

Questions

Dr. Stefan Hölscher

This article deals with the art of questioning as one of the central means of steering social processes. The first part takes its lead from the diagnosis, that the possibilities of questions, for example in the context of organisations, remain in general greatly unused. It examines factors which in turn emphasize that questions are productively effective for our thinking and acting. The second part deals in detail with systemic questions, as a helpful means to make the assumptions and interpretations underlying our actions visible, and as a means to form new and creative thinking and action options. A simple classification of the most important types of systemic questions will be given. The respective types – circular questions, operational questions, differentiation questions, evaluation questions, hypothetical questions and questions involving solutions, will be described and discussed regarding their logic, their qualities and possible application with reference to their practice in organisations. The article concludes with reflection points and hints for the conversion of these questions into practice.

Contents

| | | |
|-----------|--|-----------|
| 1. | The art of questioning | 3 |
| 2. | Systemic questions | 10 |
| 3. | Operation possibilities of systemic questions | 26 |
| 4. | Overview table: Systemic questions | 27 |
| 5. | Questions about questions | 28 |
| 6. | Bridges into everyday life | 29 |
| 7. | Further literature | 30 |

1. The art of questioning

Questions are the key to the world. An old proverb says: Whoever questions, leads. This proverb can also be turned around: Whoever leads questions. The quality of the leadership is especially obvious in the way one poses productive questions. Questions can make things visible and get them moving: non-reflected assumptions, rigid opinions and thinking habits, the feeling of not getting further and of going round in circles etc. Good questioning means that situations and problems can be better understood, motives better identified, leverages and starting points more clearly recognized, and action strategies more solidly formed and examined. Questions are a decisive, very often even *the* decisive instrument of productive problem-solving. Good questioning can get thinking and especially joint thinking and learning going and even accelerate it. And that also means that questions are an absolute central instrument of steering social processes. Nevertheless, it is a rule rather than an exception, that questions tend to be too few, too uninterested, too little theme-oriented, not to mention uncreative. In countless meetings, team sessions, negotiation situations, employee discussions etc., there is a lot of talk but very little actually said. This is due for the most part to the fact that those involved are extremely busy with the narcissistic “download“ of their own views and opinions, that they hardly ask or enquire about the other’s viewpoints and which requirements, implications and consequences such standpoints, also in relation to one’s own ideas, might show. The few questions which are posed are often questions of the type: “What do you think if we were to do it this way?“– “You also think that it should be looked at in this or that way, right?“ – “Are we going to do it this way or that way?“ – “Is everything clear or does anyone have any questions (don’t you dare...!)?“ The share of the real, i.e. non-rhetoric, non-suggestive or other false and courteous questions in important discussion events often tends to be virtually non-existent.

How is it, that such an effective means can be so undervalued and not used to its full potential? A part of the answer seems to be that very many people, and also in particular many executives, are neither well-versed nor competent in posing good questions. What is usually missing here is simply the craftsmanship, and this is again connected with the fact that the significance of questions is underestimated. Questions are seen as an instrument of querying information and as a monitoring possibility. The idea is: “Through questions I get the particular information which the other party has and which I need“. The idea is not: “With questions we can develop knowledge and ideas, which we both hadn’t got up to now (in this way)“. In order to be able to use questions as an instrument of querying information in this way, two prerequisites are basically needed. Firstly, one has to know which information is especially required and

secondly, one should have a good command of the language so as to question with regard to this information. The notion of questioning seriously does not come into play at all. As that which is missing is not noticed as being missing, the horizon for the exceptional handcraft or the art of questions is not opened up at all.

The following fact is additionally decisive for this: Employees and in particular executives in organisations are paid for good results and not for the posing of good questions. In order to be able to aim at results, one has to apply certain measures and actions. Therefore, it occurs very often and quickly, that one's view of the situation falters, so that new or hardened problems are the consequences. These then only seek to increase the pressure and rather lead to further quick measures and actions, as opposed to careful enquiries. Good questioning does not have it easy in the face of the permanent pressure of operating decision-making, and although it is obvious to everyone, that dealing with problems in a one-sided and rash manner rather increases the problems as opposed to solving them, one is still of the belief, to know the situation now, to be able to talk about it now, not to be in doubt but rather to be able to decide and deal with it. This is however an immense potential for temptation, because one goes around with the pleasant feeling of somehow having the things under control, at least that is until the next hurdle that one comes up against and which again one thinks with more or less quick certainty, that one is able to take on again.

The more significant a theme is, the more one should pay attention - that is of course if one is interested in workable solutions - as to whether serious enquiring has taken place, whether the trail of the question was followed and whether this trail highlights critical perspectives, which could mean that another way as opposed to the respective main-stream-perspective should be pursued. And the more the answer to that is: "That was not the case", the more there is ample reason, to mistrust the convictions and decisions that one has gleaned and rather to take at least one step back so as to open the process for questions again. It's of course not about, posing questions for the sake of posing questions and thereby providing oneself with an alibi through feigned analysis, in order to put into action what one thought, planned and wanted in the first place. Effective questioning is always also genuine questioning, and genuine questioning holds the risk or more precisely the chance of new ideas and change.

The following factors can also contribute, that questions can influence our thinking and dealing in a productive manner:

(1.) Preparation

The more one knows about something, the better one can pose specific questions about it. At the same time, the knowledge factor is not always decisive. Sometimes it is even a bit of a nuisance. Too much specialist or detailed knowledge often hinders one from reviewing new starting points, and being too deeply buried in a problem or conflict does not necessarily foster a free view of the action possibilities. In many ways a person, who is clearly less involved in the matter, can initiate things in a very productive manner. (There lies a recipe for success from coaching in this: Because the coach has more distance and is not “stewing in the same juice“, as his client, he is often able to bring another, not to mention very helpful perspective into play with his questions and impulses.)

If knowledge is ambivalent for the purpose of good questioning, then preparation for the discussion situation certainly makes sense. The more important and extraordinary the theme, the type of encounter and the context of the situation appear, the more decisive the preparation will be. For more official discussions, like for example meetings, feedback discussions and employee talks and workshops etc., good preparation is highly recommended. At the same time, preparation does not necessarily mean, that one has to sit down beforehand and work out everything possible. It is often suffice to get oneself in the right mood for a discussion situation via questions like: “What actually is my aim? And what is especially important to me in regard to result, content, atmosphere and process? What is the probable aim of the other party? How does the other party view the situation and which wishes could be linked to that? Which questions could possibly move into the foreground and which difficulties and obstacles could be produced as a result?” It often takes just a few minutes to reflect on such questions, which one can spare on the way to the meeting by way of a basic preparation, if, because of time restraints, such a preparation was not possible beforehand. Putting oneself in the mood also means that one not only has a much more secure feeling of the situation but also has the often underestimated advantage, of at least having fields of questions, themes and directions in the back of one’s head, so that they are also available to the discussion and can thereby counteract the laying-down of rash conclusions.

