

## : *How do decision questions differ?*

by Daniel J. Power

Editor, DSSResources.com

A choice or decision often results from answering a question like "What should be done?" Understanding question asking can help people make better decisions. Rudyard Kipling (1902) wrote a poem titled "I Keep Six Honest Serving Men" that people should remember when thinking about decision questions. The poem begins "I keep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew); Their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who." These six are the primary question words. There are other question words and phrases like How many? and How much?, even the word "Is" can start a question, but Kipling's six words are a good starting place for examining how decision questions differ in intent and how they are similar.

A decision question asks about what action(s) to take among various choices or alternatives. A decision process helps create alternatives/options, find them, and sometimes eliminate options. Answering or resolving a decision question should be a thoughtful and comprehensive process. Assessing and understanding the decision question provides guidance and direction for customizing an appropriate decision process. So let's examine Kipling's "serving men" and evaluate what they mean for decision making processes.

**What ... ?** is a complex word to begin a question. A "**What**" question may seek an approximation, a forecast or an estimate, i.e., "What will sales be in the next quarter?" Alternatively a "**What**" question may seek specific facts or information, i.e. "What is the current profitability of XYZ?" In this second case, the "**What**" question does not or should not require a decision.

**Why ... ?** questions are the most perplexing and troublesome. By asking why, a person is expecting a reason for an action or event or an explanation of something that has occurred. Asking and answering why questions are important in problem solving. Understanding causes and motivations helps us understand a decision situation. In general, a "why" question supports reasoning or informs a decision question. For example, examine this question, "Why did sales decline in the last quarter?" This diagnostic questions seeks to know the cause of a problems so that perhaps a decision can be made about how to remove the cause and reduce the negative consequences. A person may ask multiple "Why" questions in a decision situation prior to or after asking a key decision question, i.e., "How can the decline in sales be stopped or reversed?"

**When ... ?** refers to time. One wants information about the time or timing of events or actions. The Cambridge English Dictionary notes "We can use when to ask for information about what time something happens." So a decision maker may want to know about past, present or future time, i.e., "When did sales start to decline?" "When should the new sales and marketing plan be

## : How do decision questions differ?

implemented?" Some **When** questions imply a decision is needed while others are informational. Helper words like will and should can indicate whether information or a decision is sought.

**How ... ?** much or how many or how can. How is sometimes the indicator of a decision question. For example, similar to the prior discussion we might ask "How can we stop the sales decline?" or "How many people will attend the event?" or "How do we contact customers?" Some are requesting an estimate or conclusion. For example, "How much will a new production facility cost?" Many questions that begin with the how keyword request information rather than a decision, i.e., "How do I find a specific person?"

**Where ... ?** refers to location and place. The where question word seems to be primarily an indicator of a need for information about location, i.e., "Where will the event be held?" or Where is the salesperson? The first location question may however involve a decision if phrased with the should helper word, i.e., "Where **should** the event be held?"

Finally, there comes **Who ... ?** The who keyword may indicate a request for information or a need to make a decision. For example, "Who is the sales manager?" is an information request. While the question "Who should be the sales manager?" implies the need for a decision among a set of people who have applied for the position. A **Who** question may refer to choosing one person or a group of people. Consider the question "Who will implement the new strategy?" The answer might be a single individual or a group or team.

Some decision questions are routine and repetitive, others are semi-structured or unstructured and even novel and nonroutine. The amount of structure depends to some extent upon the decision situation. For example, for a salesperson the following are usually routine and repetitive questions: "Who will buy the product or service from you and your company?", "What and how much will they buy from you?", "Why do they need the product or service?", and "How should you engage them in a meaningful conversation about the product/service?" In the context of assessing the introduction of a new product, the same questions are more unstructured and often non-routine. Some decision questions lead to irrevocable decisions. Other questions have alternative options that are what Jeff Bezos call two-way doors that are revocable.

In conclusion, decision questions often begin with one of six questions words, i.e., what, why, when, how, where and who. The questions get altered by words like will and should, much and many. In English, one finds decision questions framed as Should we or Should I do or go. Colloquial or informal language also interferes with recognizing decision questions. Knowing what the word phrase implies helps us provide decision support when that is appropriate. Perhaps we can verify and test rules. For example, **IF** Decision Question (DQ) begins with "What will", **THEN** User is

## : *How do decision questions differ?*

seeking an approximation, a forecast or an estimate. Perhaps this discussion will help create a Decision Advisor Artificial Intelligence capability to help structure a shared man-machine decision process.

### References

Kipling, R. "I Keep Six Honest Serving Men," *The Elephant's Child*, 1902 at URL [http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems\\_serving.htm](http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poems_serving.htm).

Author: Daniel Power

Last update: 2020-08-21 02:27