

# Power Questions Q&A

## Power Questions by Andrew Sobel and Jerold Panas (John Wiley & Sons, 2012)

“The truth is, there’s little you can say to people to influence them or get them to change their behavior. But there’s plenty you can ask.”

### 1. What is a “power question,” anyway?

Power Questions are thought-provoking questions that give power to your conversations. They also give power to the other person—power to talk about what’s important to them, power to lead the conversation where they want it to go, power to express their thoughts more clearly than ever before. It’s not about you grabbing more power for yourself but rather being perceived as a wise and thoughtful person.

### 2. How is a power question different from any other question?

Most people don’t ask enough questions, and they often ask lousy ones. For example, they use closed-ended questions to which the other person can give a yes or no answer, or a short factual reply. That’s okay up to a point, but closed-ended questions rarely make people reflect and they don’t get to the heart of the matter the way thoughtful, open-ended questions do. It’s the difference between asking, “What’s your market share?” and “Why do you think you have gained market share?” Between asking, “How far up the ladder have you climbed?” versus “Is your ladder leaning against the right wall?”

### 3. Why is asking questions so important?

Asking thoughtful questions enables you to learn about the other person, be they a client, your boss, a colleague, or a friend. Sometimes we can spend a lot of time with someone without really knowing anything about them. Questions enable you to connect. And for what it’s worth, they make you look smart.

When a relationship is all business and there is no real personal connection, it lacks heart and soul. And therefore you are a commodity—a kind of fungible expert-for-hire. A client—or your boss—can trade you out for a new model with no remorse or emotion. But when you’ve connected personally, the situation is

Want to help someone rise above mediocrity? Take a cue from Steve Jobs and Henry Kissinger and ask, “Is this the best you can do?” (Chapter 11)

Are you involved in a sale that is dragging on and on? Read Chapter 4, “When the Sale Is Stuck” and find out if the four preconditions for a sale have been met. Ask yourself, “Are they really ready to buy?”

Encourage those who work for you (or perhaps a child) to truly learn from their experiences. Ask, “What did you learn from that?” (Chapter 16)

Have you gotten off on the wrong foot with someone, or been stuck in a futile argument? Throw yourself a life preserver and ask, “Can we start over?” (Chapter 8)

Want to understand someone’s passions? Ask questions like “What has given you the greatest fulfillment?”, “What else would you like to accomplish?” and “Why do you do what you do?” (Chapters 9, 10, and 31)

transformed because clients stick with people they like. Bosses hold on to team members they feel passionately about. Personal relationships build loyalty in a way that expertise or brilliance doesn't!

#### 4. Why don't people ask more questions?

First, they are afraid. They lack boldness in asking questions because they don't want to come across as being aggressive or overly inquisitive. Second, they don't think enough before they speak. It takes time and investment to come up with really good questions to ask someone, until you get practiced at it. Finally—and this is the most important reason—in our culture we believe we impress others and demonstrate our worth by being “smart” and having all the answers. Also, it goes without saying that we love to hear ourselves talk!

#### 5. Why not just give us lists of good questions. Why did you need to actually write chapters?

When we set out to write *Power Questions* we thought about this a lot. There are, in fact, books out there with lists of questions. Most of them are party questions—you know, “Who would you like to be stranded on a desert island with?” I realized that a great question is great, in part, because of the *context in which it is used*. Here's an example: “Why?” can be a terrific question—a truly transformative question if asked at the right moment and about the right thing. “Why?” can also be a critical, carping question that turns the other person off completely. So we decided to describe the actual stories—the events where these power questions enlarged or transformed the conversation. We've been told by readers that these stories are fascinating, get the point across, and make the questions memorable.

Are you meeting with a client who seems distracted and disengaged? Refocus on his or her most important priorities by asking, “What's the most important thing we should be talking about today?” (Chapter 33)

Oh, and never ask questions like “What keeps you up at night?”, “What has surprised you?”, and “What will it take to get your business?” Find out why in Chapter 13, “Bury the Cliches”

#### 6. What are some of your favorite questions?

When you boil it down, there are different types of power questions, and I have favorite questions within each type. **Focus** questions help focus the conversation or the other person's thinking on what's important. For example, you might ask, “What have we decided today?” after a meeting. You might ask someone, about an experience, “What did you learn?” “Why?” is also a focus question. It helps you identify what the root cause or root motivation is.

I also love **passion** questions. “What's been the happiest day of your life?” or, “Why do you do what you do?”

Another important category is what I term “**aspirational**” questions. That's not really a word, but you know what I mean. There's a great story in *Power Questions* about a consultant who asks an older CEO, who is nearing retirement, “You've had such an extraordinary career...is there something else you'd like to accomplish?” That question ends up transforming a dry, arms-length relationship into a very personal one. I like

asking business executives, “As you think about the future of your business, what are you most excited about?”

The book has some really interesting questions that cannot be categorized. For example, one of my favorite questions is “What’s your question?” People ask me for advice all the time, and they will start out by saying, “I have a question I want to ask you.” 10 minutes later they are still talking, giving me endless background information about their situation, and they still haven’t asked their question or told me what they want advice about. So I will ask them, “What’s your question?” or “There must be a question in there somewhere...what is it?”

Finally, I have personally thought a lot about this one: “If you had three years to live, what would you like to accomplish both professionally and personally?” Asking that question with a one month or even one year time frame is almost pointless—given a short period of time, everyone wants to essentially devote it to being with their loved ones and friends and saying goodbye. And that’s how it’s often posed. But three years? You won’t just hang out at your house for three years. It’s a trick question, in a way, because three years is just like the *rest of your life*. However you answer the question for a three-year timeframe is the same answer you ought to give for five or ten or twenty years!

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## **Praise for Power Questions**

The greatest gift you can give someone is to ask what he or she thinks, and truly listen to the answer. Sobel and Panas turn this powerful idea into practical, compelling advice by asking questions that reveal surprising, often life-changing, answers. —**Ralph W. Shrader, Chairman and CEO, Booz Allen Hamilton**

This book is amazing. It packs a wallop. It helps set your conversations on the right track and enhances your ability to listen. It gets you inside the mind and heart of a person. I strongly recommend it. —**John Schlifske, Chairman and CEO, Northwestern Mutual**

Reading *Power Questions* is like listening in to the most amazing array of private conversations with CEOs, politicians, religious authorities, and entrepreneurs. A joyous read. —**David Sable, Global CEO, Young & Rubicam**

In *Power Questions*, Andrew Sobel and Jerry Panas show how to drill deep in any situation by identifying the precise question that is begging to be asked. Read this remarkable book and keep it handy, because these questions have the power to enrich every segment of your life. —**Ken Blanchard, coauthor of *The One Minute Manager*<sup>®</sup> and *Leading at a Higher Level***

At the White House, I learned the art of answering questions but all the time I thought to myself the trick is to *ask* the *right* question. Andrew and Jerry nail that art. This book is indispensable for tapping the power of successful communication. A must read! —**Mike McCurry, former press secretary for President Bill Clinton**

*Power Questions* is easy to pick up, but hard to put down. Andrew and Jerry give a veritable playbook for building stronger relationships. Whether you read it cover-to-cover or just open a

page to prepare for a new meeting, it's a valuable resource no matter where you are in your career. —**Frank D'Souza, CEO, Cognizant**

Andrew Sobel and Jerry Panas have developed the thought-provoking thesis in their book of the importance of asking questions to tailor advice and build relationships. Their work is illustrated with plenty of examples—some humorous, others dramatically pertinent—and their premise becomes more convincing page by page. —**Sir Winfried Bischoff, Chairman, Lloyds Banking Group**