

# ASKING POWERFUL QUESTIONS

**SERVICE TO SOCIAL CHANGE : A SERIES OF 5% SHIFTS**

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## ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Building Movement Project develops tools that help organizations align their social change principles with their social service practices. Our research and experience shows that relatively small shifts in service provision can cause ripple effects; raising up constituent voice, fostering community cohesion and increasing engagement in advocacy efforts. This series highlights “5% shifts” – as we are calling them – that don’t rely on organizations completely changing course and reinventing themselves. We lift up shifts that are both simple and achievable, to inspire service providers to adapt what works.

These reports are structured to include both conceptual framing based on research and literature in the sector, as well as case studies of on-the-ground experiments initiated by organizations. They also include discussion materials and other resources to help staff and leaders reflect on the case examples and apply the lessons to their own organizations. We hope that organizations will take what is useful, build on their strengths, and exercise judgment and wisdom in tailoring these examples to make “5% shifts” that fit their specific community and organizational contexts.

We invite organizations to spread these lessons and learning throughout the nonprofit sector, and to reach out to BMP to share experiences or to request additional resources or coaching. Feel free to email BMP Co-Director Sean Thomas-Breitfeld at [sthomas-breitfeld@demos.org](mailto:sthomas-breitfeld@demos.org).

Thanks go to our team of authors and reviewers: Caroline McAndrews, Hai Binh Nguyen and Sean Thomas-Breitfeld co-wrote this report; Marla Cornelius, Katy Heins, and Melinda Lewis provided important feedback.

# INTRODUCTION AND FRAMEWORK:

## ASKING POWERFUL QUESTIONS

People working in service agencies constantly ask questions. During an intake process, questions may assess need and eligibility; in a counseling session, questions may focus on strengths and diagnoses; in an advocacy or organizing setting, the questions can be about root causes, power and strategy. While some questions can seem intrusive and coercive, other questions can “open the door to dialogue and discovery” and invite “creativity and breakthrough thinking.”<sup>1</sup> Questions can illuminate new opportunities and build a stronger foundation for relationships. Tapping into the power of questions to generate new possibilities and ignite change is an important tool for service providers working to help people and communities.

This report profiles two organizations that began asking new and powerful questions in their work with clients and volunteers. In the case of Crisis Assistance Ministry—an organization providing support to people and families experiencing financial emergencies in Charlotte, NC – the addition of a simple question about voter registration to their standard battery of questions to screen individuals’ eligibility for public benefits both increased the civic engagement of clients and launched an organization-wide shift towards greater advocacy. For reStart, Inc. in Kansas City, MO, the organization had always relied on volunteers to help serve homeless youth, families and adults, but when they began asking people to reflect on both their volunteer experience and perceptions of homelessness, it deepened volunteers’ motivation to support the organization and the people they help.

Part of the power of questions is that they don’t just seek information, but lead to the co-creation

of knowledge. Therefore, open-ended questions that invite people to think deeply about their experiences and the world around them are important for opening up conversations and learning. In our work helping service providers integrate social change values and practices into their work, we have often asked a one-word question – *why?* – to address both the symptoms and root causes of the inequities that force people to seek out services and support from organizations. For example, if an organization were providing after school services to children struggling to succeed in school, the answer to “*why?*” might lead to an analysis that schools need more resources in order to provide individualized attention to students; we would then ask “*why?*” again which could lead staff to probe the broader societal, political and economic structures that block the kinds of educational reforms communities need.<sup>2</sup> This kind of exploration can be valuable for organizational staff to do as part of a learning circle<sup>3</sup> about integrating social change principles into service delivery practices. Also, “*why?*” questions, when positively framed (to avoid sounding judgmental or victim-blaming), can be a powerful tool for encouraging clients to critically examine the social inequities they see around them, and what they can do to advocate on their own behalf.

While the power of questions is great, service providers should be sensitive to the power dynamics embedded in the practice of asking questions of clients. Although it may seem that questions simply invite a response or more information, the very structure of provider-client conversations often creates the expectation that the service provider

2 See “Chapter 1: Learning and Changing” of BMP’s *Social Service and Social Change: A Process Guide* at <http://buildingmovement.org/pdf/ProcessGuide.pdf>

3 For information on how to set up a Learning Circles, go to [http://www.buildingmovement.org/pdf/Learning\\_Circle.pdf](http://www.buildingmovement.org/pdf/Learning_Circle.pdf)

will ask the questions and the client will answer them.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, how a question is framed by the professional can limit the range of responses for a client to provide and lead to a pre-determined answer.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, a key part of the training for counselors, social workers and therapists is learning how to carefully, appropriately and strategically ask questions of clients that allow for authentic reflection, mutual learning and reciprocal growth.

