

Tools for the art of the ask element: **CONTEXT**

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.

Bottoms Up Research (Danny Warshay)

The three parts to Danny Warshay’s *See. Solve. Scale.* are more fully articulated as:

See: To see is to find and validate an unmet need.

Solve: To develop a value proposition that seeks to address that unmet need.

Scale: To develop something that isn’t simple a quick fix, but a sustainable model.

Danny’s book goes deeply into each of these zones. And his years of both starting successful ventures and guiding others penetrates every part. Yet, what Danny calls out that many still try to overlook, is that you actually have to take each step. You cannot, or to be kinder, you should not skip steps telling yourself you’ve already done that or know that.

Enter **Bottoms Up Research**. While there is a full methodology Danny expounds on in his book, what Bottoms Up really advocates is that, for example, in the See stage, you go about actually seeking unmet needs and validating their legitimacy and worth from the roots. You don’t just grab the first surface opportunity or fact and call the work done. And Bottoms Up, unsurprisingly, **begins with a question**:

What is the problem you are looking to solve?

As Danny says, “This is **the most critical part** of this structured process and **demand an unexpected investment of time and effort.**”

We underestimate these things almost as a habit. All of us. Not only is it a process, Danny is purposeful in declaring it to be an “iterative” one. You ask that question, then, even with a good answer secured, you do it again. Over and over. Perpetually – because things change. Because you get things wrong. Because, even when you get it right, you yourself have impact that

changes things. And when you go to scale whatever answer you've chosen to pursue, scale requires more change, presenting added problems.

Bottoms Up Research isn't merely an exercise. It's a state of mind and a practice in asking. Be an anthropologist, Danny suggests. Dig deeper as "Observing is harder than you think," at least if its value you're after (and it is value you are after – always).

The Practice of "Tell me more ..." (Larry Robertson)

This is a simple tool.

It falls in line with the others that are working overtime to remind you to, as interviewee Kaitlin Chuzi puts it, "quiet your cleverness," to pause, to listen, and to realize that your best questions come from having the intellectual humility to realize that you always have more to learn.

Interviewee Joe Youcha said the answer to the question, "Which is more important, a question or an answer" is neither. It's the next question you ask. Whatever question comes next, the best kind is one what that asks, in one form or another,

"Tell me more."

Consciously make it a part of how you interact with others, even how you ask and answer your own questions.

Observation Labs (Tina Seelig)

Tina Seelig teaches students at Stanford University to take a step back before they take the step forward to starting a new business. She knows our tendency is to race forward – to quickly try to generate an idea and then move quicker still to pursue it.

As an alternative first step, Tina conducts observation labs. The idea of the lab is to go out into the world and see just how far questions can (and should go). To get them started, she might give them a prompt, perhaps a single word, idea, concept, or problem, then asks them to do what is effectively a Question Burst – to show them that there are always many paths for questioning, and it is important not to lose sight of that.

It's a blend of Danny Warshay's Bottoms Up Research and a Dan Rothstein and Luz Santana's Question Burst (other tools you'll find in this Toolkit). Tian goes a strong step further, having her students do versions of this repeatedly, throughout the course and the process of conceiving of and starting a business. She wisely is trying to encourage them to make it a practice, both by the repetition and seeing how impactful these labs and returning to the baseline of asking can be.

You can find more of these insights and accompanying other ones in this question-laden [talk](#) by Tina as well as in Tina's wonderful books, including: *What I Wish I Knew When I was 20*, *InGenius*, and *What I Wish I Knew About Luck*.

Unpacking the Question

Sometimes what it takes to make a question more impactful isn't to run off and answer it, but to first unpack it.

Unpacking simply means to break the question down. To break it into its component parts.

Those component parts can include:

- **What is the question's actionable word or component?** In other words, what action will you take, or what will you do in pursuit of an answer?
- **What are its content words?** This is about identifying the topic or area to be explored and investigated. Asking about the content invites a rippling of questions that cause us to ask things such as, "What do we know about the topic?" "Do we feel we know it so well as to be cocky, and perhaps in need of a humility check?" "Are there new things we can learn? (hint: the answer to this question is: always.)"
- **How might we rephrase the question?**
- **What would a list of related questions look like?**

As we explore these steps in unpacking, we give ourselves time and space to think. We open up the lens and see many ways to ask about what we really want to ask about. Make it a habit:

Ask: Could this question use a bit of unpacking?

Verb-to-Question (Leidy Klotz)

Sometimes a question's limitation is that it flat out lacks an action. Interviewee Leidy Klotz has a really simple solution: Add one.

When you have **a question that seems to be directionless**, or when it leaves you without a next move, change that question. Look at its contents and **give it the action, the verb it needs to set it in motion**.

Try this too:

- Could there be a range of verbs you could insert, in other words, a list of choices of verbs that could be inserted one at a time and might produce different outcomes?

- What if you took that list of verbs and made a mirroring column of verbs that are the opposite of each verb in your first list, and then inserted those odd-feeling verbs?

Digest. Aim. Embed. New Norm (Danny Warshay)

In his must-read book about conceiving of, starting, and growing start-up ventures, Danny offers an important four-stage framework for pursuing any new idea:

Digest – is about taking that “Bottoms Up Research Approach” Danny describes in another tool in this Toolkit and using it to digest the landscape, its challenges and needs, and the areas where new value could be created more fully than we normally do. As Danny says, this takes a lot more time and effort than we typically give it. but it’s worth it. And it saves time later by more precisely identifying value potential right now.

