

## Questions that Matter: A Tool for Understanding Dynamics in Complex Situations

The following questions are designed to help evaluators, planners, and implementers of change initiatives to work with complex situations and systems. The questions assume that a definable “intervention” is being contemplated, implemented, or studied/evaluated in the situation. The boundaries of the intervention may be relatively fixed or very permeable. The questions draw attention to boundaries, relationships, and differences within complex systems/situations that create patterns that can be influenced.

Conditions Creating System Dynamics	Example Questions to Ask
<p><b>Boundaries:</b> Boundaries are demarcations that create a region or entity. Boundaries can refer to physical entities, organizational identity, social systems, rules of conduct, and other demarcations. Boundaries are often permeable to allow exchange with the environment and also impermeable in that they distinguish the system or other entity from its environment.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Focus/direction:</i> Focus may refer to specific short and/or long term outcomes that are sought, a general direction in which a system is moving, or some combination of these.</li> <li>• <i>Resources:</i> Resources refers to the human, financial, physical, and other resources that can be used to move in a desired direction.</li> <li>• <i>Time and Location:</i> Change happens over time and may vary depending on the location in which it is occurring.</li> </ul>	How changeable/stable/permeable are the boundaries of and between the interventions and its context/situation?
	How are the boundaries changing among the organized, self-organizing, and unorganized dynamics of the intervention and its context/situation?
	What changes in boundaries would bring new creative energy or stabilizing energy into the work?
	What are the few important areas to focus on for the intervention at this point in time?
	What new desired outcomes or directions are being identified?
	Are the criteria for success changing?
	What resources are available to contribute to the desired direction?
	How do changes in time, location, and resources affect boundaries of the intervention and its context/situation?
	What is the rate and nature of changes/differences in patterns or conditions across time? Across locations?
	What shifts are needed in resources to continue toward the goal and/or in a desired manner?
<p><b>Relationships (interconnections):</b> Relationships refers to the connections and exchanges that exist among bounded parts of a system. Interconnections/relationships tend to be key aspects of forming patterns. The connections may be as, or more, important than the entities making up a system. Some relationships form systems such as hierarchical systems, networks,</p>	What relationships appear to be contributing to meaningful results or conditions?
	What are the relationships/connections among the stakeholders?
	How might changes in relationships affect the short and long term outcomes or general direction of the work?

Conditions Creating System Dynamics	Example Questions to Ask
families, communities, and social groups. Cause and effect relationships are another type of relationship.	What feedback loops are built into the project/initiative and the larger system?
<p><b>Perspectives/Differences/diversity/energy:</b>            Perspectives refers to worldviews and purposes. Different stakeholders may have different perspectives on a given situation although all those within a given stakeholder group do not necessarily have the same perspective.            Differences create energy. It may be negative or positive from various perspectives but the energy gives the potential for movement.            Diversity tends to create energy. When looking for differences that matter, look for the nature of the energy within a bounded region.</p>	Is there sufficient diversity in the self-organizing units to stimulate creative ways of addressing challenging issues?
	What are the important power dynamics in the intervention or between the intervention and its context/larger system?
	Where is energy being created? Where is it stagnating?
	What variation in perspectives (worldviews and purposes) are present within the work and what are the patterns of where they exist?
	Is there sufficient diversity in the self-organizing units to stimulate creative ways of addressing challenging issues?
	What shifts are occurring in the acceptance and spread of new project philosophies?
	What variations exist in whose expertise is valued?
	Are stakeholders missing or avoiding an important perspective?
	What new definitions of diversity may help provide the basis for stimulating movement in the desired direction through self-organizing means?
Are new perspectives (worldviews) arising within the project?	

*Questions that Matter: A Tool for Working in Complex Situations* is part of a series of tools developed by InSites ([www.insites.org](http://www.insites.org)). The series is designed to support those engaged in learning, inquiry, and practice within complex social settings.

Reference:

Parsons, B. and Jessup, P. (2011). "Questions that Matter: A Tool for Understanding Dynamics in Complex Situations". Ft. Collins, CO: InSites.

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