(2.) Having interest in the thing in question

Things which interest a person and by which one is full of energy and alert when they are being discussed, more often than not lead to the fact that one will pose exciting and interesting questions in their regard. Of course one will not always have a burning interest for every theme, not even for every theme which is relevant to one's work or even simply belongs to it. If a theme then is already on the agenda and for whatever reason it is there to stay, then in order to actively stimulate one's own interest and thus possibly even gain a guarded interest in it, it helps to ask oneself the following: "What do I find exciting about this topic? Where is the point, which rouses my interest and curiosity and makes me want to jump on board and pose questions?" There are such points with nearly every theme and these points automatically generate questions and ideas, which seek to promote interest and result in bringing about new thinking and questions.

(3.) Having high regard for your communication partner

The attitude, with which one views his communication partner, regardless whether the partner is an individual discussion partner or a group, is decisive in terms of how productive the ensuing contact will be. If one thinks: "I'm not expecting anything worth mentioning from this idiot", then the probability is high, that one will in fact not be able to get anything worth mentioning from the meeting (since one is also not seriously on the lookout for anything of interest). And if one thinks: "He is only using tactics and really doesn't want to work with me at all", then the probability is high that the quality of the collaboration will not exactly move forward gigantically (since one themselves tends to become more tactical and competitive towards the other party and in doing so, strongly influences the behaviour of the other party in this direction too).

Attitudes towards people are like filters. The more restricted the filter, the more restricted is, what "goes through" it and what "comes out of it" (the legitimacy of the respective filter is very well confirmed in the fact that one only gets what one had previously expected). To express that positively means that: The more I view my opponent as an *interesting* discussion partner, whom I regard highly and from whom I believe that he has important things to say to me, the greater the chances are that I will come to interesting and further points with him. And the more I view my opponent as an *equal* discussion partner (instead of looking at him as a resource which can only deliver certain outputs to me), the higher the chances are that a real dialogue will develop between us, in which new questions and ideas will emerge.

(4.) Openness

To treat your communication partner with esteemed interest will also of course increase the willingness for openness in the discussion. Nonetheless, openness is not only an interaction phenomena, but also an attitude within oneself. Openness means not just the readiness to get involved in something different and new. Having openness as an inner attitude also means, being willing and inclined to question one's own assumptions, if good reasons for that arise. This is particularly important, if this is a matter of basic assumptions of one's own idea, for example, of the market, of customers, of the functioning of the organisation, of the boss, of the employees, colleagues or even of oneself. Openness in this case is a curious questioning attitude of the world, which in the last consequence means not letting one's ultimate certainty win, regardless of the subject matter. One should therefore view things as being in a "state of flux", and even on the basis of backed up, stringent and well-practised views, values and opinions, one should keep in mind that continual critical inspection, amendment, correction and modification is necessary.

It would be absolutely impossible (and also not necessary at all) to require from yourself or from others, to bring along an "absolute" openness with regard to anything and everything. Everyone will sooner or later come to his limit of openness, and this is all the more so, when one is dealing with fundamental assumptions of one's own self conception and that of the world ("Who am I? What makes me different to others? What are my elementary needs, values and orientations?" etc.) The same goes for openness, as with having interest in the thing and in one's communication partner: An inner openness will encourage serious questioning and the experience of the productivity of this questioning will in turn strengthen the willingness for more openness.

(5.) Suitable question techniques

Question techniques can help one to question in a more selective, more precise, more faceted and on the whole in a more productive way. No question technique can help though to cover up a lack of interest in the thing, in the communication partner or in the willingness to openness. If these things do exist however, then one will already be on the right track, and the competent handling of question techniques can clearly increase the probability of a good and successful result yet again. If, on the other hand, only the technique is noticeable, but not any genuine interest and no genuine openness - which earns this name - then the technique will trigger in the opponent the tendency for

uneasiness, suspicion, and the feeling of being manipulated, and this will make the process rather laborious and weak on results, in contrast to what was intended. At the end of the day, what is crucial for success is not the technique, but rather the attitude behind the technique.

Nonetheless, it is also worthwhile to back up the art of questions methodically. Which questions are helpful in individual cases strongly depends on the prevailing situation and on the aim of the discussion. If it is about the initiation of topics, the understanding of viewpoints, orientation, values, needs or about the better grasp of problems, their causes and effects etc., then *open questions* are helpful in any event: "How do you view the current situation?", "How would you evaluate the development in the last few weeks?", "Where do you think the main obstacle is at the moment?", "What do you think is especially noteworthy in order to reach a good solution?" etc. What holds for questions in general, holds especially for open questions. Questions of the like are posed too seldom. The place where they would be sensible and necessary, are often instead questions like: "Don't you agree with that?", "Do you share the evaluation that so and so is the main cause?", "Should we then not do A now? Or do you think B would be better?", "If we though base the results on a while ago, then, no doubt, we have to do A, right?" Such *closed* questions are definitely important and they will be necessary at the latest, if decisions and arrangements have to be discussed. In the preliminary stages, for example, at the analysis of the situation, the joint understanding of the situation and problem, the reflection as to where there could be promising leverages, with which difficulties can be reckoned on, the one-sided accumulation of closed questions often lead to narrowed viewpoints and sub-optimal results. It is worth consciously steering in the opposite direction here and following open questions, in order to be able to do justice to the peculiarity of the situation.

The so-called *W-questions* are helpful when it is necessary to put things into concrete terms at either of the phases, whether it be when decisions and plans of action are on the agenda, or at the preliminary stages, when it involves the understanding of the situation, the interrelation of the circumstances and the striving for suitable ideas for action. The W-questions are: Who? With whom? With which method? How? When? How often? etc. Such questions help to carry out the necessary distinctions and to be more to the point and also in turn to think, plan and deal in a more transparent and realistic manner. Comprehension questions and enquiries, which ensure one's understanding of the topic, are likewise helpful in potentially all phases of discussions. Questions such as: "What do you mean exactly with that point?", "What do you understand by.....?", "It strikes me that such-and-such is very important to you. Have I understood you correctly?", "When you say that you don't share the optimism, could you name a point which you find especially critical?" etc. Such questions can indeed help to

better understand what is actually meant. The danger of misunderstandings and of unnecessary points of friction can thereby be reduced. These questions can also help one to better think through the perspective of the other person. If such questions are authentic they will no doubt give the communication partner the impression of being taken seriously, which usually has a positive effect on the level of the relationship and also on the willingness to cooperate.

