of the fact they have already learned how to work with a scale?*

Use ratio scales to weight choices. Ratio scales are useful when you want a few extremely high choices to be worth a whole lot more than lots of lower choices. For example, you may want a rating of “Mission critical, an absolute must” to be worth 8 “Nice to have’s.” This is easy to do by labeling the “1” choice as “Nice to have” and the “8” choice as “Mission critical.” Then the averages are computed with an 8-to-1 ratio. Ratio scales use arithmetic ratios and always begin with zero. For example, 0,1,2,4,8 and 0,1,3,9 are both ratio scales. Zero always means something like “Do nothing,” “No resources,” “Not important at all,” or “No impact whatsoever.” During polling you instruct participants not to use the in-between choices *unless they absolutely have to*. When you use these kinds of scales, it is important to get the concept across that a “mission critical” is worth 8 “nice-to-haves”.

***TRQ:** Would a ratio scale with weighted choices do a better job of delivering the outcome we need?*

Use even-numbered scales to force choice. Using an odd number of choices allows, even promotes “neutral,” “on-the-fence,” “neither agree nor disagree” responding. An alternative is to use an even number of choices where the midpoints are along the lines of “tend to disagree” and “tend to agree” or “a little opposed” and “a little in favor of”. You can even allow them to abstain if they simply don’t care or have no opinion at all.

When you allow abstain responses, it is important to distinguish them from participants who simply did not respond to the question. In the case of an abstain response, they are actually providing data, although not in a way you can do much arithmetic on it (for example, compute an average).

It is just harder to get a discussion going when many participants have responded in the middle. And it is extremely rare for participants to rebel against “tend to…” language with “but I am *exactly* in the middle.”

TRQ: Would an even number of choices lead to more meaningful data and better discussions?

What to do with the Responses to those Questions

What is the outcome I am after? Always consider the outcome you are after when processing the results of a question. Should you probe further, or do you need to move on to accomplish other important outcomes? Are you looking for solutions or trying to further understand a diagnosis?

Am I listening carefully? When a participant is speaking, you need to listen carefully to the words, the emotion, even the body language. Whatever you do, don’t be distracted with something else unless your purpose is to turn the speaker off. This means you need to keep your eyes carefully focused on them.

Am I paraphrasing even more carefully? Most CSA workshops include a phase where responses are recorded publicly on a computer or flipchart. And, in most cases, the facilitator is feeding the comments back to the participant to ensure they heard correctly and to make the job of the recorder a little easier. When you do this, be sure you paraphrase their comment accurately with *their* words, and even their emotion. In any case, there is value in *TRQ: “Does this accurately capture what you said?”*

Am I validating participant contributions? Every comment a participant makes is put out there because *they* think it is worthwhile and is relevant somehow. That said, there are plenty of times the comments don’t seem to make sense (to you). *TRQ* like “*I’m sorry. I didn’t catch what you meant..., could you please say it a different way?*” nicely validates their contribution while, at the same time, helps to converge wild discussion.

Am I remembering who the expert is? You are a trained professional in risk and control and, furthermore, have conducted scores of these workshops. You might even be able to write the report without the workshop. Oh Lord, it’s hard to be humble.

You have to keep in mind your role is that of *process* expert, not *content* expert.

Your participants know more about what goes on in their workplace than you will ever know. Your job is to lead them through a process that helps them think more clearly and to create an environment in which they are willing to openly and honestly talk about what they are thinking.

Is it time for attribution or safety? *“Remember when John said the plant wasn’t safe and Susan said it was?” vs. “Remember when someone said the plant wasn’t safe and somebody else said it was?”* Or when probing an outlier in polling results: *“Would whoever responded this way like to say why?” vs. “Only one person responded this way; what would have to be going on to make some of the rest of you respond this way?”*

An entire workshop facilitated without attribution tends to become lifeless, but is sometimes necessary when trust and rapport levels are low. Good facilitators tend to use as much attribution as they can, given the trust and rapport levels. They also do everything they can to increase trust and rapport levels to the highest states possible.

Ironically, the intimacy developed by appropriate levels of attribution *increases* levels of rapport and trust in ways that operating in a strictly anonymous way can never do.

So, what...?, So why...? *“Half of us gave this the lowest rating we could and half the highest, so what do you think that is telling us?” “Those of us from purchasing rated this quite differently than those of us from payables, so why do you suppose that is?”*

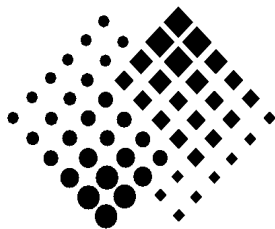
It looks like we rated some elements quite highly and others much lower, so what does that mean to us?” “It looks like a few of our activities were rated as both high impact and high likelihood, so what does it mean when something that has a high impact is likely to happen?” “So what, should we do about something that has a high impact and you think is likely to happen?”

So what...? TRQs can open up a good discussion about polling data and is fairly easy for most participants to respond to. Whereas, So why...? TRQs ask for a higher level of analysis and limit the number of participants who are likely to respond.

About the Author

Kimbal L. Wheatley is founder and Chairman of Option Technologies. He is directly responsible for the conceptual development of OTI's keypad EMS -- OptionFinder. Mr. Wheatley has been a scientist, college professor, academic administrator, hospital administrator, consultant, marketer and entrepreneur. His ability to switch from concentrated detailed analysis to highly creative brainstorming has permitted him to work effectively with many different kinds of people in a variety of settings.

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Risk Self-Assessment: Increasing speed, quality, and focus in the Audit Planning Process. *Review and clarify the business strategy, identify and prioritize the risks to the company, benefits of the Self-Assessment approach.*

CSA Design and Facilitation Using Keypad Technology: Presented at IIA CSA Conference, 1997. *Reliable methods, KISS mantra, staying focused on desired outcomes, participants interpretation of polling data, rehearsal for facilitators.*

The Genius Comes from Asking the Right Question: Presented at IIA CSA Conference, 1998. *Keypads change the group dynamic, an outcome oriented way to design workshops, the Art of Asking the Right Question, Using Scales, what to do with the responses to those questions.*

Advantages of Electronic Participation in Workshops and Other Meetings: Presented at IIA CSA Conference, 1999. *What is the CSA/RSA movement trying to accomplish, What do management, participants think of CSA/RSA, what do CSA professionals like about electronic participation, how is electronic participation different from other forms of participation.*

Complying with Medicare Guidelines: Lessons from the Auditors: Lessons from the audit community, the self-assessment workshop, introduction of real-time, anonymous polling, CSA methods and healthcare compliance, changing the culture begins in the workshops and continues in a cycle of improvement and risk reduction, assessment data serves as evidence of due care, benefits felt throughout the organization.

Good Things Come in Small Packages: Facilitated Meetings Using the OptionFinder System. *Benefits of keypads in meetings, designing the OptionFinder System into a meeting process, facilitating with the OptionFinder System.* Original publication reference: Flexner, William A. & Wheatley, Kimbal L. (1997) When You Really Must Have Them; Face-to-Face Meetings Using Keypad Electronic Meeting Systems. In David Coleman (Ed.) , Groupware (pp.193-205). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

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