

Power Questions for a Variety of Client Challenges

Create a peer relationship

- *Creating reach:* What interested you in meeting with us today?
- *Taking charge of the agenda:* By way of describing my firm, I'd like to share some examples of recent work we've been doing in the industry. And then I'd like to ask you to talk about your major priorities this year, such as X or Y... Are there any particular issues or questions you'd like to cover during our discussion?
- *Pushing back:* You've defined the solution here as a new technology platform, but in my experience there are several other important dimensions to the problem. Can you talk a bit more about the underlying goals you're trying to achieve? (Or, You'd like to reduce costs by 15%. Is that aggressive enough?)

Build rapport

- Can you tell me about your own responsibilities here? What do they encompass?
- Can you tell me something about your own career and how you got to your current role?
- How would you compare the experience of working here versus at your old organization?
- I understand you've worked here for nearly 20 years. I'm curious, what are some of the biggest changes you've seen since you joined?
- So what do you think about...? (a current event, trend, etc—e.g., the new study that shows coffee extends your lifespan, the proposal to build a new subway tunnel, the new regulatory framework that was just passed by Congress, etc.)
- I saw in your bio that you graduated from Duke...my son is applying—how was your time there?

- I notice you spent a couple of years at xyz corporation...I actually started my career there in the late 90s. How did you find your time there? (Connect around something you have in common)
- Where do you live? Do you have much of a commute?
- Did you grow up in this area? Where is your family from originally?

Establish your credibility

(Note: the specific topics are purely for illustration purposes—you'll need to tailor your credibility-building questions to your specific clients)

- Many of our clients in your industry are of course grappling with lower-cost competition from offshore. Some are dealing with this by moving even more upmarket, whereas others are outsourcing in a significant way. What has your response been?
- Some of my clients, in order to accelerate growth in their largest customer relationships, have created investment budgets for individual client teams. Have you considered anything like that?
- How are you handling the demands imposed by the new regulatory framework?
- I'm curious, how are dealing with the challenge of providing training and development opportunities for employees that are spread out in small offices in over 25 countries?
- I noticed in your annual report that you've set aside a reserve to replace your legacy billing systems. I'm curious, what prompted that decision, and what are your plans?
- I read the transcript of your CEO's speech at the recent industry investors' conference. I thought it was interesting that he did not mention the recent merger of your two largest competitors. What's the reaction been in your organization?

- How did you decide to divest your component parts business?
- How did you make the decision to outsource your customer call centers?

Understand their issues

(The more tailored these are to your specific client and their industry, the more effective they'll be)

- How will you and your area be evaluated at the end of the year? What are the major goals you're being asked to accomplish by your leadership?
- I was struck by your CEO's speech at the investors conference, and his focus on creating more cost flexibility in the business. What impact is this going to have in terms of the capabilities you need to develop?
- Why do you want to do that?
- What additional capabilities do you need to put into place to support your new strategy?
- Where will your future growth come from?
- As you think about the future of your business, what are you most excited about? Concerned about?
- Deciding to do X was a bold move. I'm curious about some of the choices you made—can you share with me why you ...?
- What are your most significant opportunities for growth over the next several years?
- I'm familiar with the broad outlines of your strategy...my question is, how are some of these initiatives, like becoming more market-focused and reducing your cost infrastructure, affecting your own particular area?
- What exactly do you mean when you say...? (risk-averse, dysfunctional, challenging etc.)
- What would your best customers say are the main reasons they do business with you?
- Why do customers leave?

- How have your customers' expectations changed over the last five years?
- What's the driving force behind this particular initiative? (e.g., what is behind the drive to reduce costs, design a new organization, etc.)? (or, Why did you decide to do that?)
- What would better (risk management, cost controls, organizational effectiveness, etc.) look like?
- In which areas do you wish you were making faster progress?
- This issue you've been talking about—would you say it's one of your two or three biggest priorities this year?

Connect to higher-level goals

- Why is that happening?
- Why did you decide to do it that way?
- Why do you think this approach is best for you?
- What business goal is driving this?

