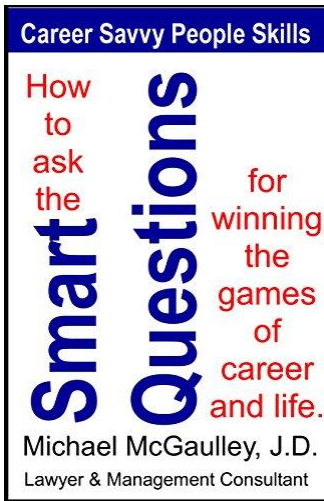


Here is your sample drawn from

How to Ask the SMART QUESTIONS
For Winning the Games of Career and Life



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Question 4

What is this situation ultimately about? Where is the “crunch”?

It's helpful to view games, especially within organizations, as ultimately about solving problems. In games at work, the various players usually have differing perceptions of the core of the problem, and usually measure success (or victory) differently.

In a well-managed organization, there will never be enough resources to fill every possibility—that is, resources like budget increases, extra staff, best offices, raises and promotions.

The fact is, it's usually a *good* thing that there's not quite enough to fill every worthwhile need, as organizations that operate lean usually operate best. The competition for resources brings out creativity, along with higher levels of energy and focus.

Most of the “games” at work are about genuine competition or conflict for resources from people with different ideas, responsibilities, and perspectives. These games and competitions tend to be generally beneficial, at least in the longer term. That competition provides a useful internal form of checks and balances. Ideally, most of those competitions will benefit the organization, as people compete by coming up with the best ideas and the highest productivity.

But not always. Organizations are made up of people, and people are only human (for better or worse!), and hence some conflicts and competitions are about ego, empire-building, defensiveness, and downright orneriness, vindictiveness, and power-hunger.

These games may devolve one of two forms: Either a Zero-sum game (for me to win, you must lose), or a Positive-sum game (we all work together so 1+1 becomes 3, or even 5).

Ideally, all will be playing with the Positive-sum mindset. But that's not always the case, and the Zero-sum folks are not likely to say otherwise and give up their advantage.

In this chapter, we'll be examining some questions helpful in looking through situations in order to spot the real core of the conflicts in which you may find yourself enmeshed . . . whether as observer or participant.

4.1 Is this a real conflict over real things? Or is it just a matter of some personalities getting crosswise with each other?

Another way of putting it: “Am I (or the other party) being strong, or just being a pain?”

“Roy is an aggressive, competent guy. Let me be clear on that. To say that a manager is ‘aggressive’ is usually a positive statement, as it means that they step forward to deal with challenges, instead of sitting back hiding from them. It implies they are ‘pro-active,’ instead of ‘re-active.’ It means they have confidence and have no fear of competing to see whose ideas and approaches are better. That’s all good.

“But Roy can’t keep his aggressiveness and competitiveness under control. He’s compulsively competitive. It’s not only when he’s going for a promotion—competitiveness in that context I can understand. But play handball with him, and he’ll break his neck—or yours—to win. He just can’t seem to discriminate the occasions in which it’s important to win from those when it’s not.

“He’s the same in meetings. He can’t stand to lose on any point, no matter how minor, and he’ll push so damned hard for his ideas that he turns everybody off, including the boss.

“The bottom line is that he’s the classic case of the guy so obsessive about winning every skirmish that he can’t see it’s causing him to lose the war.”

Corporate manager, speaking of a peer

“You need to be diplomatically aggressive here. I mean being aggressive as hell, yet still being diplomatic. A lot of people can be aggressive. The great ones can be aggressive ten times a day without making any enemies.”

Government Executive, Ph.D. scientist, former Army colonel

A tool to pinpoint the core of the (possible) conflict

The template below is a tool for cutting to the heart of what the conflict is actually about.

The example shows how it would work if we were trying to get a handle on an impending conflict with Roy (the compulsively competitive guy in the quotation above)

For the example, we'll assume that Roy and I are peer team managers; Roy heads one team, and I head the other.

<p><u>I want:</u></p> <p>To get two new-hires on my team to help with our increased workload.</p>	<p><u>Roy likely wants:</u></p> <p>Even though my team has a need for people that Roy's does not, he makes it clear that for us to add bodies would be "unfair". He will want to make the case for splitting them, one for each team.</p>
<p><u>Why it matters to me:</u></p> <p>Our workload has escalated, and must get done on-time; otherwise we may lose customers.</p>	<p><u>Why it matters to Roy:</u></p> <p>Roy tends to see everything as a Zero-sum power game: that is, he loses face if he does not gain staff. He will likely feel personally diminished and his position threatened if he does not come away with something from this.</p>

Try it. Focus on some situation, present or past, in which what should have been a simple, straight-forward interaction turned surprisingly difficult. Use the template as a tool to find what real differences in objectives exist between the parties, and why those differing objectives likely matters to them.

Are multiple groups involved? Then you can extend the template, like this:

<p><u>I want:</u></p>	<p><u>Opponent A likely wants:</u></p>	<p><u>Opponent B likely wants:</u></p>
<p><u>Why it matters to me:</u></p>	<p><u>Why it matters to A:</u></p>	<p><u>Why it matters to B:</u></p>

4.2 Is this conflict (or looming conflict) really about the present situation, or is it about something from the past or future?

You're in a new job, attending your first staff meeting. Suddenly, you find yourself caught in a nasty squabble over what seems to be a minor issue.

Is this just a case of somebody picking on you because they don't like your looks?

Or have you walked into the middle of the latest skirmish in an ongoing battle?

Or is somebody picking a fight with you for no other reason than the fact that you're new here, and they're testing your reflexes and smarts?

"You're the new kid in town, and the other lawyers are going to be watching to see if you try to compromise on every case. Sooner or later, you're going to have to establish your credibility by taking a case and fighting it to the bitter end. Show them that you are willing to go to trial, that you are willing to scrap over every point along the way.

"Once you establish the fact that you will fight when necessary, then you'll find that they are a lot more reasonable about compromising. You can bet that they don't want to take every case to trial any more than you do, but they will test to see whether you have a backbone."

Advice from Louis Meconi, Esq. when I finished law school

Another instance: a co-worker asks a favor. It's more than you feel comfortable in granting. You turn him down, apologizing as you do.

A few days later, he comes back asking another favor, one that also stretches you more than you'd like. But now you feel you owe him one, and hence feel obliged to grant this favor.

Later, you realize that he deliberately set you up with the first request: he didn't really care about that one, but wanted to be positioned to get the one that mattered

Some considerations:

- Is today's squabble, when you really come down to it, ultimately an attempt to re-fight some issues from the past? What issues? Why?
- Are the parties positioning themselves for the future? What might that be?
- Is one of the parties "borrowing trouble" from the future? That is, being preemptively difficult now, perhaps to set up a bargaining ploy for later?
- Is someone reopening a battle from the past, either for the sake of vengeance, or just to be ornery?
- Is someone feeling terminally frustrated, or maybe threatened? (Even though it makes no rational sense, maybe they are simply acting out . . . or lashing out.)
- Is this squabble a symbolic battle over an altogether different issue altogether? (For instance, a conflict that is ostensibly about a report being delivered late may really be about who gets to control a department, or control the flow of information.)
- Is someone pushing or testing me? Or are they trying to test the system?

Summary

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