

OUR INSIGHTS

Practical advice on common business challenges
direct from our International team of business experts

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What is a BGQ?

If you've ever worked with one of my Positive Momentum colleagues or I then I guess you know already that a BGQ is a Bloody Good Question.

It's our modern business take on the ancient skill of Socratic Questioning and in our experience it's the difference that makes the difference when it comes to leading, selling, consulting and just about any other multi-person business (maybe even life) activity you can think of.

In essence it's the ability to be able to make another human being stop and think because of what you ask rather than what you tell.

Consider your best friend or maybe the best boss or mentor you've ever had. Were they/ are they great at asking you just the right question at just the right time? Is it sometimes a bit maddening that they're so on-point but do you end up appreciating them even more because of this seemingly magical ability? Of course you do.

I first used the expression BGQ back in 2003 in my very first year of consulting. I was lucky (VERY lucky as it turned out) to be awarded a project to help relationship managers in a very large bank to become better at winning new business. Whilst I knew a fair bit about how to win new B2B business, I knew next to nothing about banking as the client, who was also my former employer, fortunately only later discovered!

I realised I'd have my work cut out with experienced bankers who generally have very little patience with so-called 'soft skills experts' from outside their industry. In preparation I went out on the road with some of them to see how they engaged with clients in the real world and guess what I discovered?

Total professionals with very impressive – in many cases market leading – expertise in their markets. And that was their biggest problem.

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I remember vividly one meeting with a potential new manufacturing client in the West Midlands of the UK when the c30-year old Relationship Manager opened up the discussion not with a question but by announcing that he was “a specialist” in manufacturing – it must have been true as it was printed on his business card! The c60-year old MD reclined back in his well worn leather chair and with a mischievous smile on his face said “well I’ve been in manufacturing for 40 years, but hey why don’t you tell me all about it?”

The meeting went downhill from there as the flustered (and on any other day excellent Relationship Manager) tried in vain to row back from this very bad start but suffice to say we didn’t leave that day – or indeed any subsequent day – with a mandate...

Someone once said that Knowledge is knowing the right answer whereas Intelligence is knowing the right question

Whilst I’d found my opening I realised that I’d need something more catchy and direct than Socratic Questioning and something a lot more advanced than Fisher Price-level open and closed questioning, and so the BGQ was born.

The (mild) profanity and daft acronym is intended to make it memorable and it seems to have worked. A few years ago a guy came up to me in Schiphol Airport of all places and said “hey, you’re the BGQ guy”. He had no idea what my name was or where he’d met me but he’d remembered BGQ’s – and that was more than good enough for me!

My colleagues and I have taught this technique to thousands of business people in hundreds of organisations all around the world and in countless situations and we love particularly how we’re able to use it to solve real dilemmas for clients and never just as an abstract principle.

Our Managing Partner in India, Rajnish Virmani, has even just [released a book](#) on leadership with BGQ’s at its heart. Totally flattered.

So how can you become a BGQ-pro? Well of course, read Rajnish’s book and also:

1. Start every meeting with a well thought through question – or two.

For a short time nearly 25 years ago I worked directly for the billionaire son of a 20th century perfumery legend. Our first one to one was at a very, very posh London hotel called Claridges (where else?) and I sat nervously waiting for him in the lounge with my note pad open to a blank page. We spoke about the project I was leading for around 20-minutes and it seemed to go pretty well. At the end he gave me both a compliment and a criticism. He liked my energy but not my blank notes page. He suggested that whenever I meet anyone in future – billionaire or not – I should have prepared 3-5 questions for them and for these to be visible to both parties as a note of both respect and intent. Never forgotten that one. Thanks RSL.

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2. Stop trying to solve everything immediately.

Unless you do actually work at the reception of an A&E department, you don't need to triage everything the minute it lands. Too many business people, especially people leaders, are in a raring hurry to solve every challenge thrown their way immediately in some delusional attempt to either get everything done or show just how clever and important they are. Being a problem solver is certainly an important skill but it's overrated in my view. As my wife often reminds me, just because she chooses to tell me about the odd less than stellar day doesn't mean she wants all my ideas about how to make it better next time! Patience, empathy and the odd question to show you're actually listening is more appreciated than you (and too often I) might imagine...

3. Get hypothetical.

BGQ's take a person to a place in their consciousness that they hadn't gone before – or were maybe even trying to avoid. Questions like “if you could go back in time and do this all again how would you do it differently?” or “if you had unlimited resources what would you do?” can have a surprisingly mercurial effect.

4. Use people's own phrases when you pose questions.

If you really want to show someone you're listening to them, playing back their own words in the form of further enquiry somehow ignites new thoughts in their head in the most remarkable way. It's especially helpful if what you're asking is a little more challenging. The flattery of play back (if genuine and carefully delivered) can be a fantastic anaesthetic for the landing of a question that has just a little bite.

My favourite BGQ story involves my eldest daughter (now 22) when she was just four and half years old – around the time I was first developing the BGQ concept in client work. She had only been at 'proper school' for around 4 weeks and one day I was at home in the afternoon and so went to collect her in the car as the school was a few miles away. On the way back home I asked the classical parental question of kids after school: “what did you do today?”. Now as most parents know there are some classical child answers to this like “nothing” or “can't remember” but my little girl said something different that really landed the importance of BGQ's with me. Somewhat forthright from a very early age, she said “Daddy, don't ever ask me that question again!” □ Clearly her mother and I were already becoming repetitive and she called me on it right there and then. She was right. It's a terrible question. “OK Charlotte” I said “what was the best thing that happened at school today?” and you know what happened? She thought for a moment, told me about something funny that happened with one of her new friends and we laughed and chatted about it all the way home. Sadly I messed up this brief triumph by lazily using the same question for the next few weeks until she said – and I suspect

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you're ahead of me here – "Daddy, don't ever ask me that question again".

You see BGQ's only really happen in the moment. They are best when based directly on something you know really matters right now to the other party. They are therefore only possible when you're listening to someone with totally committed intent.

Turns out they knew what they were talking about those ancient Greek philosophers.



Good luck this week with asking BGQ's to all those who really matter to you in your life and I'd love to hear in the comment below how you get on or indeed any other tips you can offer.

Matt Crabtree

Partner

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