Explore an identified need

- How much do you think this is costing you?
- Have you estimated what it's worth to fix this?
- What do you think that opportunity is worth?
- How is this affecting other aspects of your business? (How is this impacting sales? Costs? Productivity? Morale? Etc.).
- If you do not address this (problem/opportunity), how might your business be impacted?
- How do you know that...? (turnover is high, productivity is low, risks are not being well managed, etc.)?
- Why is this important to you right now?
- Would you say this one of your top three or four priorities?
- How much time do you personally devote to this issue?

- Can you give me an example of that?
- What solutions have you already tried and how successful were they?

Get to know them better and build a personal relationship

- What's the most fulfilling part of your job? The least fulfilling?
- Where do you think you'd like to go in the organization from here?
- I'm curious—what has been the most important developmental experience in your career so far?
- As you think about your own legacy as a manager and leader, what would you like to be remembered for?
- What do you feel has been your greatest accomplishment?
- As you think about what you've learned in the course of your career--what advice would you give your younger self about how to succeed
- How did you get your start in this business?
- When you look back on the different positions you've held/jobs you've had, what's been your most memorable one?
- If you hadn't gone into (computer science, business, law, accounting, engineering, etc.) what do you think you would have done?
- Can you tell me about where you grew up? How did that influence you?
- Is there something you've always wanted to do--a sport, hobby, trip--that you've just never gotten around to?
- You've had a very successful career...Is there anything else you would like to achieve?

Meet with top executives

- Challenge them: How did you arrive at 10% as a target? Do you feel that's sufficiently ambitious? How would you describe the gap between your current leadership and the skills and capabilities you'll need in three years' time?

- Ask about implementation: How would you assess your progress in creating a more client-centric culture? What do you feel you've accomplished, and where are you lagging?
- Bring in internal insight: In working with your people over the last six months, we've observed a tendency towards risk avoidance, leading to slow decision making. Does that square with your own view? What do you think is behind that behavior?
- Ask about the external environment: Why do you think (competitor x) has grown so rapidly in that market? or Some of your competitors have created virtual customer communities...do you have any initiatives in this area?
- Help redefine the problem: In my experience, changing the organization structure won't have the impact on collaboration unless you also address things like your measurement and reward system and your decision making process. What do you think is really at the heart of the lack of teamwork?
- Ask about organizational effectiveness: How do you feel about the dynamics within your senior team? or As you think about your senior team, what skills or capabilities do you wish you had more of? or What do you think is holding people back from accomplishing this?
- Learn more about their thinking: What do you think your options are to... (grow your European business...reduce your customer acquisition costs...improve your share of wallet...etc.)
- Understand what makes them tick: What was your most important developmental experience in becoming a leader? or Have you ever experienced a setback in your career? How did it affect you?

Create a next step

- Of all the issues we've discussed, it seems like (name the issue) is the most promising one for us to explore further. What do you think?
- Would it be helpful to you if we put some examples together about how other clients of ours have approached this issue?

- If you feel it would be useful to further explore this issue, who else in your organization should we talk to before we circle back to you with some ideas about how to approach it?
- As you think about this issue, what are your biggest, lingering questions?
- Would you be interested in seeing an outline of the steps we'd recommend to address this?
- Would you be interested in seeing an outline of how the solution we've discussed could address this issue?
- Given everything we've discussed, what do you feel would be the most productive follow up to this conversation?

Dealing with a crisis or dissatisfaction

- Thank you for raising this with me. Can you share with me everything you know about the situation?
- Can you say more about that?
- What happened then?
- What has their reaction been?
- How do you think it reached this point?
- What else can you tell me?
- What do you think contributed to this?
- In retrospect, from your perspective—what could we have done to prevent this?
- I'm sorry this happened. Is there anything we can do right now to help the situation?
- This is extraordinarily important to me. How soon can we meet to discuss this in person?

- Would it be helpful if I did some additional fact-finding, and then if we met tomorrow to discuss some proposed actions to address this?
- If anything else surfaces in the meantime, can you let me know immediately?
- Going forward, what would you think of trying to meet on a more regular basis? This will help us stay more aligned, reduce the chance of this ever happening again, and give us a chance to exchange perspectives on the work we're doing.