These cards are based on an exercise designed by my colleague Carleton Nettleton in the US, which in turn came out of an exercise I experimented with at the first AgileCoachCamp (which in turn came from my Co-Active coach training). Proof that when you give something to this community, it will come back to you multiplied :-)

The description below is my version of the exercise, but please be sure to credit Carleton too, as my additions are relatively minor.

What you find here:
- Instructions for the exercise
- Powerful Questions pyramid diagram
- Cards in English and French to use in the exercise
- Article: Powerful Questions Quiz

Exercise overview:
1. Present the concept of Powerful Questions (using the diagram)
2. Instruct participants how to do the exercise, in groups from 2 to 6
3. Hand out the cards
4. Run the exercise (see below)
5. Extend the exercise if there is time (instructions below)
6. Debrief
7. Optional: run a Coaching Dojo to practice the skill in real life
8. Optional: make copies of the Powerful Questions Quiz available for further reading.
Instructions:

1. **Present the concept of Powerful Questions**

   To introduce why you talk about this, you might want to: Explain the shift from telling to coaching. From managing to self-organisation. Team wisdom. Holding space, listening...


   If you don’t have time or don’t want to try teaching the skill (you can do it!), you could just show the talk (6 minutes).

   Leave the triangle diagram visible as you teach and throughout the exercise.

2. **Instruct participants how to do the exercise**

   Tell them they are going to **work in groups to organise the cards into one row, from most powerful (at the top) to least powerful (at the bottom) questions.** Yes, just ONE row!

   - Variation: first do it silently, then add talking.
   - Note: I have not tried this yet. It probably takes longer. What happens?

   Set a clear timebox and if you can, let them see the timer as they work so they can self-manage.

   Remind them that what’s important are the conversations!

3. **Hand out the cards**

   Organise people in triads (preferred) or groups, with one full card set per group.

   If there is time, have participants draw their own triangle diagram based on yours, for each table. The act of collaborating and drawing builds engagement with the concepts.

   Otherwise make copies of the diagram available to participants as they work.

   Have one marker available to each group, but don’t point it out (you want them to think it is their own idea to start writing on the cards :-).  

   (Note: I print the cards heavy paper or cover stock. But you could just as well write them out by hand on sticknotes or statrys)
4. Run the exercise

Facilitators: circulate as teams start to work on the assigned task.

Things to watch for, with questions to ask:
- one person doing all the work
- what do you others think?
- arguments
  - remember that the conversations here are what's important: what are you learning in this case?
- too much detail
  - please try to get through all the cards. How are you doing for time?
- Other questions to ask:
  - what kind of question is that?
  - how does context influence the power of this question?

5. Extend the exercise if there is time

Instructions:
- use the rules of Powerful Questions to improve the weakest question you found (write on the blank cards if you like)
- same instruction, this time for the most ambiguous question
- If you have time, and there is energy, continue to do some more.

6. Debrief

Ask the group meta questions:
- what happened?
- what surprised you?
- what complicated your discussions?

keep it brief - rather than lots of discussion, better to practice with a dojo (next step).

7. Optional: run a Coaching Dojo to practice the skill in real life


Others have refined it: (see what else Google turns up, too!)
Michael Sahota, for example: http://agilitrix.com/2011/04/coaching-skills-dojo/

8. Optional: make available copies of the Powerful Questions Quiz (below) for further reading.

People might find my answers there unusual, and it has a reading list at the end
Some questions are more powerful for effecting change.

**More Powerful**

Why ... ?
How ... ?
What ... ?

**Less Powerful**

Who, When, Where?

Which? Yes/No Questions

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THE ART OF POWERFUL QUESTIONS: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action

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English Cards

Intended for duplex (two-sided) printing
What did we do wrong?

Who is responsible for the build breaking?

What if there was an alternative way to solve this impediment?

How could we do this Sprint differently than the last?
Powerful Questions?
Powerful Questions?
Powerful Questions?
Powerful Questions?
When did you become aware of this issue?

I wonder what would happen if we tried something different?

Where were you when this happened?

Can you explain that to me?
Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?
I am curious to hear more about what you were thinking.

How can we make a schedule that meets the deadline?

Are you going to deliver this project on time?

Describe a time when this was working.
Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?
What would be a better question?
Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?
This card deck was designed by Deborah Hartmann Preuss
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Based on an exercise designed by Carlton Nettleton
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Powerful Questions ?

Powerful Questions ?

Powerful Questions ?

Powerful Questions ?
French Cards

Intended for duplex (two-sided) printing
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Qu’avons nous mal fait ?

What did we do wrong?

Qui est le responsable de ce build cassé ?

Who is responsible for the build breaking?

Et si il y’avait une solution alternative?

What if there was an alternative way to solve this impediment?

Comment pourrions-nous faire ce sprint différemment que le précédent ?

How could we do this Sprint differently than the last?
Quand avez-vous découvert ce problème ?

Je me demande ce qu’il se passerait si on faisait différemment ?

