

Asking the right question at the right time

A Precision Q+A workshop graduate recently wrote: "The workshop section on assumptions was an eye-opener. I'm getting better at spotting assumptions my team is making, but I'm running into a problem. We move very fast, and it's a standing joke that our company culture is: ready, fire, aim. My teammates are starting to complain that my questions are slowing things down. They say I'm not being 'constructive.' In my opinion, we are often moving too fast to think clearly, which results in mistakes and unnecessary re-work. Any advice?"

The short answer: the key to building credibility as a questioner is to pick your battles.

The long answer: it's not just assumptions. Precise questions from any category can have the unintended consequence of annoying someone who is operating in rush-rush mode. However it does seem that asking about assumptions is particularly apt to flummox people, who suddenly feel the rug pulled out from underneath them.

If, before starting a string of questions, we stop to take a few things into account, we're much more likely to be seen as a resource for the group and not an obstacle to forward progress.

1. Is it too soon? Don't question the validity of a metric when a review of metrics is scheduled for next week.
2. Is it too late? Does your question undo a decision that has already been made? Are you positive that the decision needs to be revisited?
3. Are the experts, the people who could best answer your question, in the room? If not, raise the question at a future meeting or take it off-line.
4. How much is at stake? How high do the standards need to be? It's a waste of resources to put \$100,000 thinking into a \$100 decision.
5. Is your question too big? Before presenting it to the group, narrow it down. Don't pull the rug out from underneath everything all at once.
6. Is your question actionable? By whom? Would you be willing to do the additional work yourself?

While these considerations can help you pick your spots more carefully, don't let them talk you out of asking the important question. At both Microsoft and Cypress Semiconductor managers who have a reputation for being constructive questioners give this advice: "In meetings let the people with less experience ask their questions first. Listening to them will help you map the surface of the problem and give you time to locate risky assumptions. When the group gets stuck, you can start taking things to a deeper level."

Precision Questioning isn't about asking *more* questions; it's about asking *better* questions, questions that get to the heart of the matter and that take the rest of the team with you.

Do you have comments about this Skill Sharpener? Do you have your own stories to tell or questions to ask? Contact QuestionMaster@vervago.com.