Aim – is the step that quite simply asks you to take aim at something from what you’ve digested, and to do it in a very purposeful, very defined way. While the aim step involves experimentation, it is not the shotgun approach of just spraying effort all over the place and hoping something will come of it. It’s calculated aim. It’s organized aim. It’s aim you take measure of to prove that it’s landing (or not).

Embed – refers to the idea that, with the deep and specific knowledge of digesting, and with the informed formula for impact that comes from aiming, you will have naturally been in the parallel process of developing habits, methods, and behaviors honed to what works. These are the very things you want to embed in what you do, and in others who do it with you.

New Norm – specifies that the goal here is to use this process in such a serious and refined way that you actually develop new norms by which you and your team operate that permeate everything you do, even when not formally stated. In other words, the sum of it all shapes culture – and advantage.

What’s provided here in the Toolkit is but a sample of what you’d be wise to explore in depth in Danny’s *See. Solve. Scale.*

Wonder: Why do you ask? (Larry Robertson)

There is a tendency with tools to think they demand a lot of effort and time. The truth is they tend to save you those things. Yet, the added truth is that sometimes they’re just plain about doing something simple. This is one of those tools.

Every now and then when you catch yourself asking, pause – pause and ask:

Why do I ask?

This isn't the larger philosophical form of that question that contemplates why any of us ask. (To learn more about that, go back to your yield guide that is *Great Question: The Art of the Ask and Getting More of What You Really Want*.) This "Why do I ask?" is a right here, right now taking in of where you are on the question spectrum.

The question spectrum ranges from those questions found on one end of the spectrum that that I refer to in *Great Question* as **Functional Questions**. These are the day-to-day or mid-process questions the job of which is simply to move us to the next step – to get an answer, and movement forward. (Think: What's for dinner?) On the other end of the spectrum are **Great Questions**. These are bigger questions – questions that can take a long time to answer, have many possible answers, or need to be asked over and over. (Think: Why do I matter?)

In between these poles is what I call the Messy Middle. This is the place where most of our questions reside. It includes the directionless, the unconsidered, and those questions based on the outdated, among others. The Messy Middle is also where most questions go to languish or fade.

Asking "Why do I ask?" is really asking yourself to consider where your question falls on this spectrum, and to point it, even refine it, to serve purpose – not to languish or die. So ... Why DO you ask?

Dignify Your Fears – By Turning Them into Questions (John Borstel, Liz Lerman)

This tool comes right out of *Great Question* and one of ends end-of-chapter Dips in the Toolkit. It was shared by Liz Lerman and John Borstel in their wonderful book *Critique is Creative*, a book about the creative process, and how to infuse that necessary element of critique into that process for better more valuable outcomes.

The tool is both insightful and potent. Far too often, we allow our fears to overwhelm us. We allow them to make us feel lesser, wrong in the immobilizing form of feeling wrong, and closed to the help we need that is more often than we think right there and adjacent to where we are.

What Liz and John suggest is a two-stage springboard:

1. First, that you take those fears, give them a name – meaning, call them out and allow them to be recognized.
2. Then, turn each one into a question, perhaps a list of questions – questions that enable you to engage those fears and employ them for forward momentum.

Dignifying your fears with a question isn't magic, but it can feel like it. The tool doesn't solve things in one fell swoop, but it gets you back in motion and ready to move forward. That, as it

turns out, is precisely what it takes to get to great answers, and to get more of what we really want.

John and Liz have developed and refined a whole process around this idea, and refined it over decades. They call it the Creative Response Process, a process their book details and devotes half the book to sharing examples of that process in a wide range of uses. That book, *Critique is Creative*, is a worthy read and chock full of other tools for creating and asking.

Ask: “What’s the narrative you’re creating?” (Arne Lang-Ree)

Questions that allow stories to be told, rather than just seek raw data, have been repeatedly shown to land with greater impact. When a story is allowed, the data within it is far more likely to be retained by the person who asked the question. Stories also naturally lend to the asking of more questions, to sharing, and most of all, to relationships. But story is just the beginning.

Over time, our stories link to one another. That is true in every sense. Any one of our stories tend to link to other stories of our own. But MY stories link to YOUR stories and to other people’s stories as well. Over time, those links connect our stories in what interviewee Arne Lang-Ree calls a narrative arc. Knowledge of that larger ever-developing arc is powerful seed – for our questions to be sure, but also for our impact, and for our chances of getting more of what we really want.

The tool here is simply to become more aware more often of the narrative arc.

Bonus points accumulate if you consciously use it to inform your art of the ask.

Zen-Mondo (Fumiko Hoeft)

In *Great Question*, one of the tools offered is called Follow the Question. Zen Mondo is a Japanese variation that interviewee Fumiko Hoeft shared.

Follow the Question is a tool with two primary forms or methods of use:

Solo. The first form is simply using the exercise to allow questions of your own to follow on any question you’ve asked. This can take the form of your own personal Question Burst, where, rather than answering the question, you simply allow the full range of questions you have to burst forth. This gives you asking range without even answering. The second form is to allow a question to follow the one before but to do so by consciously asking based on the answer that comes back.

In Pairs. This form of Follow the Question works best with two people. One takes the role of only asking. Any question they ask as follow on must build on what the other

person's answer was. There is a true power in lingering in the role of asking. But there's power on other side of this exercise as well. The other person has the power of being the only one answering. They own the floor, as it were, and feel their own unique sense of importance and agency. The roles are typically flipped at some point so that both people can see the power – and importance – of both sides.

Zen-Mondo is an added twist more. In alternating turns, **one person asks a question that the other must answer with another questions. In other words, questions and asking dominate.** The answers aren't the focus. And yet, the question-as-response is its own form of an answer. It's that simple, but it's remarkably powerful.