On the contrary, there are questions, which in their normal use are nearly always out of place and this especially at the point when a constructive agreement with one's respective interaction partner is important to somebody. The following types of questions belong to this category: *Suggestive questions*: "No doubt you've already also noticed the outstanding advantage of this product?" "You agree for sure that there's nobody here as scheming as Meier, right?" *Insinuating questions*: "How often have you manipulated these results in the last few weeks?", "How do you deal with knowing that your colleagues think you're the biggest failure of the firm?" *Threatening questions*: "Are you going to get that done now or do we have to bring your boss into it?", "Can we count on your support now or do you want war?". Nonetheless, there are no good or bad questions. As the attitude behind the questioning is more important for their effect than their actual wording, and allows in principle every technique according to their manner of usage, to be either constructive or destructive, unorthodox questions and questions which upon first glance appear less skilful could turn out to be quite productive. So for example, suggestive questions help issues to be addressed, which were not expressed before, but which are extremely important for the progress of events: "We have come to an agreement now but when I see your expression I don't get the impression that you are really happy about the result. Are you sure that it really is what you want? Do we have the result here from which you will still say in a few months time: Good that it turned out that way?"

Even insinuating questions can display a creative effect, if they are backed up by esteem instead of aggression and convey the greatest of ease in their formulation, as opposed to huge inquisitorial eagerness: "Am I getting that right: You are all of the opinion that Alternative A is so inadequate and absurd, that we shouldn't waste any more of our precious time on it; we should simply consider it closed and forget it and concentrate completely on Alternative B, because all of the really good arguments seem to be with it." Such friendly inquisitorial pointing can help one to critically think over his own viewpoint again and at least to notice it more consciously, instead of blindly carrying on from his root position.

Which question leaves what impression, will always come to light in the further course of the discussion. That is why it is good, to keep an eye on where the questioning actually leads one: what the reaction of the communication partner is,

if both parties are making progress with each other or just going around in circles, whether there is still energy in the discussion or whether it is gradually dying out and how one himself is actually feeling etc. And it is likewise good to take logical steps as a result of such observations, therefore for example, to change the kind or focus of the questioning, which in turn will be of more relevance the more it deals with the understanding of complex connections and the development of new solutions. In order to get out of the well-worn but not always successful thinking and dealing patterns in this instance, it is helpful to have questions prepared, which bring such patterns out into the open and can make new thinking and action possibilities visible. The technique of systemic questions is a question technique which can serve one well in this.

2. Systemic questions

Systemic questions are an instrument of diagnosis and of intervention, which was developed in the area of systemic consultation and therapy, but which has meaning and relevance far beyond that. What is central to the systemic consultation and therapy approach is the question, how social systems construct their reality, that means, from which assumptions and orientation do such systems start out with and which action effects do they produce because of their assumptions and orientations. All kinds of unions of people, therefore for example, families, groups, organisation units, organisations as a whole, societies etc., can be viewed as social systems. The characteristic of social systems is the ability to communicate or as can also be said, the ability to interact socially. Every communication forms the basis for a particular construction of reality, which sounds rather abstract, but is nevertheless definitely noticeable everywhere in our everyday lives: We as people and as carriers of social systems can do nothing other than make assumptions, expectations and ideas, for example, of our respective communication partner, the situation and the context. When we are active in organisations we form at any rate premises and conclusions about our customers, the market, the colleagues, the employees, the boss, the description of the organisation as a whole etc. We also have every possible idea and assumption about ourselves: who we are, what matters to us, what our strengths and weaknesses are, where we want to head, what we like and need and what we really don't like and don't need.

Such assumptions, whether then from individuals, groups or bigger social units (like organisations or societies) are always at play in social systems. The respective assumptions, ideas and interpretations are virtually like maps, they give orientation and steer the action, by which the usual holds: the more basic the assumption, the less explicit and reflective it is also. The most self-evident assumptions are also in general the most effective. And that means: the basic

settings of the course of our action are mostly not really conscious or transparent to us. We simply deal according to them, which is otherwise not harmful, so long as our action produces fruitful effects. The opposite is in effect however in problem, conflict and crisis situations. In these situations people usually tend not to be in the position to perceive, that because of the effects of their action leading assumptions, they, more often than not, blithely help to maintain the problem, to make it even worse or in general give rise to it. For instance, if somebody's basic ideas and maps (for example about, in which ways decisions have an effect) are not in harmony with those of the other party, if the claim to validity of assumptions is so stretched, that they are related to areas, which they do not suit anymore (for example, the assumption that one should be friendly and approachable in every situation), or if at a given time appropriate basic premises are no longer workable, because the environment has changed (for example the premise, that solid and long-term relationships are a or even the most crucial requirement for success in organisations).

In such and countless other cases the biggest leverage lies on the level of the action underlying starting assumptions. Taking a scouting look behind the scenes of the operative events is necessary in order to find a productive solution to the problem, and systemic questions represent an excellent instrument precisely for this. Systemic questions help to grasp what actually matters in a particular individual or social perspective, what significant implications and effects it has, and how this perspective interact and harmonise with the implications and effects of other relevant perspectives. It can become clear, which typical effects correlations exist in each of the observed action fields and which assumptions are aids of the involved people and systems, in order to really influence, that the chance of an accurate, appropriate and effective action increases.

Some "classic" systemic questions will now be presented and clarified with examples.

(1.) Circular Questions

Normally we question directly. A questions B: “How do you evaluate this and that?”, “What do you think of X?”, “What more should we do in this matter in your opinion?” etc. Circular questions follow a different logic. A questions B about what B reckons, what C thinks, wants, intends or feels etc., for example:

- “What do you believe is really important to this customer? What does he expect from us and what does he pay attention to above all?”

