

## Tools for the art of the ask element: **CONCESSION**

### Rules for Tools

1. The best attitude for using tools in the art of the ask is to “play.”
2. Each tool offered here is described in a summary form.
3. Where added explanation is warranted, reference links may be provided.
4. References may be a longer explanation, a video, an article, a book, or even a reference to an organization that can offer more or added explanation (even further tools).
5. Tools are not listed in any particular order, which might otherwise imply rank.
6. Any tool here can absolutely be used to practice ANY of the five elements.
7. If a tool came from a specific person or source, it will be noted after the tools name.

### **Always Question the Toolkit (Manisha Biswas)**

---

Tools for asking are all around us. They can come from anywhere. This one came while listening to an episode from interviewee Lynn Borton’s marvelously questioning and curious nationally syndicated radio show *Choose to Be Curious*.

In [episode 325](#), Lynn was interviewing Manisha Biswas. Biswas studies Collective Synchrony. It’s a fascinating area of scientific research that focuses on this dynamic, collective synchrony, that is about people coming together, always with some kind of shared element, typically with ritual aimed at that shared element, frequently involving movement and multiple senses. You could think about soldiers marching, ravers raving as a DJ conducts the music they’re listening too, etc.

Yet, as fascinating as what she studies is, what’s more fascinating and relevant here is that she used to be an anthropologist. [How she got from anthropologist to collective synchrony researcher was by way of this tool:](#)

#### **Always Question the Toolkit.**

Biswas’ interest in collective synchrony, came while she was working as an anthropologist. As happens with any of us, to explore this new area, she relied on her then current and known toolkit. The problem was that toolkit was tuned to the questions of anthropology. Not to collective synchrony. She could have stubbornly persisted with the tools she’d long been used to, but she didn’t. In her case, she shifted entire fields to get at the deeper value and understanding in what her curiosity was focused on.

Most of us won't make such a dramatic switch in our lives and professions, but the less holds: You should always be checking in with the toolkit you are using. You should be open to assessing its advantages but also its limits. And, you should ever be adding to it, setting tools aside for a time, even creating ones of your own IF what you want is to get more of what you really want.

**Take note** that while this lesson applies anywhere, it appears in the Toolkit section on Concession. Concession is about intellectual humility, and having enough of it to be honest with yourself that you don't know it all, never will, and might need to change as you learn.

## **Asking Without Asking (Kai Robertson)**

---

Among the many things Kai Robertson does, she regularly guides workshops in diversity awareness. Inevitably in these workshops, there are lots of questions. One challenge, at least at the start, is that the diversity being explored is often about race, religion, sexual orientation, and other topics that often come with a high degree of sensitivity- the kind of sensitivity that makes people not want to ask, or for that matter, to be asked questions. So, at least to begin with, she doesn't go there. Instead, she asks without asking.

As an example, as the workshop begins the group will be lead into exercises of comparisons, an example being a comparison of beliefs about right handers, left handers, and those who are ambidextrous. The topic is fairly innocuous, though not completely impersonal.

**The goal is initially to gather and take note of the range of perspectives. Just that.**

With the impressions gathered, Kai then asks them to focus their thoughts on the less expected in the exercise, examples being:

- What surprised them
- What made them curious
- Where did they sense a gap in their own knowledge
- Where did they feel a bit of humility in what they thought, knew, or did not know

It's not cast this way, but in every sense they are knee-deep in asking. **They've just been led into the asking by a side door, one far less ominous** than the title of the workshop might have had them thinking as they arrived to take part.

The thing is, we arrive at a lot of question asking apprehensive, guarded, thinking we know, or unsure how to break through those things. This form of Asking Without Asking is a way to remind ourselves that there are many ways into questions, and the indirect is often the best way to make that move gradually and confidently.

## **Around the Circle (John Borstel and Liz Lerman)**

---

There is both a familiar element and an unfamiliar one to how John and Liz use the idea of going around the circle when it comes to questions. What I like most about their two-part approach, is that it builds in humility.

**The familiar element** – of their use of a circle is to approach questions one at a time, **going around the circle to allow everyone to shed light** as to how they see the question and shed light on how they personally would approach its answer. We've all experienced this, but we also have experienced skipping over it. It's such a simply thing. Allowing everyone input. Sharing perspectives, and seeing the often-surprising range and starting points for each person. The familiar element of asking in a circle is something we ought to use more consciously and more often. But the unfamiliar element holds equal if not greater value.

