

Deborah Hartmann Preuss

# Travelling Light

... with **Powerful Questions**



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My name is Deborah Hartmann Preuss, and am fanatical about helping change agents bring meaning and joy back to the workplace.

To do this I have done a number of things – from computer programming to scrum training to journalism.

These days I offer workshops and one-on-one coaching to influencers, leaders (both explicit and guerilla types!) and teams.

I live in Karlsruhe, Germany. If you want to know more please visit my website

[www.abiggerga.me](http://www.abiggerga.me)

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# Travelling Light

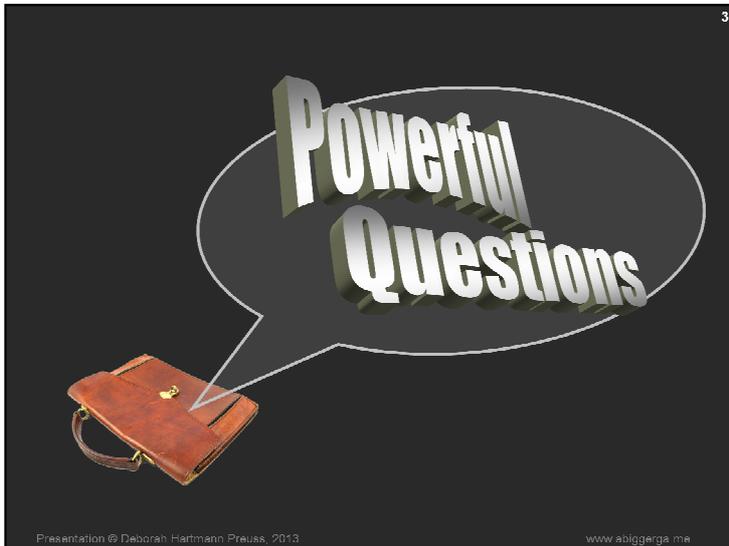
... with *Powerful Questions*



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As an trainer and coach, I often arrive at a new client site almost empty handed. ALMOST!



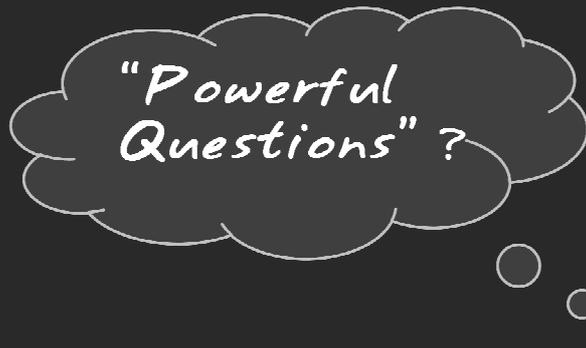
In my lightweight toolkit I keep some simple tools to help me align with my customers and set expectations for our working relationship.

I think my most-used tool is POWERFUL QUESTIONS, a technique I learned while studying professional coaching at The Coaches Training Institute.

Powerful questions help me really listen to my customer.

As a consultant listening is crucial. And, In fact, these days, pretty much everyone in IT works in a consultant / customer pattern.

So listening is probably a critical skill for your success – whether you are an internal employee or external consultant.



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So: what do I mean by Powerful Questions? ...

In fact, there are many kinds of questions that serve us well at different times.

Not all of them are what I'd call Powerful Questions.

## How do we use questions?

<i>Politeness</i>	“How’s it going?”
<i>Control</i>	“Will you eat your supper or go to bed?”
<i>Influence</i>	“Why not buy a newer one?”
<i>Emotion</i>	“Are you nuts?”
<i>Leadership</i>	“How could we do this better?”

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Think for a moment about different kinds of questions YOU ask...

Here are some examples I thought of...

What else could we add?

→ LEADERSHIP... questions that generate hope, engagement, creative action, and new possibilities

This last is the type of question we’ll work with today.

In the traditional management model, **leaders do the thinking**, make decisions, and **tell** workers how to make those decisions real.

