

Tools for the art of the ask element: CONNECTION

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.

See. Think. Wonder (Claire Bown)

Interviewee Claire Bown is good at lots of things, among them is giving proper credit. I learned this tool from Claire, but she is ever quick to point out that she learned it from Harvard University’s Project Zero.

Which leads to a bonus resource. I write about Project Zero and one of its founders, Howard Gardner, in Great Question. **Project Zero** has been going a long time, over 50 years, which means the resources it has accumulated are great and also vast. You can get many of them for free on [their website](#).

Now, for a bit about Claire and See. Think. Wonder!

Claire is the founder of Thinking Museum, a training and consulting firm that helps museums, galleries, and cultural organizations create participatory experiences for their staff and visitors. Claire believes that, more than just acting as a storehouse for art, every museum or gallery has the potential to spark wonder. The key to that, according to Claire, comes down to engagement. Engagement is also the beating heart of what it means to truly connect.

When we think about engagement, too often, we think about it as something big and also momentary. But Claire has come to see that, “Engagement often begins well before any explicit interaction takes place, and it continues beyond it.” It’s also an outgrowth of how we move through the world in search of other connections. In that sense, “Engagement isn’t shaped by a single activity, program, department, or role alone,” Claire noted, “but emerges across the whole [journey], through many small choices made by many people. Seen this way, engagement is cumulative, not just momentary.” Engagement, and therefore connection, is a mindset, a practice, a way. And all it takes to move in that direction, Claire will tell you, is to:

See. Think. Wonder.

“We’ve made questioning quite confusing with taxonomies, classifications, tools, and lists,” Claire was clear. “Where’s the connection, and can connection come from simple asking?” To the latter, Claire was clear it can, that is, it can “when we use questions more as a playful practice, rather than treating asking as a task. For some, for myself at times, that simple difference, that conscious engagement, is a revelation.”

See—think—wonder is one of the easiest ways to uncomplicate questions and reboot engagement. And while Claire uses the practice most often with clients in a museum, she teaches that it’s portable anywhere. Here’s how it works:

1. **See.** Begin by asking, **What do I see?** Actively verbalize what you’re taking in through your eyes.
2. **Think.** Next ask yourself, **What do I think about that?** Actually voice your thoughts out loud, to yourself or a good listener.
3. **Wonder.** Now amplify it all. Ask yourself or a partner: **What does this make me wonder?** This third part is about a movement forward.

Try it! Even make it a continuing practice to: See. Think. Wonder.

A Drawing Exercise (Wendy McNaughton)

The best TED Talks, I believe, are the ones that get you doing, or clearly show you how. Wendy McNaughton’s doesn’t just get you going. It gets you connecting. With others.

Here are the basic steps for how to do this exercise:

- **What You Need.** Have a pencil and piece of paper. Pick a partner, better if someone you don’t know.
- **What You’re About to Do.** You’re going to draw your partner, even if you think you can’t.
- **The Guidelines.**
 - Look at and keep looking at your partner.
 - Do not look down at your paper as you draw.
 - Look closely as you draw, for example to the color and patterns in their eye
 - Draw without lifting the pencil.
 - Do this for one minute.
- **The Point.** What emerges is real, it is not an iconic smiley face or Rembrandt. What it is, is connection with someone else ... seeing someone else ... taking 60 seconds to do these things you think you don’t have or need more than 60 to gain from. Drawing =

Truly Looking = Seeing = Loving, she suggested. As McNaughton said, “The moment I stopped looking for the story I expected to see, an entirely different truth emerged.”

This is a form of connection that consciously takes away things you know or come to know through (like your assumption that you can’t draw, or your desire to look at what you are drawing while you are drawing). It asks you, not dangerously so, but through a less familiar part of you (though still wholly part of you), to find new ways to connect. Just imagine the questions this will spur, before, during, and after drawing!

Reflection Back ... and Forward (Roni Reiter-Palmon)

Roni Reiter-Palmon is one of the interviewees for *Great Question*, and also a professor of industrial and organizational psychology who studies curiosity and creativity in leadership at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. Reflection is an important part of what she studies in each of those areas, most notably, leadership. While she’d be the first to tell you that reflection isn’t a new discovery by any stretch, it is deeply and directly related to learning, something she says we regularly and grossly undervalue.

