

Change Your Questions, Change Your Life

Reviewed by Lee Salmon



Lee Salmon

I found Marilee Adams' latest book, *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life*, an important and practical read, having previously made good use of her first book, *The Art of the Question*. My eclectic background – as OD specialist, executive coach, environmental scientist, and physicist – has long had me be a believer in the power of questions to shape our thinking, our lives, and our organizations. We see that organizational approaches that focus on creating deep change are directly or indirectly centered in principles of inquiry. I include in this category learning organizations, action learning, appreciative inquiry, open space, and dialogue models like the World Café.

Change Your Questions is a fable through which we learn in an accessible way about the framing and programming power of questions. While the story occurs in a business setting, its lessons are also directed to our ability to think and relate effectively everywhere in our lives,

including our personal relationships. Most striking is the focus not only on the power of questions, but also on the impact of our *internal* questions and self-talk on our external communications, actions, and outcomes.

Marilee calls this Question Thinking. She provides models and methods showing how deeply our internal questions impact thinking, behavior, relationships, and results. The final chapter of the book, entitled “The Inquiring Leader,” hints at further work she has developed, with distinctions she calls inquiring leadership and inquiring organizations. What makes the book especially practical is the workbook at the end providing instructions on how to personally apply the seven QuestionThinking tools.

Beyond the concept of Question Thinking, the power of the book revolves around the Learner/Judger mindset model and the recognition that our internal questions consistently express which mental model we are operating from. Marilee claims that every one of us has these two mindsets; the only issue being which one we choose at any given moment. Judger mindset is critical, reactive, committed to being right, looks from its own perspective only, is win-lose, and narrows possibilities. Learner mindset is open-minded, accepting, curious, discerning, thoughtful, looks from multiple perspectives, is win-win, and opens possibilities. A systems

**Change Your Questions,
Change Your Life:
7 Powerful Tools for Life
and Works**

Marille Adams, Ph.D.
Berrett-Koehler Publishers,
San Francisco, CA. 2004.

perspective is more natural and accessible from the Learner mindset. Marilee sums up the use of this model by advising us to: “accept Judger and practice Learner.”

Change Your Questions, Change Your Life provides a useful graphic, the Choice Map, which illustrates the distinct paths of Learner and Judger and the different worlds of experience, results, and possibilities created by the choice of either one. The Map also shows how to shift from Judger to Learner by asking “Switching questions.” While the terms Learner and Judger describe mindsets of an individual, one can also postulate Learner or Judger organizations and Learner or Judger teams. The Choice Map then becomes a tool for working with both. The QuestionThinking approach invites us to consider the intersection of individual thinking and organizational thinking, of individual learning and organizational learning, of individual performance and organizational performance.

I find the Learner/Judger distinctions simple, elegant, and profound. I use the Choice Map in a coaching context, for example, in raising awareness when a leader claims to want to be inclusive and empowering, but whose behavior is critical or dismissive. Clients find it easy to understand and use for increasing their ability to observe where they are and highlighting their choices. The results they achieve often show

me that changing their questions from Judger to Learner transforms their thinking and behavior.

Juanita Brown and David Isaacs say they have been using Marilee's work as a "key resource" for the World Cafe since its inception. They've used her work on questioning to help shape successful Café dialogues throughout the world, by showing Café participants how to frame more powerful questions that then become the catalyst for richer dialogues.

Myron Rogers, coauthor of *A Simpler Way*, has this to say about *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life*: "Marilee's Learner/Judger model is incredibly simple, but can hold the complexity we deal with as organizations and as individuals. There are many tools and models out there, but I consider this tool to be fundamental. It provides simple ways to bring people back to simple change and also

helps build an organizations capacity to change itself. I used the Learner/Judger model with a company that had a culture of judgment. I could point out what was happening in the room and ask how that fit the Judger path, building awareness and their ability to make different choices. Focusing on the importance of questions also gives clients an explicit way to understand the importance of the process that leads to outcomes (answers), and places where they can intervene to change the process (by changing their questions). Both of Marilee's books help me explain what I do and give me a language to explain it to others."

For those of us committed to organizational transformation, Marilee's QuestionThinking work raises some provocative questions. One is, "How can we discern the questions that organizations are asking and answering (implicitly and explicitly)

with their behavior – and what implications for deep change might this suggest"? In my opinion, however, the big picture of this work goes beyond the practical importance of questions for individuals and organizations.

At a deep level, Marilee challenges us to take on inquiry as a transformative practice, as a way of being that can fundamentally alter who we are, how we relate and act, and what world we choose to create. This is a pivotal point in history, when many have concerns about a sustainable future. The power of the QuestionThinking perspective is to recognize that needed changes in institutions, government, and culture require new questions to open new possibilities. A renewed level of thinking and dialogue is called for, with the courage of fresh questions to light the way.

Lee Salmon is the practice leader for executive coaching, mentoring, and leadership development with the Federal Consulting Group, where he works with leaders at the highest levels of government. FCG is a government franchise within the Department of the Treasury, serving as internal government consultants for organizational development and change. Lee is also a scientist and physicist and participated in the second SoL global forum in Vienna.

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Reflections

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