Circular questions are an invitation to take up another perspective. By B saying, what he believes is going on with C, B has to at least make the attempt to slip into C’s perspective for a moment. And right here lays the charm of circular questions. We are used to observing things from our own perspective and often do not notice at all, that this is only one of many perspectives, in other words, it is not the one “sole correct“ viewpoint. This also leads again and again to the “tunnel view“ phenomena: one is so captured by his individual viewpoint, that one is not in the position anymore, to perceive, what is happening right and left of it and is in danger with even greater effort of getting stuck on it. Circular questions can help to prevent such narrow views, as they make it possible, to seriously regard other relevant perspectives and to coordinate them with one’s own individual ideas. In the course of this, when A asks B about his assumption with regard to C, C may be present or not.

So it can definitely be important to think in a team about for example, what important third parties, like particular customers, other organisation units, bosses and clients regard highly about the present cooperation’s layout and what they rather find difficult, what they expect and want and what they, on the contrary, don’t expect and don’t want. If one gets seriously and systematically involved in such a contemplation, then one not only has the chance to think more precisely through the perspective of the third party, but also has the possibility, to examine whether the images and ideas, which the individual participants have about the respective third party, suit and harmonize together at all. The experience shows, that one can again be completely amazed in such a way, that even in close and already longer working teams, differences, heterogeneities and inconsistencies can be opened up with regard to central common themes and question posings. And regardless of how one deals further with such differences, whether one sees meaningful additions in that respect, which can be integrated into a more complete picture, whether one revises some ideas, examines the thing yet again or has to think the whole thing through from other aspects again, it is helpful in every case to look at existing differences in evaluations of successfully critical

factors together, in order not to run into non-mutually agreed, inadequate or inconsistent behaviour. The more important the reflected theme is, the more uncertainty in relation to C's ideas prevails and the more decisive C's behaviour for a success is, the more useful it will be to question the respective C directly regarding his position and ideas, which one has already thought over, subsequent to the internal reflections.

A special situation arises, if C is directly present at the forming of B's hypothesis about C. In this case C simultaneously gets a form of feedback from B, namely a feedback about, how B views C's behaviour. For example A, an executive, who would like to have a straightforward conversation with B and C, two employees who quarrel with each other like clockwork. A asks B:

- "What do you think, Colleague B, how Colleague C is finding the cooperation between you both at the moment? What does he regard highly and what bothers him?"

To question B about C in the presence of C, is of course more unusual at first. Why not just ask C directly, how he views it? Why go through B first? What at first appears to be a roundabout way, can be the lead into an intensive exchange. If C is simply directly questioned, it often occurs, that, even if it is nothing to do with B and C squabbling, C says precisely that to B, what he in such situations always used to say, and B interprets precisely from C, what he always used to interpret and this will likely not bring the discussion between B and C one iota further, although this is urgently needed and could also have been possible. If on the other hand, B speaks in C's presence, about his or in other words about B's assumption to C's wishes, views, expectations etc., then C will in all probability do something, by which there is already a first important difference to all other encounters of the two, namely C will listen more precisely. Furthermore, C will be able to properly examine every point, as to what extent B's hypothesis about C's ideas, expectations and evaluations fit to his own experience. If C is then directly asked by A for a countercheck of B's assumptions regarding C, then C will be able to say which points he actually finds appropriate and which he does not. Through the ensuing alteration from circular and direct questions the possibility emerges, that in the discussion what equally connects as differentiates the parties and what creates tension becomes more explicit and with it more clearer negotiable.

This gaining of clarity and conciseness is an advantage which should not be underestimated. Situations, in which those involved feel great suspicion, scepticism or antipathy towards each other or in which they either with each other or alone simply get bogged down, distinguish themselves namely not only through tunnel vision phenomena, but rather thereby, that one often gets only very few substantial answers to direct questions. The danger is great, that if for instance, executive A directly questions his employees B or C exclusively, he will hear “the same old song“ from everyone or get only relatively thin answers. A to B: “How is the collaboration going with Colleague C at the moment?” – B: “Well, so-so...., you know how it is.” – A: “I see. And how do you see that, Mr. C?” – C: “Well, the way I usually see it, you know what I mean.” If A on the other hand, questions in a circular manner:

- “What do you think then, Colleague B, how Colleague C perceives your collaboration at the moment, what does he like about it, what displeases him?”

then Colleague B cannot simply just begin to sing “the same old song“, he has to at any rate contribute something more rich in content as opposed to only “so-so“, and regardless what he then says, how appropriate or inappropriate, how central or peripheral, how open or closed it is, A can follow the track of the answer closer and he can then question C: “Yeah, is that right about what you perceive at the moment? Is that what you like and what displeases you?” And sometime later he can question C, about what C thinks with regard to B.

Circular questions can therefore be a good means, to get into more sensitive themes and they are at the same time a good way, to look more precisely and more intensively at the different relevant perspectives and their combination in action. It is therefore necessary, that one keeps on the ball with the investigation of the ideas about the respective perspectives. One swallow doesn't make a summer and one circular question will not bring about any change in perspective. The suction of the individual perspective is definitely high, and it goes without saying that the higher the emotional excitement or entanglement in something is, the more difficult it is, to seriously entertain other perspectives. In this instance one has to do something, so that going into another perspective in a really searching manner can be achieved. What is supportive on the one hand, is a circular enquiry and further questioning and, on the other, an as vivid and specified an initialization of the perspectives as possible:

- “Assuming that Customer X, with whom you recently had problems in service, were to sit here on front of me and you yourself were not present, and Customer X and I had a little time to chat and if I asked him, how he found your service performance and the contact arrangement recently? What do you think, Customer X would say to me?”

If one gets the impression, that the posing of a circular question to one's communication partner could be very disconcerting for him, then one can if necessary announce and prepare such questions in advance as it were:

- “I would really like to ask you a question, which at first may sound strange to you. But it is important to me, that we also try to view the thing from a different perspective again.”