The focus on asking the right questions in counseling settings arises from the belief that questions can be interventions, in the sense that they introduce “alternative possibilities, theories and views of the world.”<sup>6</sup> In the context of interviews and therapy sessions, professionals often choose between questions that focus on ‘personal agency’ or ‘external causes.’<sup>7</sup> Those questions focusing on external causes – like childhood trauma, economic hardship, etc. – provide important context and background on the client’s situation, but can also be disempowering and lead clients to emphasize their sense of victimhood. On the other hand, questions focused on personal agency – like people’s strengths, survival skills and ability to overcome challenges – have the potential to emphasize the ability and power of clients to strategize and act in ways that change their circumstances, but can also risk blaming clients for their experiences and removing structural factors from the analysis of the barriers they face. Therefore, the practice of

asking the right powerful questions is more art than science. Service providers must balance the desire to help clients connect to their sense of personal agency, with a clear-eyed and shared analysis of the real societal problems they confront, in order to empower clients to address personal challenges and advocate for social change.<sup>8</sup>

The careful attention applied to the practice of asking questions can be a model beyond therapeutic settings. Positive, strengths-based, open-ended questions can all be useful ways to engage with colleagues, clients, volunteers and boards. Asking “why” questions prompts people to make connections, identify patterns, and explore new ideas. Embracing social change and organizational transformation inevitably involves asking difficult questions, with no clear or easy answers; but those are the questions that lead to innovation.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

What questions drive the work of your organization?

What difficult questions have led to breakthrough thinking in your work?

What questions underpin your organization’s strategies for responding to your social context?

4 Witkin (1999)

5 For example, in McGee, et al. (October, 2005), the authors provide a “classic legal example: ‘Have you stopped beating your wife?’” The question presumes that the answerer is guilty. Obviously, this is an extreme example and not representative of common questions in a therapeutic setting, but illustrates the principle that questions often embed answers in them.

6 McGee, et al. (October, 2005)

7 Healing and Bavelas (2011)

8 The Right Question Institute is a great resource for helping people in low and moderate-income communities learn to formulate their own questions, in order to advocate for themselves, participate in decisions that affect them and partner with service-providers and public officials. Go to [www.rightquestion.org](http://www.rightquestion.org) for more information.

## CASE EXAMPLE 1:

### INTEGRATING QUESTIONS ON VOTER REGISTRATION INTO CLIENT INTAKE

#### BACKGROUND

**C**risis Assistance Ministry manages emergency housing and utilities funds for the city of Charlotte and surrounding Mecklenburg County in North Carolina. It assists more than 50,000 individuals a year and believes that if it could support individuals to gain more financial stability and assets, the number of people who need emergency assistance would decrease. Therefore, the organization not only designs programs to prevent financial emergencies, but also supports clients to build their collective voice to advocate for policies affecting poor and working families. To accomplish the latter, Advocacy Program Manager Daniel Valdez developed a comprehensive voter registration plan that began with staff and volunteers asking a simple question: “are you registered to vote?” The integration of this question into an existing intake process had significant impacts on staff and clients, leading to real gains in registration and voting among clients.

#### HOW IT WORKS

In order to prepare for an election in November, Daniel developed a civic engagement and voter registration plan in January. As this was the first time such a plan existed at Crisis Assistance Ministry, Daniel provided trainings for all financial assistance case workers on voter eligibility and nonprofit limitations in electoral work. These 30-minute trainings, along with materials on voting and issues in the upcoming elections, helped build staff’s confidence to talk to clients about voter registration.

In addition, Daniel collaborated with Benefit Bank counselors and volunteers to prioritize voter registration as one of their intake outcomes. Benefit Bank counselors use a web-based tool to screen individuals for multiple benefits such as Medicaid, food assistance, earned

income tax credits, and student aid, while clients wait to meet with a financial assistance case worker. Because voter registration questions were already incorporated in the Benefit Bank software and a client’s information was already in the system, the counselor simply clicked a button, and the program printed out a voter registration sheet ready to be signed and submitted.