“If **people don’t reflect**, they don’t learn as much,” she noted. Then she shared what her research suggests are **the possible reasons why**. “Our tendency is to think of reflection as only looking *back*, but it is also looking *forward* to the next time. **Reflecting isn’t just summary work.**” Pointing at perhaps the greater ROR, Roni said, “**It’s prep work.**”

“Reflection is a cognitive effort consciously done.” While a natural ability and even central to who we are, it isn’t powerful if it’s not consciously pursued and the result of a deliberate choice. Referring to her decades-long research on organizations and their leaders, Roni said, “We find repeatedly that along the way in their work, teams don’t debrief of their own volition. When they finish a project, they are done, as in finished, no time to spare, and typically on to the next perceived fire to put out.”

Both revealing and perplexing, even the few that do, Roni has found, never use the end-of-work reflection to invest in new questions and new ways of doing as they look forward. “That’s not just forsaken value left on the table from what you’ve just done. Absent the conscious effort to reflect, and absent the willingness to see both the pluses and minuses, you’re failing to set up for a *next*. You’re choosing—even if you don’t see it that way—to not build off what you just did or just conquered, in essence doubling the waste,” and lessening the return. In the context of *Great Question* and its Toolkit, you’re giving away the *more* of what you want.

Now, what do you think your assignment is for this tool?

***Rebel Leadership's 5 Insights* (Larry Robertson)**

My third book, *Rebel Leadership: How to Thrive in Uncertain Times*, looks at the first quarter of this new century and notes two key things. First, the level of uncertainty in our lives and our work is increasing to such a degree that there is no longer a normal, but just a new abnormal. Second, while this flummoxes most of us, some leaders, and across a wide spectrum of sectors, are in fact thriving in this new abnormal. The central question is: Why?

That's what I set to find out, and what became the basis for the book. **Five Patterns stood out:**

1. Let them laugh, soul matters most.
2. Leadership moves.
3. It's the culture, stupid.
4. Your power source is your superpower.
5. The long view matters – right now.

Each of these patterns is expressed in the same way those thriving in these times described each. Each pattern reflected what those leaders had learned about uncertainty and how to leverage it in their favor. A truly high level explanation of each would be as follows:

1. **Let them laugh, soul matters most.** Soul in this context means knowing who you are, in the context of what you do, and how what you do connects to and impacts others. (Ask: Do you know your soul? Most do not.)
2. **Leadership moves.** The fact is, there is not, nor truly has ever been one single leader of anything. Leadership moves across teams and groups to find its way to what that team or group needs most at any one time, and to who can provide it, regardless of their title.
3. **It's the culture, stupid.** Organizations talk about culture as key all the time. Acting on it? Well, that's another story. This pattern is the lesson that culture isn't just important, its pivotal. It's also where advantage, competitive and otherwise, lies.
4. **Your power source is your superpower.** Deeper than mission, more deeply rooted than process or strategy, your power source is the thing from which all the rest is derived. It's the asset that doesn't care about how much things change, and provides the insight for how to make change work in our favor – ever time. If I told you that Airbnb's power source is "Belong anywhere," or that Subaru's is "Love," would it resonate?
5. **The long view matters – right now.** We talk, and talk, and talk about the future and where we want to be when we get there. But we near-always keep the future in the distance. It's a someday thing. Those thriving in these uncertain times inject the future in the here and now. It's how they arrive at it while most others do not.

You might be wondering, where's my tool?

- Well, first of all, **these five patterns are a leadership framework.** Frameworks are one of the most powerful forms of tools you can employ.

- Second, **every one of these patterns ought to raise a dozen, even a hundred questions** in your mind immediately. You might put that into practice right now, thinking about and jotting down a few for each pattern.
- But third, and most of all, **each involves a question-anchored practice** – to ask ...
 - Do I know my soul in this context?
 - How does leadership move, and where do I fit in?
 - Do I more than know the culture of my work or my team? Do we, do I live it, or just talk about it, or worse?
 - What is my power source, and how do I find out, use it, and thrive?
 - Where is the long view in what I’m doing right now?

Rebel Leadership tells you a lot about each, but ultimately, these question paths are your ongoing exercise and journey.

The Power of Observation™ Framework (Bonnie Pitman)

For this tool, I’m going to borrow directly from *Great Question*, allowing interviewee Bonnie Pitman, who created the Power of Observation™ Framework, to both explain it and take you into it.