Dealing with circular questions is as a rule a little unusual, not just for the person being asked but also for the person posing the questions. The logic of circular questions is clearly a longer way away from our intuitive everyday questions than other types of systemic questions (for example operational questions or evaluation questions). Because of that there is also a strong tendency for the person questioning, to whom the systemic instruments are less familiar, to return to looking at the things in his usual way, and that means in this case, posing direct questions again. If one is really intent on using more circular questions, it is necessary to focus one's individual attention directly on the formulation of such questions. However, it is likely that the first few attempts will sound a little clumsy and constructed, and the proportion, which actually hit the bull's eye with ease, will probably at first stay very unclear. It is thus sensible, and this goes at the end of the day for all systemic questions, as long as one is still inexperienced with them, to create test possibilities, that is an “operation place“ so to speak. In this way one can try out these questions and thus lower the risk that something could go wrong. It is obviously ill-advised to try such questions out for the first time in the most difficult negotiation situation, with the most important customer, in the heated conflict discussion with one's own boss or the deciding round of the application for a new job. Situations, in which the theme is problem-solving and where one feels relatively relaxed and secure, are best suited for testing. One could try out such questions in discussions with colleagues or employees, with whom one gets on well, discussions with friends or in the family or situations that one has thought up. The last-mentioned situations should not be underestimated as a field of application, nor should they be viewed just for the purpose of practice. One can use every function of circular questions, like the systemic thinking through other perspectives, the integral view of complex problem correlations, the planning and examining of procedure strategies, the agreement of important action situations with others etc., in an inner dialogue. For example, one can ask oneself:

- “What does my new boss most expect from me? What is the most important thing for him, and what do I have to do, to gain his positive attention and high regard? What in my action on the other hand, would lead my boss to think: ‘Does he really understand his job at all? Does he know at all, where he is and with whom he is dealing?’”

Asking oneself such and similar questions from time to time is definitely beneficial and not just in view of a new boss and new conditions.

(2.) Operational Questions

Operational questions aim at indicators, that is, they investigate, what is perceivable and observable in relation to a maintained fact or a fact in question. Examples are:

- “If our aim is: more orientation with customers, how would our customers then notice, that we are even more intensely orientated with their wishes and needs?”
- “By which of the salesperson’s signals and reactions could you realize, that there is probably even more financial negotiation leeway than he maintained at first?”
- “What proves to you that the suggested way of action, as you say, is unsuitable?”
- “If you think, Mr. Schulz is uncooperative: What does Mr. Schulz do or what does he not do, to make you come to the conclusion, that he is lacking in the necessary cooperation?”

By aiming at what is observable, operational questions contribute to precision and help to put things into more concrete terms. People often use the same words, but they understand completely different things by them or they don’t really exactly know upon closer look, what they actually mean with a particular term. Operational questions could help in such situations, to clarify what is meant and to bring about a common understanding as a result. At the same time, operational questions could also contribute to objectification. Evaluations are often articulated, without the speaker even noticing, that he is being judgmental. The speaker says: “That fits. Our relationship is relaxed. I’m cool. The customer

is lying“, and thinks he is describing things, “as they are.” The evaluations can be viewed as unproblematic as long as all the people interacting share their evaluations with each other and as long as those common evaluations lead to long-term successful results. Both are however obviously not always the case.

There are conflicts and tensions, that is situations which distinguish themselves through different and contrasting evaluations, and there are cases, in which evaluations sooner or later prove to be problematic, for example: “There could be world cars produced, which would fit all markets equally well.” Or: “Whoever is not acquiring and merging in a big way globally, will sooner rather than later be eliminated.” To seriously examine such situations, for example: “What is then observable at closer examination? Which indicators are there? How can we recognize that what we’ve assumed really applies? Which positive examples are there? And which counterexamples can be determined?” etc. – pursuing such and similar questions systematically, can not just help, to perceive the things in a more undistorted way and therefore more in line with reality, but also contribute more intensively to reaching common viewpoints. Situations which are characterized by different and conflicting views are predestined, that the involved will get more bogged down than ever and will get caught up in arguments with each other, if one or other stays too insistent on their own ideas and evaluations. Operational questions offer the chance, even when the evaluations differ, that one can come to the point, in which at least agreement is more easily possible, because one talks about what is perceptible in concrete terms (instead of about general evaluations and conclusions). At the same time, operational questions signal to the communication partner, that one takes him seriously and wants to understand him more precisely. This has a generally positive effect on the level of the relationship and often actually leads to a better understanding, as both parts can mutually recognize the other person’s similar and different perceptions and evaluations clearer and in this way create the basis for a more workable agreement.

Operational questions are on the whole, a simple and likewise effective means to make productive advancement both with each other and with the thing in question. In addition, these questions also give one the chance, to pass the ball to someone else and to gain a little thematic material and time in this way. Both can be very advantageous in situations, when the statement of the other person is really surprising or when he expresses criticism or anger, to which one cannot simply say or would rather not like to say straight away only: “Yes you’re right”. If one also employs operational questions in this way, as a means of giving the ball back again, one thing is fundamental to their further effect in the discussion: namely, whether the other person experiences the questions as being “constructive-solving oriented” and embedded in the wish to understand the situation more precisely, or whether he gets the feeling, that he has to produce

just a little more material, in order then to be refuted as skilfully as possible or even made to look silly. If operational questions are used in this way, they become weapons, and whoever employs them as weapons, should not be surprised if the other party counter attacks.

(3.) Differentiation Questions

People tend towards polarization especially in stress and conflict situations, but quite often also in very relaxed “normal” conditions. A black-white-scenario emerges, in which it’s only about “good and bad”, “right and wrong”, “suitable or unsuitable” and “workable or unworkable”. Differentiation questions invite on the other hand, ideas, convictions, opinions, concepts etc., to be more precisely differentiated and graded. Sensible differentiation is reached for example, through questions about percentages, scale rating or classification:

- “What do you think, to how much percent are you fulfilling your customers’ expectations at the moment in supplying them quickly and reliably?”
- Let’s imagine that one were to request your employees to rate their present motivation in the team from a scale from 0 to 10, by which “0” would mean “no (more) motivation” and “10” would mean, “totally motivated”, in which categories would the most evaluations be?”
- “With which customers do you get on best at the moment, with whom on average good and with whom not so good?”

Differentiation questions help to come to a clearer, but by no means sweeping evaluation. At the same time, they arouse the awareness so that things move on a spectrum and not in binaries of “yes-no situations”. Because of this it will also be quite possible to view the other side of a rash or one-sided resolved ambivalence. If, for example, an employee tells his boss, that he is having big problems with a colleague from another department, because the latter is so “non-flexible and stubborn”, then the boss can ask something like:

- “How would you then evaluate the quality of the cooperation with the colleague at present on a scale from 0 to 10, if “0” means ‘miserable’ and “10” means ‘really good’?”

And it doesn't matter which evaluation the employee reaches on the scale, the boss can in every case - after of course some of the problems, which the employee in the cooperation sees, have been described to the boss - go on the other side and ask about the positive experiences of the two employees in question. If the employee evaluates the quality of the cooperation with a "3" for example, then the boss can say:

- "There is therefore still something that works between you two. What is it then?"