Daniel also increased Crisis Assistance Ministry’s capacity by partnering with other organizations that were able to mobilize volunteers. These volunteers talked to the 200 or so individuals who came to Crisis Assistance Ministry every day and engaged them on voting and registering.

#### **BEFORE:**

Crisis Assistance Ministry does not have the capacity or a plan to register clients to vote even though there are more than 200 clients who come to the organization every day.

#### **5% SHIFT:**

Staff and volunteers ask clients if they are registered to vote and a streamlined Benefit Bank process makes registering clients easy.

#### **IMPACT:**

More than 800 people were registered in one election season and 81% of first time registered voters actually voted. Clients become co-creators of social change.

## RESPONSE & IMPACTS

Asking clients to register to vote worked very well within the Benefit Bank intake process. Voter registration information integrated in Benefit Bank software meant time was saved without staff feeling overwhelmed by more work. “Doing it this way allowed us to use resources and tools that we already have. We just added voter registration to something that the counselors were already doing. This also allows us to reach people where they already are without going to them,” Daniel explains.

The Benefit Bank team was able to make the process even more effective by refining the questions they posed. Instead of stopping after a client said they were already registered, Benefit Bank counselors asked, “Since you last registered, did you change your address or your name?” In this way, the team was able to catch many more voters whose registrations had expired. A streamlined process also allowed the team more time to engage clients in a deeper way. After someone had registered, the team asked the individual to take the next step to sign a voter pledge card. The pledge was so effective that 81% of first time registered voters actually voted.

Significantly, the civic capacity program made voter registration readily available and accessible for Crisis Assistance Ministry’s 50,000 clients who came to its service sites. During the four months before the election, a client who walked through Crisis Assistance Ministry’s door had three potential opportunities to learn about voting and register to vote: through a financial assistance case manager, a Benefit Bank counselor, or a partner organization’s volunteer in the lobby. The program was able to benefit individuals like a 41-year-old client who had never voted because she was too embarrassed that she did

not know how to register, or a client with a felony conviction who found out that his voting rights were actually restored through an informational pamphlet at Crisis Assistance Ministry.

More than 800 individuals were registered at Crisis Assistance Ministry’s service locations last year. About 30% were first-time voters. Even though case workers did not fully participate in this round, the staff was excited by the project and the new information. The work of the Benefit Bank demonstrated that voter registration is simple and can be executed with the right tools. Some staff even took the time to register themselves to vote. Significantly, the project helped to demystify some of the complexities around voter registration and elections for staff, setting Crisis Assistance Ministry up for other civic engagement projects, including those outside of the election cycle.

This year, Crisis Assistance Ministry is transferring its caseload from a paper filing system to an electronic database, so there is an opportunity to explore other strategic questions to be integrated into the new database. Information collected in the database will also give Crisis Assistance Ministry a

### THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- Elections have definitive deadlines. Make a civic engagement and voter registration plan well in advance of Election Day.
- Start small. Pick a team that is willing to test the project so that its impact can be demonstrated to the rest of the staff.

greater insight into trends such as employment rates and family poverty in the community so that it can adjust its client engagement and advocacy efforts.

In this way, the voter registration experiment through the Benefit Bank has become the basis of a larger plan to engage clients in Crisis Assistance Ministry's advocacy efforts. Daniel plans to collect information on who votes during which cycle. His theory is that an individual is more likely to vote and engage in the issues if this person was registered to vote by a case worker who has been learning about their family and financial situation for 30 minutes rather than by a random stranger on the street. The foundation of this relationship—and the inclusion of this critical question—form a backdrop in which taking the next step in civic engagement is more likely. It will allow Crisis Assistance Ministry to set a baseline for what they can accomplish, and also motivate staff to design ways to improve how they work with clients in order to include them in advancing the organization's mission of fighting poverty.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

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What kinds of questions does your organization routinely ask clients?

Do these questions encourage clients to be civically engaged? If so, how? If not, what systems would you need in place to encourage civic engagement?

Do these questions lead to a broad sense of personal agency? If not, how might the questions be disempowering (overwhelming number, negatively framed, etc.)?