**The unfamiliar element** – that Liz and John use the circular exchange for is to be sure that they don't lose what there's not enough time for. In any exercise, there's inevitably a time constraint. Sometimes it happens because so much time has been taken up going around the circle to share views. John and Liz make sure that the last use of a circle is to go around and ask:

**What did you hope you'd get to ask, or that would be asked by another?**

**Basically, they use the circle to gather a list of the questions and thoughts that might otherwise never reach the surface.** They use the circle to say those questions out loud, sometimes to write them down for further consideration, but most of all to give them voice. As they do, they are giving the askers voice and acknowledgement, too. The power is one with a multiplier effect, whether or not each question is answered.

## **Looping (Charles Duhigg)**

---

In [an interview](#) with Matt Abrhams on the podcast *Think Fast, Think Smart*, author Charles Duhigg said this:

“What’s really important is not just to listen but to prove that you are listening. And one of my favorite techniques for this is this thing called looping for understanding which has these three steps.”

He then went on to describe **the three steps of what he calls Looping**:

1. Ask a question, and hopefully a deep question.
2. Then, repeat back what you heard the person say in your own words.
3. And then the third step, the one that we usually forget, is ask them if you got it right.

Looping is clearly a listening tool. It's what I consider a starter tool. It's a tool that helps to begin to show you how much you miss, how poorly you likely listen (despite your hopes to the contrary). It's a potent tool to use in a group setting, too.

## **Start with Who (JoAnn Garbin)**

---

Simon Sinek famously awakened us to the Golden Circle idea.

### **In the Golden Circle, there are three levels:**

1. In the center is the question Why? Why, Sinek said, should drive everything else in the circle.
2. In the middle of this bullseye image is How.
3. The outermost ring is What.

What Sinek so wisely pointed out is that most of us begin this three-questioned path not with Why at the heart of center of things, but What. It's what could lead Coca Cola to think that their job is to produce cans of soda, that is if they ask what first, look at their current product, and conclude that's what they do. But if they instead start with Why, they might answer: To provide refreshment. Suddenly, they have a wide range of answers for what provides refreshment, not to mention How.

Sinek's Golden Circle upended some well entrenched thinking about how we ask, and how we should, if what we want is greater value and value ongoing. interviewee **JoAnn Garbin took it a step further**. JoAnn says, don't stop at the Golden Circle and starting with why (maybe sometimes don't even start with the Golden Circle). Instead:

### **Start with Who**

Value is fickle thing, except in one important sense. Value is a judgment. Value is judged based on what it does for someone, what it means to them, how they see and define value. If you don't know who it is whose sense of value you are trying to appeal to, how much can any of the other questions of Who, How, or What really matter? Great question.

## **A Prompt to Practice Noticing (Bill Adair)**

---

At a commencement speech at Warren Wilson College in 2019, Bill Adair, founder of PolitiFact.org, offered this advice:

**“Set a reminder on your phone every day called “Understand someone else.”**

Take note, Adair didn't say how. Understanding could be of anyone. It could also come in any form, from simply thinking, to reading an article, to having a conversation outside the likeminded group you most often talk with.

**He referred to it as “planting the seed for more understanding.”**

Simple. Powerful. Worth trying.

## **Counting Change (Reg Murphy)**

---

Early in my career, I had the chance to work with Reg Murphy. To that point, Reg had lived several lifetimes. He'd been an investigative reporter, working in Atlanta for a major newspaper. He was kidnapped for that role, held hostage in the trunk of a car for several days. He later helped negotiate the release of another kind of hostage, Patty Hearst. (You can look up Patty's story on your own.) He'd even been the President of the PGA, the Pro Golfers Association for a time. But when I worked with Reg, he had recently taken over National Geographic.

It was a time of great change for the great brand. The organization had been run by one family for most of its life. Reg was not member of that family. It was populated with extremes, an old, dug in, stubborn guard, and a new crop of young professionals with ideas of their own. And it was the advent of the digital age. NatGeo was at the time deeply old school and no-digital.

Especially as an outsider, but also as a newcomer to what was in essence a hot mess of a situation, Reg's first move was choosing to do a lot of listening. For a time, it seemed that was nearly all Reg did.

As it is in anytime, listening was hard. At NatGeo it was arguably harder still. There were different ideas. There were different understandings. There were different camps, and they perceived themselves as taking part in a winner take all battle for what Reg would determine was the best path forward.