In the new paradigm, there is still a need for leadership, but it looks different. Leaders can still contribute significantly by bringing **meaning and direction** to the decisions of the whole team. Powerful Questions are a great tool for doing this without “telling”.

## Powerful Questions

catalyse *insight, innovation, action*

useful to foster  
reflection  
hope  
engagement  
new possibilities

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## Powerful Questions

catalyse *insight, innovation, action*

reflection,  
hope,  
engagement,  
new possibilities

## The world of knowledge work



Read the story at <http://www.jainworld.com/literature/story25.htm>

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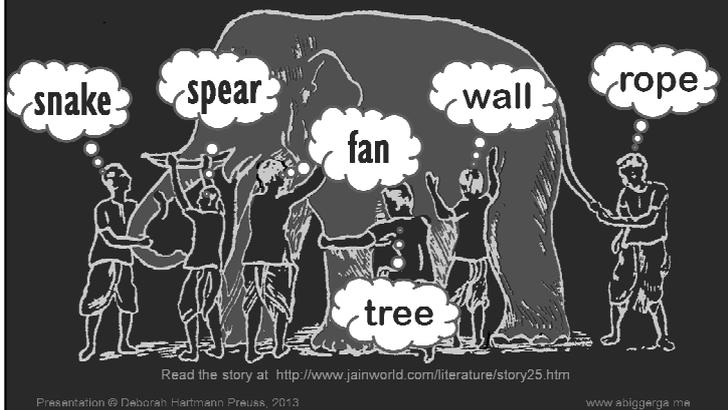
### The story of the Blind Men and the Elephant

[www.jainworld.com/literature/story25.htm](http://www.jainworld.com/literature/story25.htm)

Is not unlike the world of knowledge work. One big difference: there is no Wise Man to tell us what the „real“ big picture is.

We can rely on the wisdom of teams, and leaders are still needed to reflect, use their intuition, and offer direction with open questions like: what if the elephant had all those qualities?

## The world of knowledge work



We are exposed to so much information in our lifetimes. The human brain excels at filtering and making sense of it all. It is really quite impressive.

But the traditional management model assumed that leaders could collect all significant information in order to use their excellent brains to make leadership decisions.

The reality now is that no one person can collect all the significant information within an enterprise. In fact, it can be hard to tell which information is significant for a given decision.

Why don't we do it, then?

VALUES

*simplicity*

*speed*

control

*kindness*

habit

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Why don't we do it, then?

Scientists tell us that many of our decisions are made (not from our head) but from our gut.

We make instantaneous decisions all day long, including decisions about what to say.

These decisions are influenced by our priorities, our values.

What do we value at work?

We can tell by looking at how we speak. What do we see in the questions we ask?

Some answers I have heard:

*simplicity*

*speed*

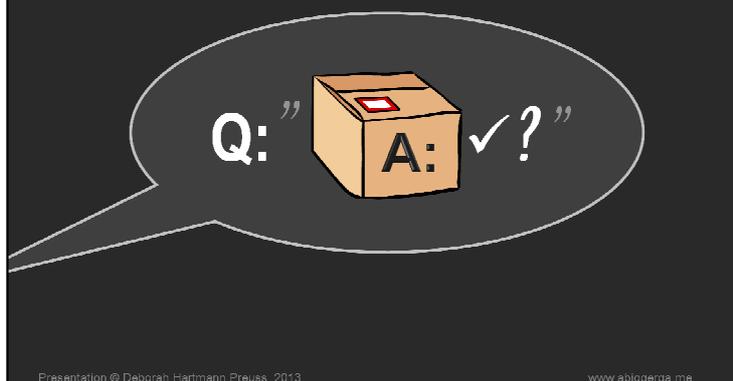
control

*kindness*

habit

What else?

Some questions come with answers!



Imagine listening to the voice of a parent – your mother, father. Saying...

“DID U DO THAT THING I ASKED YOU TO DO?”

Ha! You know this question is loaded! If YES – you’re a hero.

