

Category Review: Questions of Clarification

Clarification is one of the seven categories of analytical questions that constitute the Precision Questioning Toolkit—the category focused on meanings of the words, concepts, and data that we encounter in our work. Asking clarification questions is a simple but effective way to improve your understanding and your work efficiency. Unfortunately, clarification questions are often the ones that people think are the “stupid questions.” Imagine this: You’re sitting in a meeting and someone says: “If we can maintain these advanced design flows, we should be able to achieve a satisfactory level of predictability and productivity in the design process.” Everyone nods their heads. As the meeting rolls on, you think to yourself, “Was I the only one who didn’t get that?”

Ambiguity/Vagueness

The problem that we encounter all the time, as in the scenario described above, is that we are surrounded by words with unclear meanings. When you adopt a PQ mindset, your response to the vagueness conveyed in statements like the one above is to attack it: “We’ve discussed several design processes this morning; to which one are you referring?” “What is your definition of a ‘satisfactory level of predictability?’”

Pivot Table

Questions of clarification come in many forms. One of the most useful is pivot table questions, which provide a way to break down large chunks of data into smaller chunks that are useful for your particular analysis. When using pivot table questions, the key phrase to remember is: “show it to me by _____.” Let’s say your team is reviewing data on the company’s market share in emerging markets. You could ask: “Show it to me by product line,” or “Show it to me by geographic region,” or “Show it to me by age demographics,” and many other variations. If there are significant differences in the data when you look at them broken down in these different ways, you may need to think about different strategies for each category.

You can also pivot on your pivots. You could ask to see the market share data by product line, then choose one product line and break down that data by geographic region. Again, you are seeking significant differences in the results that may require you to create a more complex set of recommendations. As with all clarification questions, you want your questions to push your thinking as deep as the work requires.

Planning Tool

Think about the meetings you've got coming up in the next week. Which clarification questions would improve your understanding of your work? Write them down in the chart below.

Another way to use a chart like this is to bring it with you to meetings where you are engaging in analytical thinking, and jot down concepts that come up as the meeting progresses. These concepts will almost certainly require clarification once you look at them with your PQ toolkit in mind.

Meeting You Will Attend (one-on-one, team, customer, review)	Clarification Questions You Want to Ask; OR Concepts That Require Clarification (ambiguity/vagueness, difficult concept, pivot table)