And even if the employee evaluates the quality of the cooperation with "0" at first, which seldom occurs, that doesn't automatically mean that there is nothing to be found at all on the other more positive side. "So between you both there is really nothing, not even a low amount of workability in the cooperation up to now? Then virtually nothing functions, but really absolutely nothing at all functions?" Expressions of this type, which again clearly emphasize the apparent lack of functioning cooperation, often lead to the fact, that one's attention will eventually fall on something positive. This helps to break the one-sidedness of the attention on the deficit and sharpens the awareness for the fact that there are differentiated quality facets.

Besides the effect, that differentiation questions steer against reality-distorted one-sidedness, they also offer one the chance, to get deeper into the themes, by focussing on their development. Something can be asked about the scale result, for example, what would have been the result of an evaluation on this scale a year ago regarding the theme in question. If this result displays a difference, it would be therefore sensible to enquire about the reasons for the changed evaluation, which in turn often helps important conditions and effect factors to become visible. Likewise it can be important, to enquire about prognosis for the future: "What do you think then, which value will the quality of the cooperation get in a year's time, if it continues as it has until now?" And what has to happen, in order that the value 3 increases at least to 4 again or even 5?" Questions like the last-mentioned can contribute to one training his sights on easily understandable and practicable steps, which in most cases are clearly more promising than the question: "How do we get out of this fiasco now and get onto the direct route to paradise?"

(4.) Evaluation Questions (Questions with regard to the construction of reality)

These questions often come up in our everyday conversations. What is meant by these are all direct questions, by which A asks B for his opinion of a situation, or his evaluation of conditions, causes and developments, or his prognosis or assessment and such the like. Examples of such questions are:

- “How do you find the progress of the project at the moment? What do you think has developed especially well and what is not going so well?”
- “What in your estimation is the principle reason for the positive results and what is the reason for the things which are still not running properly?”
- “According to your prognosis, where will the project stand in a year’s time, if everything continues to run as it has up to now?”
- “Where do you see a suitable leverage point, so that the development in general can be even more positively influenced?”

Questions of this type also aim at a constructive or interpretive element, because, it doesn’t matter what A asks B, he will always only hear B’s subjective viewpoint, but never the “truth or reality as such” free from interpretation, regardless of how sound and empirically supported B’s viewpoints may be. This “absolute reality as such” cannot be experienced “literally”, not because A somehow awkwardly asks or because B doesn’t really answer honestly, but rather because it doesn’t exist. Every answer, every thought, every reason, every realization always presupposes a certain perspective of the perception and with it also a particular arrangement or even construction of the reality. It is also important for the person questioning to keep in mind the way people tend to construct and perceive reality, especially when the answers he receives confirm his own opinion, so that it can be really tempting to believe, that the things really must be, as they appear to him. The art of dealing with evaluation questions lies therefore in taking and using the questions and the answers to them seriously and seeing them for what they are, namely good possibilities to experience the respective opinion of the person being asked more precisely. However, the person questioning should not forget that in order to deal with the respective theme successfully, it could be decisive not just to question one person but to hear the views of other relevant parties too. In this way the questioner will likely get other clearly different viewpoints which should also be taken into consideration. It is sensible in this instance, aside from the more precise investigation of the perspective of the person questioned, to try to bring other perspectives as explicitly as possible into play, for example through circular questions or through a direct questioning of the others involved.

(5.) Hypothetical Questions (Questions with regard to the construction of possibilities)

Hypothetical questions are questions of the kind: “What would be, if...?” or “Assuming that...?” The sense of such questions lies in being able to go into the scenarios and operations and to examine, which situation alternatives and action alternatives there are, which prerequisites and likely consequences the respective alternatives have, and how one should evaluate every alternative. Examples of such questions are:

- “If the quality problems stay as they are in the next few months, which effects would that probably have on the relationship to our customers? Which customers would we be in danger of losing? And how would our other customers react?”
- “Assuming that we were to increase the price of the follow-up product by 10% against its predecessor, what consequences would that likely have on the sales in our most important markets? And provided that our aim was to clearly increase the number of items sold, despite the 10% price increase, which requirements must we fill, in order to be successful with this aim?”
- “If you were to decide, to articulate your viewpoints, wishes and expectations to the other team members more clearly than you have up to now, how do you think they would react to that? Would your colleagues then probably feel “run over” by you or would they look forward to hearing your position more clearly? What do you think?”

The more it is about focussing on relevant but not definite foreseeable developments, making meaningful decisions or avoiding falling into one-sidedness in complex or conflicting situations, the more important it is, to plumb the available room of possibility, that means looking at which possibilities exist at all, what can be held from them, and how one can best prepare oneself for them. Hypothetical questions offer ideal instruments for this. These can equally promote point precision and system as well as creativity. From the standpoint of setting creative thinking in motion, there are two variants of hypothetical questions which are especially interesting, the so-called suicide questions and miracle questions.

(5.1.) Suicide and Aggravation Questions

The term “suicide questions” appears odd upon first sight, as do the type of questions which are hidden behind it. Examples of suicide questions are:

- “What do you think we would have to do to put this big customer off for once and for all, who has continually complained about our bad product quality and service recently?”
- “How would you probably have to behave, if you intended to intensify the critical relationship with your colleague Schlendermann, so that absolutely nothing more would function between you both?”
- “If in my new position I wanted to give the impression as quickly as possible to the most important people involved, that I am extremely unsuitable for the position, what should I do? With this aim in mind which action strategy would likely be especially effective with regard to my boss? How could I set the most important opinion makers and key players in my department against me? And what would help to set the most influential representatives from the neighbouring departments against me as much as possible?”

Suicide questions are therefore questions of the type: “What do we / you / I have to do, to ruin the project, the job, the business, the relationship etc. as quickly, as effectively and as decisively as possible?” Of course such questions are not about putting the identifiable dooms strategy into action. One’s view can be sharpened though for the things that one should refrain from doing in all events, if one wants to survive. So suicide questions can help to recognize more precisely what one has to consider in all circumstances, because we urgently need the likes, as much as we need the air we breathe. Recognizing such is by no means trivial. Complex action situations are characterized through the interaction of the most variable circumstances. But only some of the circumstances are at any one time decisive for survival. Suicide questions can help to identify these necessary survival techniques. In practice one can often see, that through the investigation of such questions as to how one can bring things to the brink of disaster as quickly as possible, that the sense of the exercise comes to light. One can through it realize in the cold light of day, that one is already doing a lot in this direction anyway. In this instance, one at least gains the chance through suicide questions, to once again think over whether one wishes to continue acting in a harmful way or whether one would prefer to change in someway.

