

Here's how 'question bursts' make better brainstorms

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Credit: MIT Sloan School of Management

When faced with a question, the impulse is to spit out an answer. But asking more and better questions can sometimes get you further.

It's among the largest of projects that Ling Xiang, a director of product management at Oracle, has encountered: helping to lead an organizational change that is part of the company's transformation from a software developer into a cloud-based service provider.

The transition will require bucking old ways of thinking to adopt new ones. But Xiang expects such a drastic shift won't come without some measure of resistance, and figuring out how to overcome it will require that she, too, explore new leadership methods and avenues of thought to ensure everyone comes on board.

Such outside-the-box thinking doesn't come easy when you've been deeply involved in a project and may be locked into your own perceptions of the situation. That's where Hal Gregersen, the executive director of the MIT Leadership Center, comes in.

For Gregersen, finding solutions to challenges like Xiang's doesn't so much lay in thinking up answers as it does in just asking the right [questions](#)—lots of them, at a rapid clip. The method was highlighted in a [recent article](#) by Gregersen in *Harvard Business Review*.

Xiang, a candidate in MIT Sloan's Executive MBA program, experienced the practice—which Gregersen calls a "question burst"—firsthand. She pitched her challenge to two fellow students, and then sat back and took on the role of scribe as they pelted her with question after question. She wasn't allowed to [answer](#) any of them—only to record them one-by-one, verbatim.

Most people have a preconception of what brainstorming is, Gregersen said, and groups that partake in it are primed to act a certain way.

"We're almost locked into what we say, what we don't say, how we say it," Gregersen said. "For a lot of people it's almost a bit jaded. It's like

'Oh, let's do a brainstorming session,' and you check it off the list and move on."

Focusing on questions rather than answers provides a new, less familiar lens to explore issues, he said. With limitations on providing answers and context, participants are stripped of their normal anchors of expertise.

"For most leaders, they get paid to answer questions. They have a knee-jerk response about answer-giving, and it's excruciatingly painful for them to not answer the questions during this four-minute process," Gregersen said.

Gregersen said people usually experience one of three outcomes after participating in a question burst: a more positive state of mind about their challenge that leads to new, valuable ideas; a feeling that the problem is much bigger than they expected, or a realization that they are themselves a part of the problem.

Data that he's collected from question bursts he's led show that participants "emotional temperature"—how they feel about the challenge—typically turns from mostly negative associations, like "frustrated," "overwhelmed," "intimidated," or "nervous" to more positive takes, like "hopeful," "optimistic," "empowered," and "better."

"I'm inviting people, in a very explicit way, to ask questions that cause people to be wrong or uncomfortable about whatever their situation, position, struggle is," Gregersen said. He added: "If you can get to that point of trust, where you can ask the really tough questions, that's part of it."

Xiang's pencil worked furiously as her classmates served up queries and probes about why people who work in silos are harder to bring on board, or whether she herself was nervous about the looming change, or what

the first milestone in the process would be, or who her biggest advocates might be.

Occasionally, her head would bob vigorously as one resonated particularly well before she began etching it into her notebook.

"I could just use this as my blueprint," Xiang said, reviewing her list at the exercise's conclusion.

Asking better questions will be the focus of a new book by Gregersen, "[Questions Are the Answer: A Breakthrough Approach to Your Most Vexing Problems at Work and in Life](#)," out this fall.

Provided by MIT Sloan School of Management

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