But if you DIDN’T do it – ah, that’s not what they want to hear!

At work, too, many questions embed the asker’s expectations and beliefs, and actually TELL YOU the expected answer!.

- You’ll have that on my desk before you go on vacation, right?
- We’ll need to work overtime now or lay people off next month: which do you prefer?
- The VP thinks we should do it ... what do you think?

These “loaded” questions put us on guard. We have learned to watch for them; and to look for the “right” answer buried within. In our meetings, guided by such questions, a lot is said simply because we don’t want to look wrong.

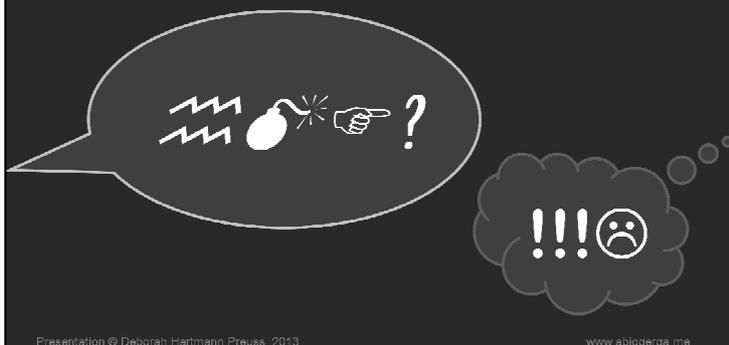
On the other hand, if we disagree with the proposed answers, or if we are unsure, a meeting can become very quiet... in that case, we can avoid looking wrong by not answering!

And sometimes questions How did this defect get out into production? (“you idiots” – better be quiet on this one)

If you need creativity and innovation from our people, there’s a problem here: It’s unlikely we’ll get it when they are in “self defence mode”.

There’s a better way. But it takes practice.

**“ I know you think you understand what you thought I said  
but I'm not sure you realize that  
what you heard is not what I meant”**  
-- Alan Greenspan



**“ I know you think you understand what you thought I said  
but I'm not sure you realize that  
what you heard is not what I meant”**  
-- Alan Greenspan

There can be hidden messages, powerful messages, embedded in our questions. Sometimes we do it intentionally. Sometimes we are quite unaware of it.

Every question has two parts: the message SENT and the message RECEIVED.

Part of the skill of Powerful Questions is to develop better listening skills. Which involves more than our ears!



So, we have well-developed habits of using questions to carry all kinds of messages. We do it without thinking.

But there is a problem here, if you need creativity and innovation from your people.

It's unlikely we'll get it when they are in "self defence mode".

When if we took this energy we use to be „on guard“ for trick questions, and put it into reflection and creativity?

There's a better way.

We can create a different work culture.

But it takes practice.

# Powerful Questions

a leadership practice

to help catalyse  
**insight, innovation, action**

through well-designed & well-timed,  
**open-ended questions**

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In contrast, Powerful Questions, together with deep listening, is a leadership practice that asks a different kind of questions.

Agile software development asks us to shift how we think about leadership.

At first glance it may seem to say: we need no leaders, which understandably makes the managers nervous about their job security.

But in fact,

The world we work in is too complex, it moves too fast, for leaders to do all the thinking and deliver solutions to workers – this is the old paradigm.

*The new paradigm:*  
<http://abiggerga.me/blog/new-language-for-a-new-mind-tbd/>