Aggravation questions follow a similar logic to suicide questions. They are the type of questions with regard to how one can worsen a particular situation. These questions also focus on critically successful, respectively unsuccessful circumstances, albeit they are posed less in the form of an ultimatum – “suicide-

light” so to speak. Aggravation questions are especially suitable at times when it is not easy for people to become aware of their protagonist role. There are always situations in which one sees himself as the victim or in which one meets people, who are (have become) maybe even very experienced at perceiving themselves completely as nothing other than the victim. It is usually not hard for people in such moods to imagine how everything could be even a little worse than it already is. If one asks:

- “Assuming that you wanted the colleague, whose behaviour towards you is both mean and despicable, to behave even meaner and more despicable – of course you don’t want that, then his behaviour is already bad enough – but just as a pure thought experiment, what could you do to drive him to that?”

By whatever the person questioned mentions as a possibility here, it will also be clear simultaneously, that he is not just the victim, but also the culprit. It is obvious that, whatever a person can make worse, can be obviously actively influenced by this person, and whatever one can actively influence, one can potentially influence in both directions: in a negative and a positive way. Aggravation questions can therefore help to recognize, how one can come to terms with a protagonist role in a more intense and constructive manner. A prerequisite for this though, and this goes for all questions, which examine the intended activity in a negative direction, is, that these questions are - in all seriousness in the thing and are meant to be taken seriously by the affected - posed with a certain light-heartedness, and with a wink of the eye. If this occurs, then the paradoxes within the questions can definitely have a creatively inspired effect. On the other hand, whoever “convicts” the protagonist with all biblical seriousness or with a raised forefinger, demonstrates, that he has already found a conclusive answer to the question: “What can I do, to send myself and the process into a dead-end with just a few sentences?”

(5.2.) Miracle Questions

Miracle questions are complimentary to suicide questions in that they examine the other side of the spectrum that is, the best possible situation. These questions do not mean at all, finding out which conditions and mechanism could bring about a very good situation, what is questioned is rather what this situation would actually look like, if it were somehow produced by a miracle. Miracle questions therefore relieve one first from the often seriously felt task, of identifying measures and action steps and give one room to go about imagining a new ideal situation instead. The challenge lies right here, because often people and groups have no clear individual or even a clear common idea about *what* they actually want. People tend only to have ideas about what they *don’t* want

and when questioned about their positive ideas for the future, they produce richly variant negations of things refused by them or mere continuations of the reality familiar to them. Miracle questions are therefore always in danger of only being sucked in by the negative or being sucked into the unalterable factual and that means on the other hand: the effectiveness of these questions is linked to the notion of “complying” with certain conditions.

Miracle questions aim at visionary ideas. It goes without saying that first and foremost, both time and a relaxed atmosphere are paramount to the unfolding of such ideas. Time is necessary, as visionary ideas do not come at the press of a button and also because it always takes time to put the ideas which surface into concrete form and make them understandable. A relatively relaxed atmosphere is necessary, because without it the freedom and openness, which are necessary for creative thinking, would fail to emerge. Furthermore, it is important to address the sensorial powers of imagination, and therefore not to ask about abstract concepts (core sizes, numbers or general terms etc), but rather to enquire about sensorial perceptions and experienced qualities, because a vision or a “model” so-to-speak can only emerge in this way. Like the American short-term therapist, Steve de Shazar, demonstrated, the type of miracle questions and how they are articulated is additionally decisive. Such questions can be virtually trance or hypnosis inducing instruments, as they set our thinking in a less controlled condition of free-flowing focus, which is necessary to achieve a significant effectiveness. It is therefore advisable for the questioner to change his normal way of speaking, which is characterized by the usual relevant business issues, to correspond to the creative thinking which is to emerge. Taking pauses can be a good support in this instance, an easy and clear vocabulary is also important and repetitions, order, and retardations can help one to achieve a quasi meditative rhythm.

- “Assuming a good fairy were to come – and she came especially to our team, and we could wish for anything – the best possible situation for the team – we could wish for which aims we want to have achieved and what the main focus of our work should be – we could wish for how we should deal with one another, which values we could be lead by and distinguished by, we could wish for how the others should perceive us and speak about us – and otherwise whatever is still important and worthwhile – and all that, whatever we wish for would be fulfilled – how would the world with regard to our team probably look like – by which would we notice, that all these things then, that all our wishes have come true?”
- “When you go home after our meeting and today’s workday, you will bring the day to a close and at sometime become tired and go to sleep – assuming, a miracle were to happen during the night – and this miracle meant that the

problem disappeared and that all the aims, which you have with regard to this situation, were suddenly achieved – suddenly – just like that – that would be a miracle, right? – and when you woke up tomorrow morning – and nobody said to you, that this miracle occurred – what would make you realize, that this miracle actually happened?”

Through miracle questions it is not only possible, that a clearer picture emerges of what an ideal future might look like, but rather with such a picture, energy to move the action in the direction of this ideal future also usually emerges, even when the way there promises not just to be pleasant and easy. Miracle questions have therefore the charm, to be able to motivate our action to aim-directed changes and in truth there are only two fundamental energy sources within us to bring about such changes. The first is experienced suffering, which is with corresponding intensity, the most frequent reason why people change their behaviour. The second energy source is the prospect of an attractively perceived future. As miracle questions evoke and put this prospect in us into concrete terms, they also help us not only to do more, but to do things differently, than merely wanting to end a badly perceived situation as quickly as possible.

(6.) Solution Questions (Questions with regard to solution attempts)

These questions serve the purpose of finding out, which solution strategies were already tried out in the actual problem and also in earlier comparable problems, and which experiences were had through the process. Examples of solution questions are:

- “Which solution attempts have you already undertaken up to now? Which experiences have you gathered in the course of this? What proved worthwhile in your eyes? What proved to be difficult or damaging?”
- “How would the other parties involved probably evaluate the previous solution attempts? To which points would the others have probably given a similar evaluation to you and to which would they have likely given a completely different one to you?”
- “How have you mastered difficult situations of this type in the past?”
- “Which resources and abilities can you and the others rely on at any rate – even if it would be difficult?”