Among her many roles, Bonnie helps young doctors newly out of medical school to take notice. “The point,” Bonnie told me, “is to cultivate visual and communication skills for medical diagnosis. But instead of patients, students diagnose a painting, its artist, the context in which the work was created, and the meaning of all of that. On one level, it is a completely different way of analyzing than what residents learned in medical school. But it’s aimed at a common skill in pursuit of a larger goal: noticing, in order to do better, anywhere. We’re just using art to show how much further noticing can go.” She uses the framework to do this.

The Framework:

Context. During the course, medical students are walked through four acts, as Bonnie calls them, to help them practice noticing: scanning, attending, connecting, and transforming. These actions mark the pathway for how students open up to noticing—a flow that should resonate with you.

Scanning – is about pausing to consciously and deliberately take notice and become aware that that’s what you’re doing. It’s an active, curious, and questioning form of observation.

Attending – builds on that. This second step is about focusing on what you observe, but in a way that allows seeing fully and openly before you decide what it means. Think of it as a version of Kaitlin Chuzi’s “quieting your cleverness.”

Connecting – is the third act, in which Bonnie asks students to make new connections between the art, themselves, and the world of medicine. Because during the program the space in which the med students do this isn't their known space, Bonnie has observed they can connect openly, playfully. In essence, they're newly unrestricted. Again, no one is seeking some mythical right answer. This is why when they get to the last step: transforming.

Transforming – frees the students to move out of the allowed ambiguity of the first three steps. They can then explore ways in which they might integrate their newly acquired understandings into their medical work.

"It changes them," Bonnie said, "and their habits."

Biomimicry's 9 Principles of Life (Janine Benyus)

Different interviewees use different principles by which to operate. Some are more straightforward than others. Some come in ready-made question form (like the 5 Habits of the Mind), while others are pregnant with possibility. Every one came from questions, and I'd argue that it's because every one of them fuels questions that they remain so powerful.

Biomimicry was popularized by interviewee Janine Benyus. Like the subtitle of her book of the same name, the idea is to allow human innovation to be inspired by nature.

To get at the value of the concept for your purposes here in this Toolkit, it helps to know that Janine's work is driven by a question she asks, one she concludes nature ask, and by some core principles as to where things go from there.

Janine's question is: **What would nature do?**

Nature's question, which in turn drives Janine's is: **Is this conducive to life?**

Nature's 9 Central Principles are as follows:

1. Nature runs on **sunlight**
2. Nature uses **only** the energy it **needs**
3. Nature fits **form to function**
4. Nature **recycles** everything
5. Nature **rewards cooperation**
6. Nature banks on **diversity**
7. Nature demands **local** expertise
8. Nature **curbs excess** from within
9. Nature **taps the power of limits**

Imagine creating or innovating through this lens. If you tried to innovate by borrowing from nature, you'd have to ask: "What would nature do?" You'd have to further be aware that nature is always asking, "Is this conducive to life?" and then abide by the same query. And in whatever solutions you came up with, you'd have to assure that your innovation did not violate the central principles or better, made the most of them.

Just the exercise alone causes you to break out of your human shell and think about a different way to innovate, indeed to ask. It's the exercise that has brought you Velcro, bullet trains, high performance running shoes, and more. Maybe, just maybe you ought to give it a try.

The Subtraction Tool (Danny Warshay)

In a section of his book See. Solve. Scale. that Danny calls Systematic Innovative Thinking, he offers up what he refers to as "the first tool." You could argue it just happens to be the first on his list, but it's first. There's likely a good reason. One is it suggests questioning what already works to get at something new, better, or both.

The Subtraction Tool is straightforward. As Danny writes:

"Subtraction involves removing an essential component from an existing product or services" – or way of doing – "and finding beneficial uses for the new arrangement of existing components."

In other words, "Instead of trying to improve a product by adding components or attributes, you remove them, particularly those that seem desirable or even indispensable."

I suggest you pause and think about that for a moment. What it asks is for you to **do several things unlikely to be your nature:**

1. Stop adding to get better or more
2. Find the good stuff in something, the critical even, and then take it out, call it unavailable
3. Rethink something you know so well without its best-known attributes

It is a masterstroke of innovative thought. It unleashes a maelstrom of questions. It pushes you out of your comfort zone. And, most of all, it asks that you change nothing. It's just an exercise. But you see the power in questions that enable you to just "go there" and wonder.