*Encourage reflection*

*Trigger creativity*

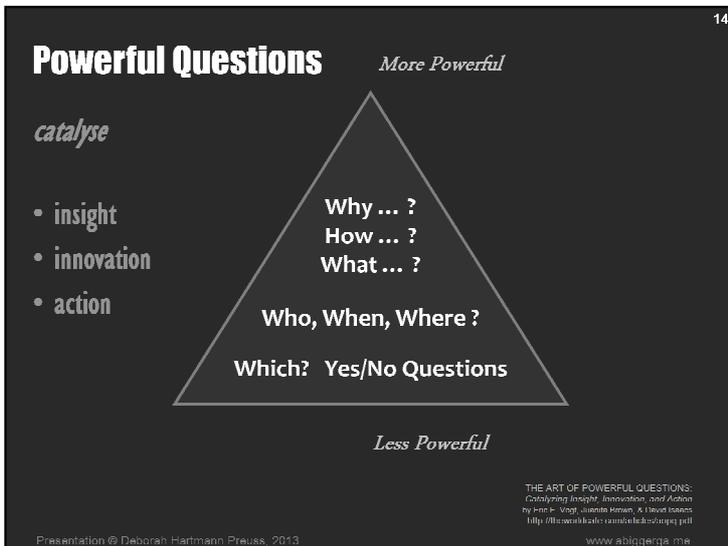
*Move us into action*

*Achieve results*

*Create shift*

What assumptions or beliefs do your questions communicate?

How well do your questions generate hope, engagement, creative action, and new possibilities?



It isn't really that hard to formulate good leadership questions, Powerful Questions, but it takes practice. Here is a diagram that can help.

Researchers have found, internationally, that, when people are asked which questions are “more powerful” and which “less powerful” for achieving results

Who did that... is always less powerful than How can we fix this?

And “Why” is the most powerful of all.

Of course, there are exceptions - “yes/no” question can be extremely important (particularly if you are closing a large deal!).

And then, “why” can also evoke a defensive response, as people rush to justify themselves.

Use of “why” requires context and trust – and it works really well on good teams.



You might like to try Powerful Questions with your customers. The results can be surprising.

Your customer is anyone who needs your help to accomplish something they can't do alone.

You can use powerful questions to help them think more creatively. literally – to think outside the box they need to get out of,

(maybe it's a box is created by marketshare, reduced work force, or tighter budgets. Often the box consists of

History   habit   assumptions (missing information)

Whatever it is, they need your help)

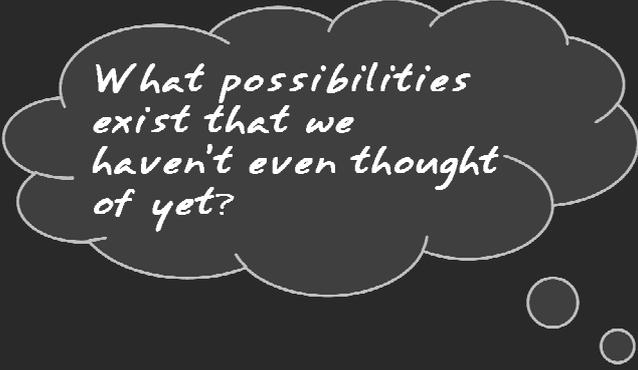


“Questions can be like a lever you use to pry open the stuck lid on a paint can. . . .

If we have a short lever, like a Euro, we can do it, but we only just crack open the lid on the can. But if we have a longer lever, or **a more dynamic question**, we can open that can up **much wider and really stir things up. . . .**

**If the right question is applied, and it digs deep enough, then we can stir up all the creative solutions.”**

For all it’s machinery, IT today is really knowledge workers. And the job of the leader – including technical leadership – is to help people to access what they know and use it.



*What possibilities  
exist that we  
haven't even thought  
of yet?*

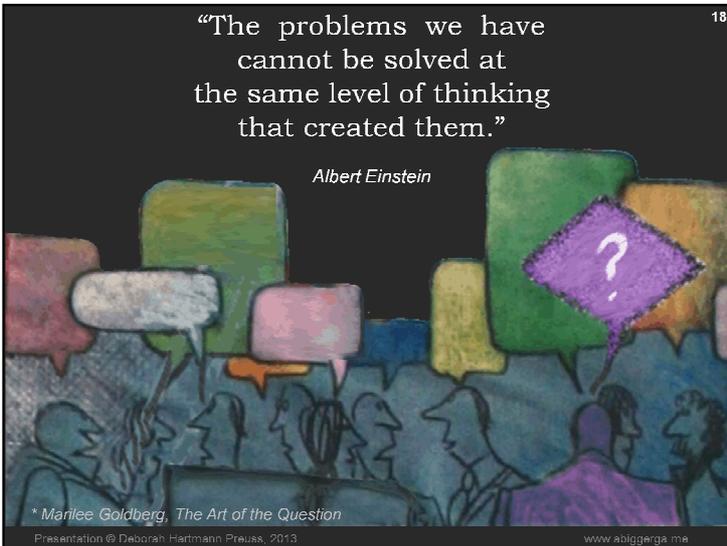
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Powerful questions give us the “long lever” we need to put our knowledge (and knowledge workers) to work for us.

