By Sardek Love
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• “We want to conduct a needs assessment, but our clients don’t give us the time
  or resources.”
• “Clients just want us to train.”
• “We delivered the training like they asked, and then the client complained that
  the problem still exists.”
If you have experienced any of these, rest assured you are not alone.

Here is the harsh reality. Failure to invest sufficient time to properly define the problem almost always results in providing a solution to the wrong problem. I don’t have to tell you what that does to your credibility.

So how can you balance your need to accurately define the problem with the client’s need for a speedy resolution? You have to ask the right questions. Asking these seven questions will enable you to rapidly assess any situation to ensure that you address the right problem immediately.

**The Diagnostic Question**

The first question is obvious: What is the problem? However, answers will almost always be symptoms and not causes. Great performance consultants know this, and they begin a series of root cause analysis questions that are framed by asking why, using the 5 Whys technique. When a solution fails to deliver value, it can often be traced to a lack of problem definition. So it is imperative to ask questions that reveal potential root causes.

**The Metric That Matters Question**

If you want your clients to give you time, money, and resources (also known as getting their buy-in), align their problems and any potential solutions to a metric that matters to them. Metrics that matter are always a variation of time, quality, cost, and output that managers are held accountable for through reporting requirements and performance measures. Continue the conversation by asking,
“Which metrics are you trying to positively affect?” This will enable you to use the metrics to evaluate the success of the solution you eventually deliver.

The Performance Gap Question

Like a person experiencing chest pains, clients will speak in terms of symptoms. As expert diagnosticians, it is our job to conduct an initial diagnosis to identify potential solutions. You can accelerate right past symptoms by asking, “What are employees doing that they shouldn’t be doing?” or “What are employees not doing that they should be doing?” The answers to these questions provide a trail of evidence enabling you to rapidly assess what is actually happening compared with what is perceived to be happening.

The Timing Question

The longer a problem persists and the higher the frequency of its occurrence, the more urgent it is likely to be for your client. Gain valuable insight regarding the timing of the problem by asking, “When did it first begin?” and “When does it occur?” Answers reveal who else may be adversely affected by the problem. They also point out where there is potential for unintended consequences to occur if changes are made to the current way of operating.

The Location Question

Problems occur in a specific part of a process, in a specific geographic location, within a business unit, within a specific region, and so on. Get a clear picture of the location by asking, “Where does the problem occur?” Clients often will not
know the details you seek. This is a great opportunity to identify others who can provide the information and sell the benefits of using observations and other data-gathering methods to ensure that the right problem is addressed.

**The Scoping Question**

Many training and consulting professionals fail to determine the potential size and impact of the problem. A simple way to initially assess the scope is by asking, “How big is the problem in measurable terms?” The measurable terms should be linked to the metrics that matter question. Help the client determine just how much the problem is adversely affecting the metrics cited for improvement earlier in the conversation.

**The Powerful Closing Question**

During a rapid needs assessment, every master consultant knows there is highly valuable information left unshared by the client. They tap into their clients’ minds by asking, “What questions should I have asked that I haven’t?” This question triggers the client to share any last minute details that are relevant to finding a solution.

**Summary**

Asking the right questions helps you deliver maximum value to your consulting projects. You now have seven highly effective questions that will get you started on the path to positive, bottom-line impact that your clients will love.
Sardek P. Love is president and founder of Infinity Consulting and Training Solutions, a global management and leadership development consulting firm. Possessing over 26 years of expertise, he has worked in 32 countries, inspiring, developing, and educating thousands of managers and their employees to consistently deliver exceptional results.

Known globally for his energetic and thought-provoking style of delivery, Sardek teamed up with Anne Bruce to co-author the updated version of Anne’s best-selling book “Speak For A Living – The New and Expanded Edition” which will be published by ATD in 2018.