Où étais-tu quand ça s’est produit ?

Peux-tu m’expliquer ça ?
Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?
Je serais curieuse de savoir: à quoi tu pensais?

I am curious to hear more about what you were thinking.

Comment pourrions-nous planifier notre travail pour arriver à temps?

How can we make a schedule that meets the deadline?

Vas-tu livrer ce projet à temps?

Are you going to deliver this project on time?

Décrivez-moi comment c’était lorsque ça marchait?

Describe a time when this was working.
Powerful Questions?
Que serait une meilleure question?
Powerful Questions?
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French translation in collaboration with
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Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?
German Cards

Intended for duplex (two-sided) printing
Was haben wir falsch gemacht?

Was wäre, wenn es einen anderen Weg gäbe, dieses Hindernis zu beseitigen?

Wer ist dafür verantwortlich, dass das Build nicht funktioniert?

Was können wir in diesem Sprint anders als im vorherigen machen?
Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?
Wann bist Du auf das Problem aufmerksam geworden?

Ich frage mich, was passieren würde, wenn wir etwas anderes ausprobieren würden.

Wo warst Du, als das passiert ist?

Kanst Du mir das erklären?
Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?
Ich bin neugierig, mehr darüber zu erfahren, was Du gedacht hast.

I am curious to hear more about what you were thinking.

Wie können wir einen Plan aufstellen, der den Fertigstellungstermin einhält?

How can we make a schedule that meets the deadline?

Wirst Du dieses Projekt rechtzeitig ausliefern?

Are you going to deliver this project on time?

Beschreibe eine Situation, in der das funktioniert hat.

Describe a time when this was working.
Powerful Questions?
Was wäre eine bessere Frage?
Powerful Questions?
This card deck was designed by Deborah Hartmann Preuss
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Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?
Dutch Cards

Intended for duplex (two-sided) printing
Wat deden we verkeerd?

What did we do wrong?

Wie is ervoor verantwoordelijk dat de build gebroken is?

Who is responsible for the build breaking?

Wat nou als er een alternatieve manier was om deze blokkade op te heffen?

What if there was an alternative way to solve this impediment?

Hoe kunnen we deze Sprint anders doen dan de vorige?

How could we do this Sprint differently than the last?
Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?
Wanneer werd jij je bewust van dit probleem?

Wat zou er gebeuren als we iets anders probeerden?

Waar was jij toen dit gebeurde?

Kun je dat aan me uitleggen?
Powerful Questions?
Ik wil graag meer horen over wat je (toen) dacht.

I am curious to hear more about what you were thinking.

Hoe maken we een schema zodat we de deadline wel halen?

How can we make a schedule that meets the deadline?

Ga je dit project op tijd opleveren?

Are you going to deliver this project on time?

Beschrijf wanneer deze oplossing wel werkte

Describe a time when this was working.
Powerful Questions?
Wat zou een betere vraag zijn?
Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?

Powerful Questions?
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Powerful Questions?
"In coaching, powerful questions knock people off their automatic pilot program and make them fly the airplane".


I was introduced to the importance of Curiosity in coaching while going through Co-Active Coach training. One way to practice curiosity is to ask "powerful questions" - in Co-Active coaching this term denotes open questions asked to move a person or group toward something of importance to them. Powerful questions operate by engaging the answerer’s own curiosity to surface important facts, memories, assumptions, feelings and ideas. It is taught together with the Three Levels of Listening, because good listening skills enhance the ability to pose and use powerful questions.

What do you know about asking questions that energise people to move forward in constructive and innovative ways? Turn the page for my four-question quiz – I hope it teaches (or reminds) you of at least one practice for your people-skills toolkit!

If you would like some further practice, I would be happy to run a Getting Unstuck workshop for your group in Europe. In America, my colleague Carleton Nettleton runs similar workshops.

Instigator, team whisperer, life coach, holding space for change

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ONE: What makes a question "powerful"?

A) It conveys the questioner's strong desire for change.
B) It sets a clear direction for answerers to follow.
C) It evokes the answerer’s wisdom.
D) It is specific to the answerer's context.
E) It is easily answered.
F) It has never been asked before.

My answer is C.

While a desire for change helps frame questions, and context sensitivity is very important, it is the effect in the answerer that defines a powerful question. A powerful question cuts through old habits, defenses and assumptions, and invites the answerer to apply their wisdom in a fresh way. This may or may not make it easy to answer. And the same question in different contexts may lead to a very different outcome, so don't hesitate to re-use a question, when appropriate!

A warning: be careful to look for and remove your own assumptions embedded in the question. If your question embeds hidden assumptions or suggestions, people (ever eager to meet expectations!) may look for your answers rather than coming up with their own! This suggests that a little thinking might be in order, if you have the opportunity to prepare (often you don't, you just have to wing it, keep practising!)

TWO: Which of these is (or are) evidence that question has been "powerful"?

A) The energy in the room shifts.
B) There is a pause, while a deep breath is taken.
C) Body language indicates curiosity.
D) One or more of the above may happen.
E) It is impossible to tell right away.
F) All of the above.