A powerful question:

- surfaces underlying assumptions and generates curiosity
- invites creativity, and generates forward movement
- stays with participants, evoking more questions over time



I use Powerful Questions because my clients need things to be different than they are today.

There isn't time to tune and test all the strategies we already have,

As a very smart man once said:

**"The problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them."**

*Albert Einstein*

*This is the "paradigm shift" that Agile brings to teams.*

=====  
MARILEE GOLDBERG,  
THE ART OF THE QUESTION

"A PARADIGM SHIFT OCCURS WHEN A QUESTION IS ASKED INSIDE THE CURRENT PARADIGM THAT CAN ONLY BE ANSWERED FROM OUTSIDE IT."



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Let me tell you about how I combine Powerful Questions with another tool in my Agiles Koffer:

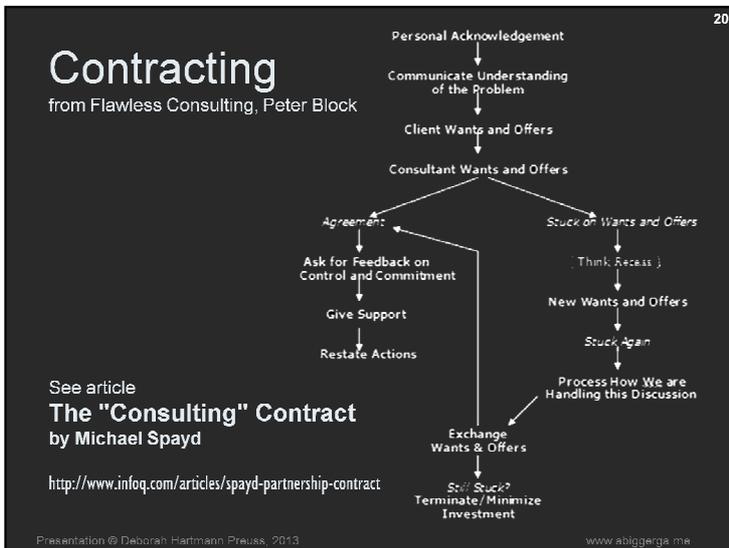
Contracting.

I don't mean nailing down the legalities on paper and getting a signature.

I mean really getting on the same page with my customer, and preparing to work in partnership.

Powerful questions help me to find out what's really going on; to discover what my customer's motives and assumptions are.

Now, it's important to step back from the problem and start building this partnership by finding out "who my customer is" and what they do.



This model is from Peter Block's book *Flawless Consulting*.  
 It contains powerful questions.

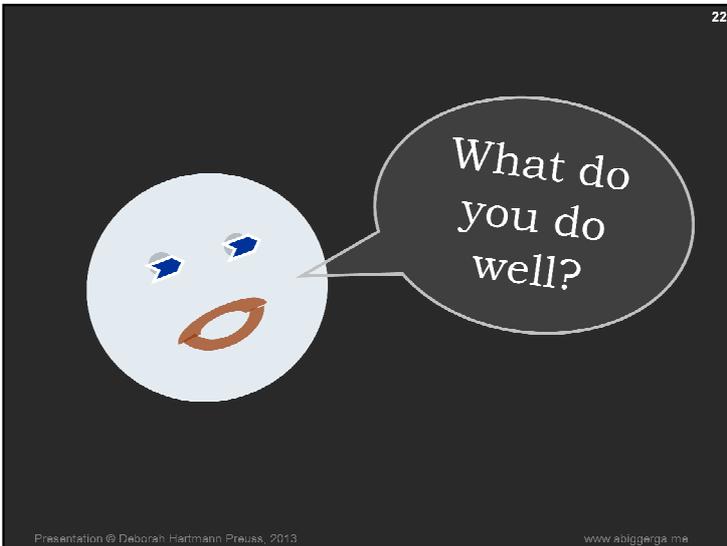
You can enhance it by getting to know your client first, to set the stage.  
 You can use powerful questions there too.

