

## Weave question threads into quality knowledge work

Asking multiple questions that follow a line of thinking creates “question threads,” which are crucial to high quality analytical work. Question threads allow us to delve into the assumptions buried in our ideas and unearth meanings that would otherwise escape notice. Sustaining question threads can be difficult when we encounter short attention spans, time pressure, and virtual meetings that cut us off from one another’s nonverbal expressions. To move our analytical thinking to the next level, however, we must learn to sustain question threads in spite of the obstacles.

When we feel rushed and have to work under pressure, it is easy to make the mistake of thinking in terms of single questions. But high quality knowledge work most often requires opening up an issue through the use of multiple questions that build on one another. Question threads deepen our thinking.

We have written about some of the difficulties that cause us to [avoid asking](#) questions or that [prevent us from asking follow-up questions](#). Sustaining threads of questions involves some perseverance, some intellectual intensity, and sometimes the courage of our convictions. Once we overcome some of the personal obstacles that prevent us from asking multiple questions, however, we begin to see some of the social obstacles. With shortening attention spans, our colleagues may become impatient with multiple questions if they can’t see how they build on one another. And increasingly distributed teams, virtual meetings and conference calls present difficulties in keeping the floor long enough to ask a series of questions.

### ACKNOWLEDGING A QUESTION THREAD

Acknowledging a question thread involves using short statements to signal that we are moving through a series of questions and to keep others following us along the question thread. For example, we might say: “Thank you. That addresses my first question.” These short statements keep others with us as we move through the work.

### FOCUSING WITHIN A QUESTION THREAD

Focusing within a question thread involves pointing out shifts in the direction of our thinking, enabling others to align with us easily. For instance, we might offer: “I’d like to move from a focus on causality to a focus on effects.” Others will follow subtle shifts in topic across multiple questions without getting confused.

### CONTEXTUALIZING WITHIN A QUESTION THREAD

Contextualizing within a question thread involves conveying our motivations in order to allow others to understand why we are asking multiple questions. For example: “I’m motivated to ask a series of questions because I’d like to explore the data and the data collection process more fully.” Contextualizing helps others

construct precise answers without guessing about why we are seeking information.

### DELIBERATELY ENDING A QUESTION THREAD

Sometimes it is difficult to know when someone is done with a line of thinking, especially when we lack visual and nonverbal communication. By deliberately ending question threads, we can prevent this uncertainty and make sure that others have a chance to ask questions that build on a thread as well.

### QUESTION THREADS IN ACTION

The following example shows these four techniques in use. Notice that each of these short techniques serves a purpose in the work. They aren’t just added words.

Is this sample large enough to allow us to make generalizations for our customer base?

*A precise question, which can be answered with a core of yes or no and additional information as necessary.*

Do you have any qualitative data that would help explain some of these unusual survey findings?

*A precise question about data, continuing the question thread.*

Good. That addresses my first concern.

*Acknowledging through short statements like these can be very helpful in keeping people on track with a thread of questions.*

Next, let’s shift from looking at the data to looking at the metric. How many survey items are combined to form this composite measure?

*Focusing involves deploying short statements that reveal the direction of our thinking and enable the listener to follow the shift in topic without confusion.*

Right now, I’m interested in the process you are using to develop these measures, rather than the data itself. How did you develop these survey items?

*Contextualizing the motivation of the question helps others construct precise answers without second guessing what the questioner wants.*

So tell me, given your qualitative analysis, are your measurement assumptions still valid?

*Precise question that extends the thread.*

That covers everything I wanted to ask. Does anyone else have questions about this topic?

*Deliberately ending a thread of questions. The conscious use of ending threads allows us to make sure that others have a chance to ask relevant questions we might not see.*

Cognitive overload narrows our focus. Time pressure narrows our thinking. But high quality analytical work depends on deepening our thinking and expanding our focus when necessary to cover all of the knowledge terrain that is important. Question threads help push back against the forces that constrain and narrow our mental work.

Sometimes question threads begin with multiple questions that we've identified in advance. Perhaps in a review meeting, we walk in the door knowing that we want to ask multiple questions about changes in the schedule. We have to be ready to acknowledge our thread,

focus our colleagues on the thread, and contextualize our need to ask multiple questions about the schedule. Then, depending on the answers, we may extend the thread beyond questions we had initially prepared, or we may deliberately end the thread and allow the review to move on to other topics.

At other times, however, question threads may evolve as a kind of exploration of our work. We may not know in advance how many questions we need to ask. We build a thread of questions in real-time, in response to the answers we hear. This use of question threads takes us deep under the surface of issues and leads to pockets of assumptions to check, voids to fill with more data, or hollows of confusion to clarify through definitions and examples. In these conversations, following the thread may be even harder because it requires thinking on your feet as well as managing the attention and motivation in the discussion. Acknowledging the thread, keeping yourself and others focused on subtle shifts within the thread, and contextualizing the motivations for keeping the thread going are techniques that will help sustain the exploration and get to the deep unknowns that move the work ahead.

## This Month's Practice

Combat the use of single questions that are driven by short attention spans, time pressure, and virtual meetings by employing four techniques that keep question threads alive. Practice the techniques in meetings and on conference calls to help deepen your analysis and raise the quality of your work.

### PRACTICE 1

#### USE FOUR COLUMNS TO BUILD QUESTION THREADS

In the Precision Q+A workshop, you learned to use the Four Columns tool as a way to deepen your analysis. Choose a topic that is important in your work this month and use the Four Columns tool to generate questions. After completing Four Columns, you will have outstanding questions that you must answer. Organize the questions into question threads.

### PRACTICE 2

#### TAKE YOUR QUESTION THREADS TO MEETINGS

After you have organized your questions into question threads, identify meetings where you must gain answers. In preparation for each meeting, type your question

threads and in the midst of the threads, write out some ways that you can apply the techniques that keep question threads alive. In your own words, phrase how you will: 1) **acknowledge** your question thread; 2) **focus** others to shifts in your thinking within the thread; 3) **contextualize** your motivations for asking the thread; and 4) **deliberately end** the thread. By writing out the techniques in advance and putting them in your own words, you'll be able to use the techniques more easily and effectively in the heat of the moment.

### PRACTICE 3

#### USE QUESTION THREADS TO EXPLORE WORK

Identify a meeting on your calendar in the upcoming month in which you will greatly benefit from an

exploratory conversation that moves from the surface deep into an issue in your work. Establish a reminder to deliberately use question threads to deepen the thinking. You won't be able to anticipate all of the useful questions in advance, but you can prepare by refreshing yourself on how to acknowledge a thread, keep the thread focused, and contextualize your motivation for exploring the issue.

We're here to help. If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at [QuestionMaster@vervago.com](mailto:QuestionMaster@vervago.com).

You may also join our LinkedIn group for Precision Q+A alumni by visiting us here at [LinkedIn](#).