## CASE EXAMPLE 2:

### USING REFLECTION QUESTIONS TO CONNECT VOLUNTEERS TO THE MISSION

#### BACKGROUND

**V**olunteers make up an integral part of service agencies such as reStart, Inc., an organization serving homeless youth, families, and adults, in Kansas City, Missouri. reStart, Inc. sees its volunteers not as uncompensated labor and donors of tangible goods, but as key community members who will help carry out its mission of empowering people and ending homelessness. In order to support this effort, reStart, Inc. began integrating reflection questions into its volunteer program. Asking volunteers to reflect on the issue of homelessness and their experience engaging with clients facing homelessness creates learning opportunities for volunteers and invites them to redefine their service to include advocating for both reStart, Inc. and for ending

high school students from the suburbs, Alissa might ask, “Have you been to a homeless shelter before?” or “How often have you been in an urban setting?” and “What have some of your experiences been?” Alissa explains, “For many volunteers, this may be the first time that they have encountered the issue of homelessness or someone who is homeless, so a huge part of my job is education and advocacy. I explain the different pockets of the homeless, and how some residents are here because of the recession. People can relate to that.”

After volunteers have finished their shifts, Alissa brings the group back together for a debrief of their experience. Common debrief questions include:

#### HOW IT WORKS

reStart, Inc.’s Volunteer Manager Alissa Parker explains the basis of the program, “You can hear a story, you can read something in a book, but until you are specifically impacted by it, you won’t really understand it. We want to provide a fantastic volunteer experience that will get to the heart of reStart, Inc. and our mission. We do this by providing the opportunity for volunteers to reflect and make meaning of what they just experienced.” Alissa develops the program to allow time for learning and reflection to connect the volunteers’ experience with clients to their own life and reStart, Inc.’s larger mission to end homelessness.

A typical volunteer session begins with a 15-minute orientation to familiarize volunteers to reStart, Inc.’s understanding of the issue of homelessness and to contextualize volunteers’ experience within that analysis. As such, it is important to adapt the orientation to volunteers in the room. To a group of

#### **BEFORE:**

Volunteers came to organization to work and complete tasks.

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#### **5% SHIFT:**

A robust volunteer program asks volunteers to consider key reflection questions as part of an orientation and a debrief after the volunteer shift.

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#### **IMPACT:**

Volunteers deepened their commitment to the organization and to the issue by increasing their participation, referring other volunteers, creating new volunteer-initiated programs, and bringing in more donations.



What did you see? How was that experience for you? What impacted you today? What felt good? What didn't feel so good? When a volunteer sees something unfamiliar or out of the range of their ordinary experiences, Alissa helps to clarify the experience and uses it as a teaching moment to ask "How do we build on that?" The debrief is also an opportunity to deepen volunteers' engagement with the issue of homelessness. Alissa may additionally ask: What do you wish that others knew about homelessness and about reStart, Inc.? How can you share that information? What can you do differently to affect change? "I try to help volunteers make sense in their own head and their own heart before they actually leave the location," Alissa says.

## RESPONSE & IMPACTS

The response to the orientation and debrief has been overwhelmingly positive. The process of asking questions gives volunteers an opportunity reflect on their experience, on the work that they do, and on the people that they came to serve. It allows them to learn new information and make sense of their new experience. It signals that reStart, Inc. values their insights, not just their labor, and it makes the volunteer experience more transformative than transactional.

Since initiating the orientation and debrief as part of the volunteer program, reStart, Inc. grew its committed volunteer network from 900 to 2,300 unduplicated volunteers in one year. Prior to this program, reStart, Inc. had a few key volunteers but many came once and did not return. In contrast, current volunteers act as effective outreach workers who speak positively about their volunteer experience at reStart, Inc. and refer others to the organization. reStart, Inc. receives at least two volunteer referrals a week through word

of mouth. Volunteers also make their contributions in other ways by bringing in donated goods, writing a check, and mobilizing their networks.

Through reflections and contextualization, volunteers are able to build real personal connections with residents that last beyond a single volunteer shift. Alissa recalls, "We had a group of high school volunteers from one of the wealthiest school districts in the country. They made an emotional connection with the young people in our shelter. They ended up coming back to do the toy drive for every young person in the shelter and they came back again to serve food once a month, and they came back again to do a huge hygiene drive."