## *Design your alliance for success!*

Don't leave success to chance, design for it.

Powerful Questions  
can precede contracting  
to improve understanding and teamwork.

Based on this understanding, you can  
design how you want to work together.



(I start building my partnership by finding out who my customer is.)

So many software errors stem from false assumptions. We dive into our customers' problems and "solve" them, without sufficient context.

Sure, you want to do a little research first,  
but there's extra value in hearing it directly from your customer,  
Both what they say, and HOW they tell you.

This question allows your customer talk about her successes –  
which is much easier than the next step: telling where the problem lies.



Now, at this point, I'm really only looking for the problem's its impact is and what's driving the customer to solve it.

But what I'm more likely to a story. That's ok. They may be frustrated, or under pressure.

I can work with their story, using another type of question I call FTSSOW (for the sake of what?) (**wofur?**) that helps us get to the bottom of things:

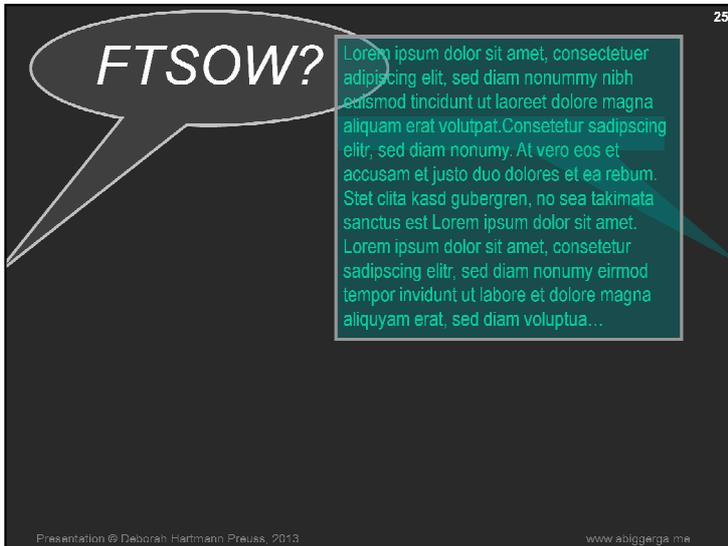
...keep asking to get to  
root causes and true priorities



*FTSOW?*

There are many ways to ask:

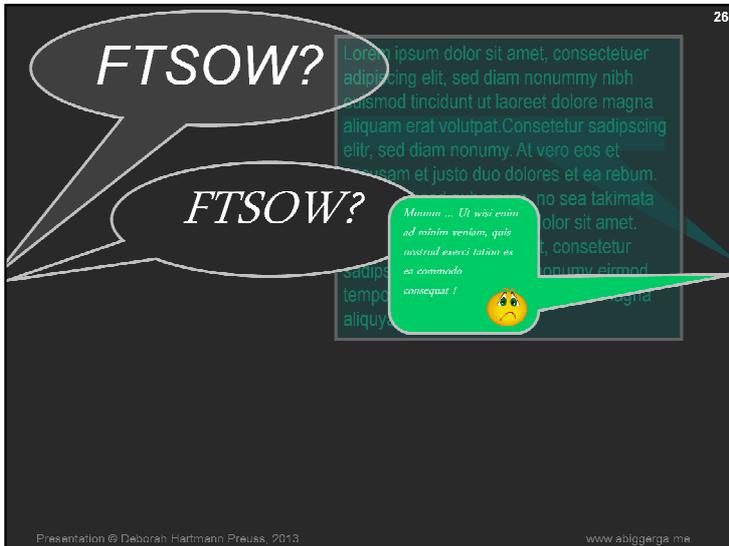
*"For The Sake Of What?"*



(From there, I have another tool I call FTSOW (**wofur?**) that helps us get to the bottom of things)