Listening is so key, and so powerful. And Reg knew it. But how did he remind himself? He counted change.

It was a time when we still used coinage and each of us usually had some in our pocket. Reg made sure he did, especially in the many long meetings in which he did his listening. As others were talking, under the table and unseen by others, Reg would reach into his pocket and pull out a fistful of coins. He'd use the other hand to lay them all out flatly on his palm, or maybe to stack them by size. He'd guess at how many coins he'd pulled out that day, then count them with one of his fingers.

All of it was made up of exercises that didn't distract from his listening. The sensory exercise was instead a meditation. It slowed Reg just enough to breathe. To stay calm. To listen a minute more. To think. All of it.

**Counting change is really a metaphor** for counting on your ability to listen when change is in the offing.

## **Take an Intellectual Humility Quiz (Greater Good Science Center)**

---

The Greater Good Science Center has been a leader in forwarding the science of intellectual humility. For *Great Question*, I spoke with a number of people at or linked to the Center. I also used their library of articles and papers to learn.

Here's one of their resources you might try – **a Quiz to Test Your Intellectual Humility:**

[Quiz](#)

## **Quiet Your Cleverness (Kaitlin Chuzy)**

---

Interviewee Kaitlin Chuzy described this as her mantra:

**“Quiet my cleverness”**

It's her reminder, not only to do more listening, but to raise her intellectual humility too. It's powerful in its sparseness and immediate relatability. Try it as a mantra.

## **Listen Atmospherically (Jim Lampley)**

---

Two of the journalists interviewed for *Great Question* each and separately had a powerful tool for asking deeper, and in ways that get something back that's truly great. Jim Lampley was one of those. Here is a slice of what he shared in the book:

Jim is a journalist by trade, and for decades, he was a popular sports announcer on ABC's *Wide World of Sports* and for several Olympics. Later, he took his skills to the college classroom, where he now teaches aspiring communications and journalism majors how to ask and how to listen. “I spent more than forty-five years in the broadcast world, gradually making my way up the ladder, and a lot of that rise had to do with the questions I asked. But in my teaching and mentoring, I tell students the fuller truth: With interviewing, storytelling, and gaining knowledge, rather than the questions, it's all about the listening.

“Many, even most, journalists, make a list of questions they plan to ask if they get the chance in an interview. Doing that involves *zero* listening. If you make a list and call your work done, you’re operating against yourself,” Jim was blunt. “You’ve given yourself no assignment to hear what you least expect. You’re making a choice to lock in, no matter what the real context turns out to be. When you do those things, you’re setting aside some of the most interesting things to be discovered—the things that happen *around and beyond* your list and what you think you know. To be sure, questioning is about listening, but at its most effective, it’s listening not just for answers, but for your own biases and blind spots. Listening for and to your gut. Sure, you’re listening to others, but you must do so acutely enough to turn off your preconceived notions and assumptions and hear something grander, more encompassing, truer. It’s about listening atmospherically,” Jim concluded.

## **Decolonize Your Questions (Abe Abusharif)**

---

Two of the journalists interviewed for *Great Question* each and separately had a powerful tool for asking deeper, and in ways that get something back that’s truly great. Abe Abusharif was one of those. Here is a slice of what he shared in the book:

What is it we’re doing when we listen atmospherically? It’s partly acquiring and partly letting go—acquiring a bigger sense of what is happening around you and letting go of those lists in your head. Those are the ones so full of preordained answers that it makes it hard to be humble or to really listen.

Something struck me about the enlightening phrasing fellow journalist and Northwestern University Professor of Journalism and Strategic Communications Abe Abusharif chose about the letting go part. “In my own reporting and in my teaching,” Abe said, “I aim to *decolonize* questions. What I mean by that is I seek to ask questions that do not follow the expectation of some personal or global true north. When I teach this,” Abe explained, “I tell my students to try not to predict the answers. This can be hard, even to identify when you are doing so. To see more clearly, I tell them to be conscious of when their reactions align with or differ from their expectations. Both are clues that somewhere in their heads the openness they might think they bring to their questions always comes with some sort of constraint. Those constraints impact their ability to listen as well. Questions,” Abe ventured, “are still the most important technology we have. They are how we learn. Period. But you must constantly work to get around your own limits and to humble your assumptions and assumed strengths. When you fail to listen at that level, you’ve colonized your own thinking to a degree that you miss the terrain you’re trying to learn from and gain from. If you don’t listen that way, the questions become little more than a potentiality unrealized.”