Armed with deeper knowledge of the issue and a personal and emotional connection to residents at reStart, Inc., volunteers are more engaged and committed to reStart, Inc.'s mission. They show more leadership and take initiative in new projects. Inspired by reStart, Inc.'s model of empowering residents and meeting resident needs, volunteers recently started a weekly literacy/tutoring program with more than 10 volunteers at each session. When

### **THINGS TO CONSIDER:**

- The orientation familiarizes volunteers to the organization's mission, contextualizes their experience, and asks for their partnership in empowering residents.
- Be prepared to support engaged volunteers in developing and implementing new initiatives.

a series of nine toy drives distributed toys to every young person in the shelter and still had nearly 700 toys left over, volunteers partnered with staff and residents to develop a free store stocked with toys and other goods that residents can “buy” through a system of work contribution.

reStart, Inc.’s integration of reflection questions into its volunteer engagement strategy has also transformed its staff’s understanding of volunteers. Volunteers were mobilized for many months to support reStart, Inc.’s renovations and construction of its building. As a result, staff recognized that it wouldn’t have been possible without a dedicated team of volunteers. The staff has also embraced the idea of volunteers playing ongoing roles in program delivery and organizational communications, including agency advocacy—activities formerly reserved for professional staff.

Executive Director Evelyn Craig sees volunteer engagement not as an isolated part of the organization, but as part of reStart, Inc.’s effort to invigorate and include all parts of its community, from staff and board to clients and volunteers. “When we open up the process and engage our community in that way, we as an organization become solutions providers, and not just service providers.”

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

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Think of the last time you volunteered at an organization. What questions did the organization ask you to consider? What did you wish you knew more about? In addition to providing your service, what relationships were nurtured?

How do you engage volunteers in your organization?

What questions might your organization ask in order to collaborate with the broader community in confronting social problems?

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Purpose of this Discussion:

Have participants reflect on the case studies and their own experiences, in order to identify opportunities for asking powerful questions in their work.

### Hoped-For Outcomes:

- Explore the value of asking questions as a skill and practice
- Identify new questions to ask about the organization and its work

## 60-MINUTE AGENDA AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Round of Introductions and Personal Reflection 10 min

Start with a round of introductions where people respond to the following statement:

Describe a time when someone asked you a question that caused you to have an “a ha” moment (sparked new ideas, connections, insights).

If time allows, ask for reflections on common themes across the content of the questions that sparked new ideas and thinking and/or the context in which the questions were asked (i.e. who asked the question, power dynamics, mutuality, etc.).

### Reflect on the Questions Asked in the Context of the Organization’s Work 30 min

Explore questions that get asked amongst the staff:

As staff, what questions do we ask ourselves and each other about our work? How do these questions help us innovate?

What “why” questions do we ask ourselves about the systemic issues that bring people to our doors? How do the answers to those questions inform our programs?

How often do we ask open-ended questions that expand the conversation and open up new possibilities? How often do we ask closed-ended questions that narrow the range of possible responses?

Explore questions that get asked of the organization’s clients and constituents:

What questions do we ask clients and our community? Do we tend to ask questions focused on ‘personal agency’ or questions focused on ‘external causes’? (The distinction between these two types of questions is discussed in the introduction)

What questions do we ask clients and our community that are helpful (leading to empowerment and sense of agency) vs. unhelpful (leading to disempowerment and sense of victimhood)?

Do the examples of new questions asked of clients and volunteers in the two case studies in the report offer any parallels to our organization and programs?

### Begin to Explore New Questions 15 min

Begin a discussion about new questions you could ask of staff and clients:

What opportunities do we have to think of our work in a larger context? What questions would help us get there?

What questions could we ask our clients and/or volunteers that would engage them at a deeper level?

### Closing and Evaluation 5 min

Ask people to identify one thing they liked and one thing they would change about the conversation. Close the discussion and thank people for their participation.

**Note:** If there was energy about new questions to ask within the organization, invite people to participate in a follow-up meeting, using the guide and worksheet on the following pages.

## FOLLOW-UP

### DISCUSSION GUIDE

### AND EXERCISE

#### **Purpose of this Discussion:**

For those individuals who were particularly engaged or excited by the last meeting, you can use this agenda and worksheet to delve deeper into new questions for the organization to ask about its mission, theory of change and program design.

#### **Hoped-For Outcomes:**

- Identify opportunities to introduce questions that could lead to breakthrough thinking and innovation in your organization
- Generate a list of concrete questions that can be proposed to others in the organization
- Reframe questions that are already being asked so that they are the right ones (i.e. not misleading, blaming, narrowing, etc.)

## **60-MINUTE AGENDA AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### **Round of Introductions and Personal Reflection 10 min**

Start with a round of introductions where people respond to the following prompt(s):

(If any participants were not part of the first meeting, have them first reflect on this statement) Describe a time when someone asked you a question that caused you to have an “a ha” moment.