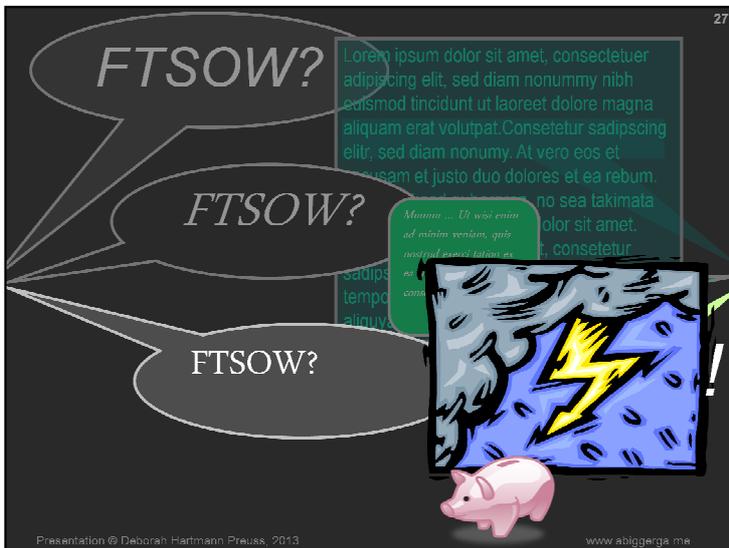
So, they're telling me their story, with all its history, facts and drama. But it's not what I need.

So I do something that's a lot like Lean's "5 whys" exercise, and I keep asking until we get to the root cause of the customer's request.



(Now we need to do something that's a lot like Lean's "5 whys" exercise: I ask them again.)

Note: You can do this on all sorts of levels, whether your customer is asking for a whole new process or just a new menu tab at the top of a window. Ask "why" again and again, in different ways, and together you might just see a new way to solve the same problem that's cheaper, better or more innovative.



Eventually they'll tell you where it REALLY hurts – in the bank account, the board room, or the complaints department.

Or maybe they don't know... and that's good information too. Now you can team up and design some new powerful questions to find out!

In the meantime, there are still a few Powerful Questions that can help set you up for success, including

**WHAT HAVE YOU ALREADY TRIED?**



**What have  
you already  
tried ?**

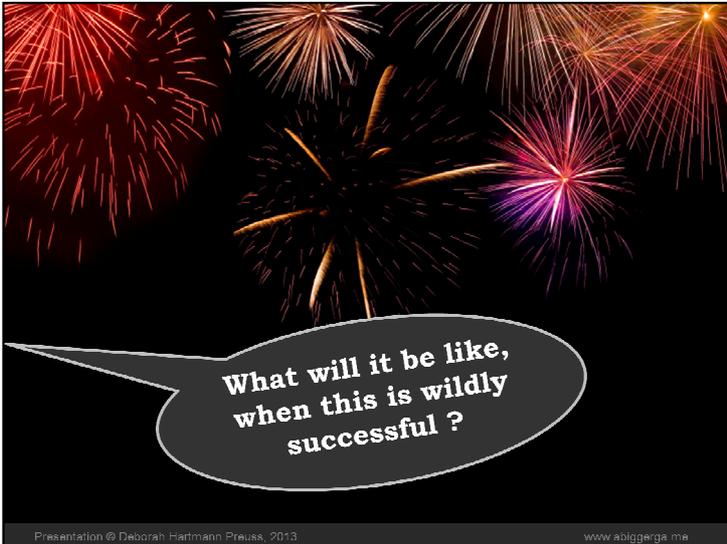
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## **WHAT HAVE YOU ALREADY TRIED?**

A question we too often skip, that leads us to cut-and-paste errors of applying solutions that work elsewhere here, without hearing the background!