Questions to solution attempts offer tips on which strategies and ways of action were at least partially successful with regard to the search for previous problem

solutions, and which proved ineffective. In this way, one gains not just valuable hints on the course of the previous problem, but rather resources and abilities also become visible at the same time, which could be helpful for the solution of the problem and for a productive layout of the situation.

3. Operation possibilities of Systemic Questions

Systemic questions are especially suitable in all consultation and coaching contexts, if the task at hand is to find new solutions for difficult problems. The typical areas of application for such questions are for example, management coaching discussions (i.e. situations, in which the executive acts as a coach towards his employees), team development discussions, conflict mediations, facilitation occasions and also of course moments of systematic self reflection (self consultation). In principle, systemic questions can be used in all problem solution contexts successfully, therefore for example, in meetings and group discussions, whose focus is on finding solutions to problems, in error analysis and discussions about procedure planning and in vision and strategy discussions etc.

A prerequisite for using systemic questions as sensibly as possible is to have the aim in mind, of wanting to discover a theme *together* with one's communication partner (as opposed to trying to extract information regarding a particular theme from the other person), to be ready to get a type of observer perspective or an outside perspective of the theme at hand and in this way, to entertain different opinions and possibilities. The readiness to take such a perspective can be supported at the same time through systemic questions, which demonstrate its effectiveness. On the other hand, reserve is recommended with regard to the use of systemic questions, in particular when one finds oneself right in the middle of a conflict as one of the involved parties, and is up to 90 inside (yet again). In such situations many people rather tend to become attached to their own perspective. Questions like: "What do you actually think, how your boss would view, what you are doing here just now?" can in fact appear to be flawless systemic enquiries, nevertheless, they rather help to intensify the problem as opposed to reduce the tension.

4. Overview Table: Systemic Questions

| Type of Question | Characteristic | Example |
|---|---|--|
| (1.) Circular Questions | Invitation to change of perspective: A asks B, what B thinks about what C thinks, wants, intends, feels etc. | “What do you think is especially important to this customer? What does he probably expect from us and what does he hold in high regard?” |
| (2.) Operational Questions | These questions aim at indicators, they investigate what is perceivable and observable with regard to a maintained fact or a fact in question. | “If our aim is: more customer orientation, how would our customers notice then, that we are even more intensively orientated around their wishes?” |
| (3.) Differentiation Questions | Enquire about more exact differentiations, for example, through scales, percentage evaluations or classification. | “What do you think, to what percentage are you fulfilling the expectations of your customers at the moment, in supplying them in a quick and reliable way?” |
| (4.) Evaluation Questions (Questions with regard to the construction of reality) | A asks B about his view on a situation, about his evaluation of circumstances, causes and consequences etc. | “How do you find the progress in the project at the moment? What, do you think has developed very well, what is not going so well?” |
| (5.) Hypothetical Questions (Questions with regard to the construction of possibilities) | Going into possibilities, options and scenarios: “What would happen, if? – “Assuming that.....?” | “If the quality problems stay as they are in the next few months, what effects will that probably have on the relationship to our customers?” |
| (5.1.) Suicide Questions | Questions about how one can bring about the “worst case scenario”. | “What do you think we would have to do to put this big customer off for once and for all, who has been complaining continually about our bad products and quality of service recently?” |
| (5.2.) Miracle Questions | Examine what the best possible situation would look like | “Assuming a good fairy was to come to us and we could wish for the best possible situation for our team, what would the world look like with regard to our team?” |
| (6.) Solution Questions | Investigate which solution strategies are being tried out in the actual problem and also which have already been tried out in comparable earlier problem situations, and what experience has been earned in this way. | “Which solution attempts have you already undertaken up to now? Which experience have you gathered in the course of this? What proved worthwhile in your eyes? What proved to be difficult or damaging?” |

5. Questions about questions

- How would somebody who really knows you well and listens to you carefully, probably describe your way of questioning? What would he/she probably say as to how distinctive and interested your questions are, as to how you pose very open, respectively closed questions, with which attitude are you likely enquire (for example, trying to gain information, uncovering contradictions, a wish to understand the other party, finding out things together etc.) and how successful are you at bringing progress and creativity through questions into play?
- With which assumptions do you start out with in situations in which you deliberately reduce intense enquiries at the beginning or in which you don't ask such questions at all? (For example, "Whoever asks intense questions, proves themselves to be nothing other than over curious or at worst as *crossing the border*", "As a rule intense questions are not worth it, because they tend to produce rather redundant descriptions, unnecessary detail or give rise to defence", "It is better to invest in solutions as opposed to questions", "I often have no idea at all, as to what I could further ask about, that would prove useful in the long-run" etc.)?
- In which situations could and should you ask more intensive questions, in order to communicate more successfully and increase your effectiveness?
- Which questions are the ones which you do not pose often enough to yourself? What are you afraid of when posing such questions to yourself? What could you gain by posing them?
- Which questions are you mostly driven by in all your dealings at the moment? Which of these questions did you use 10 or 20 years ago? What do you think, which questions will you be driven by in 10 years' time and which in 20 years' time?
- If you were to assume, that good question posing is an essential art, what would you do differently in your life?

6. Bridges into everyday life

Although systemic questions also come up in our everyday speech, they are usually however only utilized to a fraction of their effectiveness. If one is not yet familiar with such questions, it is advisable to practice how to handle them in advance, so that the potential of these questions and one's own individual question style can be more powerfully raised. The following steps should be taken into account:

- Preparation for difficult situations. For this one can ask oneself questions systematically (for example: "What does my communication partner probably expect from me? What do I want myself? How would I detect that the situation is moving in a good direction? What is the worst thing that could happen, and what can I contribute, so that that actually happens?....")
- Theme orientated conversation situations, in which one feels relatively good and relaxed, for example with colleagues, employees, friends and one's own family.
- The analysis of a conflict situation ("How does my conflict partner likely view the situation? What is he/she feeling right now? What is his/her view of me? What does he/she want from me? What does he/she not want on any account? What does he/she probably think about what I'm going to do now, and how would he/she likely react, if I actually do that? If my aim were to have a really good relationship with him/her, what would I probably have to do to achieve that?....")
- Discussions, in which somebody comes to you with a problem: If you can hold back your own opinions, experiences and the prescribing of good advice (a little) here, and instead enquire about the problem first, in order to understand it better, you will not only be able to practice well-aimed systemic and other questions, but rather also achieve on top of everything clearly better results in the thing and in the relationship with each other.

7. Further Literature

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