(For those who participated in the first meeting) What most excited you about our last discussion together? Why?

**Note:** You may want to write down answers to the second question on a flipchart for everyone to see and remember.

### **Explore Questions about the Mission Statement 10 min**

As a group, quickly brainstorm answers to the following questions. (If you have the flipcharts from the first meeting, you can have them up as well):

Looking at our organization’s mission statement, what questions does it seem to be answering?

Does our mission explain why we do what we do? Does it explain why there is a need in our community for us to do what we do? Does it explain the root cause of the need that exists in our community?

### **Crafting Powerful Questions Exercise: 35 min**

(10 min) Break the group into small teams of 3-4 participants and ask each team to craft a question using the “Crafting Powerful Questions” worksheet on page 11.

(10 min) Next, have the small teams report out the question they would ask. Note any commonalities in the questions that people are posing.

(15 min) As a large group reflect on the following questions to begin exploring what would be different if those questions were at the heart of the organization’s work:

How might we raise some of these questions in the organization? What difference might these questions make in our programs, theory of change and planning processes?

Where are there natural opportunities to weave these questions into our interactions with stakeholders (clients, volunteers, board, etc.)? Where might there be some barriers?

What powerful questions could we ask our clients, board, funders, etc., that would help them think more about root causes? What would it take on our part to craft the right questions?

### **Closing and Evaluation 5 min**

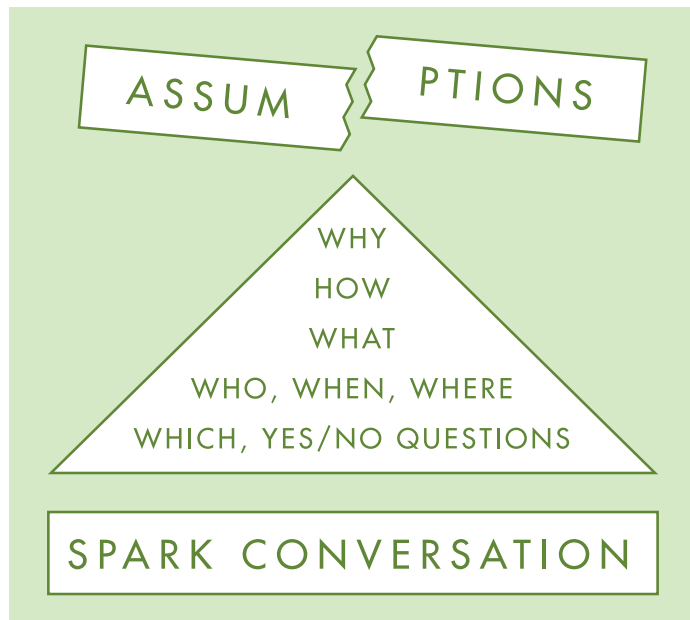
Ask people to identify one thing they liked, and one thing they would change, about the conversation. Close the discussion and thank people for their participation.

**Note:** If there was continued energy during this exercise, you may consider forming a group that will continue to work on adapting your organization’s mission statement, or adjusting your interview protocols with clients.

## CRAFTING POWERFUL QUESTIONS

Powerful questions break through assumptions, change thinking and spark conversation and reflection.

The image to the right shows these principles and how the structure and wording of questions determines their power. Keeping these principles in mind, think about a powerful question that you could ask your organization about its mission and impact in the community.



What Assumptions does our mission statement reflect about the problem, the population served, and how that problem should be addressed?

What kind of change do I want to spark in how we think about our service goals and activities?

How should I structure my question to best spark discussion and open up new possibilities and thinking?

The Question I would ask is:

**Note:** The image is adapted from "The Art of Powerful Questions" by Eric Vogt, Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, and the activity is adapted from social change goals activities in the Power Tools Manual developed by SCOPE: Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education.

## ADDITIONAL TOOLS AND USES

Asking “why?” is a great way to begin identifying the root causes of the problems staff and clients face in their daily lives. However, making visible the often invisible sources of some of our nation’s deepest inequities can be difficult. If you want to explore these in a deeper or ongoing way, check out the Root Cause analysis tool on our website at

[www.buildingmovement.org/pdf/Root\\_Cause\\_Analysis.pdf](http://www.buildingmovement.org/pdf/Root_Cause_Analysis.pdf).

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