This questions lets the customer feel heard, and gives me information to help avoid a few landmines.



## **What will it be like, when this is wildly successful ?**

Let the client dream out loud. This has power to change the mood of a project and a partnership.



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**And:**  
**What's your worst nightmare about tackling this problem?**

Get the landmines out in the open. Deal with reality. Learn from it!

Sometimes just talking about the worst-case scenario lets the client see it's not so likely, or not so bad.

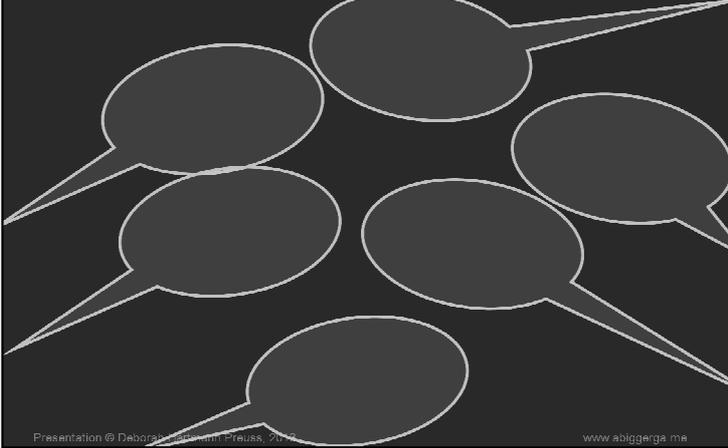


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**What resources can you offer me to help make this happen ?**

Once you get the hang of it...



Contracting is just the beginning.

Once you unlearn some habits, like the “yes/no” trap,  
You’ll find Powerful Questions useful everywhere on your project.

There are powerful questions for teams. Retrospectives use them a lot

What might happen if you asked your teams: What one thing  
could we do to double our productivity?

Oh, it does require one other tool that’s easy to pack (but sometimes hard  
to find) : Courage.

It takes courage to ask a blunt question and wait in silence while people  
look for the answers.

That silence is the sound of learning and innovation – you’ll grow to love  
it!



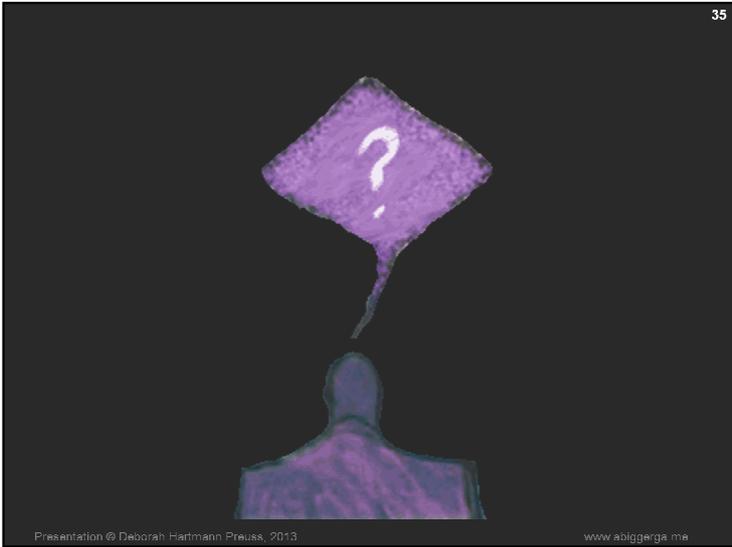
Oh, it does require one other tool that's easy to pack (but sometimes hard to find) : Courage.

It takes courage to ask a blunt question and wait in silence while people look for the answers.

Be prepared to count to 20 when you are tempted to re-phrase or clarify your question! Count to 20!



That silence is the sound of learning and innovation – you'll grow to love it!



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