My answer is D. And of course, an infinite number of other signals

While there are often long-term effects from a powerful question, its effect is almost always palpable within seconds, as the answerer wakes up, gets curious and begins to think differently. Those of us who would use powerful questions must also develop deep listening skills: using eyes and ears and gut-feel. Listening helps before, when framing a question, and after, to detect how the question has landed. And if a question does fall flat, be transparent: just acknowledge it and try again. When you are free to fail, so is your coachee... and this is just what we want to model. We "eat our own dogfood" when we fail without shame, learn from it and improve!
THREE: Which of these are sure to weaken the effect of a question?

A) Feeling nervous and stumbling when posing the question.
B) Already knowing the answer you want the answerers to discover.
C) Presenting some possible answers, to get the ball rolling.
D) Rephrasing it, to be sure it was understood.
E) Allowing an awkward silence to lengthen after asking it.
F) None of the above.

My answer: B, C and D are sure to weaken a question.

The problem illustrated here is that of being too "helpful," which may be more of an issue in some cultures than others (said the Canadian :-) While it may seem kind to soothe the answerer's anxiety by "helping" them with hints, if you really want powerful, helpful answers you must let kindness sit by the side, as it is this anxiety that irritates the oyster and seeds the pearl, to coin a metaphor.

The answer to this natural temptation to "help" is to learn to WAIT. Practise waiting, even if you think the question needs a little rephrasing (oh, this is a hard one for me!) Wait longer than you think you should. If you feel pressured to talk, count to 20 (try this, it's harder than it sounds). If you have the courage, count to 20 again! When it starts to get awkward, Diana Larsen sometimes says to a group "I bet I can wait longer than you can!" and continues to wait! With an individual it is easier to watch for non-verbal clues and be sensitive to their own timing. Remember that, with both groups and individuals, the reply may come non-verbally. I once had a group reveal deep distress non-verbally, at which point the right question was: What is going on here now? And suddenly we moved off a new and more deeply relevant direction.

Here's something else to practice: while you wait, remain curious - *let go* of the outcome. With an open question, you cannot know in advance where they will go with their answers, and if you try to control or direct (i.e. suggesting there is a "correct answer") people may sit back and wait for you to deliver your wisdom, short-circuiting the collaboration and innovation you seek.

Items A and E, while awkward, may well become invisible once the answerer is engaged and thinking. A powerful question shifts the answerer's focus inward, and the asker's discomfort or imperfection quickly becomes irrelevant.

FOUR: Which of the following statements about "Why...?" questions is/are FALSE?

A) Research has found "Why" questions, in general, to be more powerful than "what," "when" and "which" questions.
B) You can pose a "why" question without using "why".
C) A "Why" question is the fastest way to the real root of any issue.
D) A "why" question may need to be repeated to dig down.
E) A "why" question can put answerers on the defensive.
F) It doesn't matter who asks it - a solid "why" question always works.

My answer is: C and F.
A "why" question may need to be repeated in different ways to get past the initial excuses, assumptions or "pat" answers - hence Lean Manufacturing's "5 whys" exercise. But be careful: a "Why" question can backfire powerfully, too, making "Why" a great way to NOT get to the root cause. If people feel blamed, their energy will go towards hiding or justification, not memory and creative thinking. For best results, use "why" questions in situations where mutual trust and respect exist. And beware: situations of inequality, despite respect, may in fact reduce trust: Questioning while towering over a seated person can send an unintentional message of inequality and pressure! And any question could land quite differently if asked by a peer or by the CEO. These effects can be reduced by paying attention to body language (again, a form of listening), or by rephrasing "why" in a less triggering way: "What made you choose that?" or "What is it that causes us to behave like this?". These remain effectively "why" questions: digging for root causes while feeling less blaming.

You can read a little about the research that revealed the differences between different sorts of questions in The Art of Powerful Questions, a pdf download on the World Cafe website. How does this relate to World Cafe? I have come to realise that many of our facilitation practices, including World Cafe, are simply ways to set up a context in which we can use powerful questions to help people! A powerful question is a great way to “get the right people in the room”, as when we make an invitation to an Open Space event.

Do you wish you had a coach to ask you powerful questions when you get stuck?  
(Question: What's keeping you from getting a coach? :-)

Here is my offer to you: The next best thing might be my Powerful Question cards, a free pdf download in English, German and Dutch. (Further translations are welcome).

Links

Curiosity as a coaching context, from The Coaches Institute  


Co-Active Coach training from The Coaches Training Institute  
http://thecoaches.com/

Three Levels of Listening, on the Co-Active Coaching site  
http://www.thecoaches.com/resources/multimedia/Co-Active-Contexts-Listening.html

The Art of Powerful Questions, a pdf download on the World Cafe website  

Powerful Question cards, a free pdf download in English, German and Dutch.  
http://deborahpreuss.com/PowerfulQuestionCards.zip