

# Questions: A Powerful Tool for Self-Advocacy

by Pat Nelson

In a district courtroom, surrounded by the trappings of power and authority, a judge is deciding one of many child custody and support cases on his docket for that day. He makes a quick ruling that the child's mother believes is not in her family's best interests and stands to leave the bench. She stands up and tells him, "Sit back down, we need to talk." Surprised, the judge agrees to listen. The mother knows she has only 15 minutes to make her case. But she has prepared herself. She has a list of priorities that she calmly presents, articulating her reasons for wanting supervised visits and child support, staying focused on one or two issues critical to her argument. The judge changes his ruling.

At a local TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) office, a young client explains to a caseworker that her benefits were wrongly denied. She has a notebook full of prioritized questions and, should she need it, the name of the supervisor in the office. She takes notes on what the caseworker tells her, and then asks the person to review and sign the notes. Impressed and perhaps a bit intimidated, the caseworker begins to help the client to figure out what they both need to do to resolve the problem.

Examples such as these demonstrate the power of *The Right Question Project's* educational strategy that builds people's capacity to advocate for themselves, navigate complex systems, and hold decision-makers accountable.

Many low- and moderate-income people come into daily contact with public agencies and institutions that routinely make or implement decisions that can have a profound effect on their lives. They usually spend a lot of time answering questions, but don't ask many because they often don't know what or how to ask.

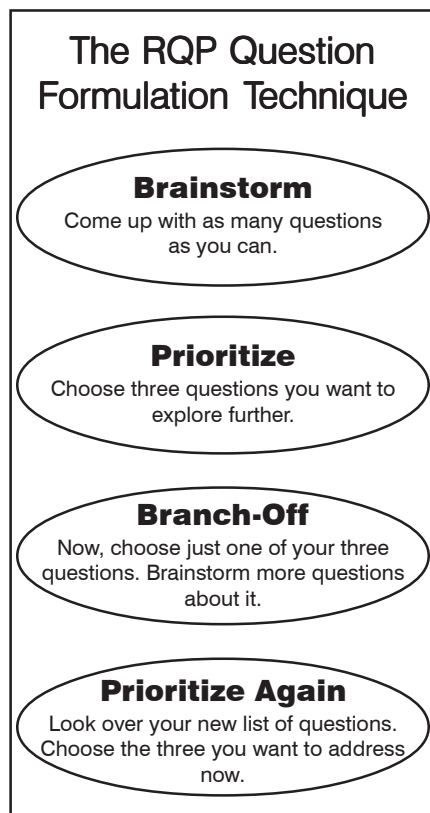
When people don't have strategies to help themselves, they often depend on advocates or staff from social service agencies to help them deal with a maze of services, institutions and bureaucracies. This can create a sense of powerlessness, disengagement and even passivity among people. Yet, our democracy depends on people having the tools to participate in and shape the decisions that affect their lives from dealing with public agencies and institutions, to being part of neighborhood organizations, to voting and other activities.

*The Right Question Project's* educational strategy helps people make a shift to greater participation by helping people focus clearly on decisions, how they are made, the basis for making them, and the person's opportunities for having a say in them. Learning about decisions awakens in learners a whole new world of possibilities. They become more effective in their personal decision-making; they are able to use the information they uncover while going through the process to determine the fairness and legitimacy of decisions made about them and to hold decision-makers accountable.

The words of someone who learned and used the Focus on Decisions expresses the transformative effects of *The Right Question Project's* educational strategy: "Now when I go to meetings where people are making decisions that affect my family, I don't have to just sit there. . . . I think

about what I want to know and what I need to know and then I ask questions. What a difference."

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# The Question Formulation Technique

The essence of the RQP educational strategy has two major components: *Developing the Skill of Question Formulation* and a *Framework for Focusing on Decisions*. The *Question Formulation Technique* is a simple step-by-step process that teaches learners how to formulate their own questions. “Formulating” rather than “asking” questions is stressed because formulating questions requires people to think carefully about what they need to know, what they want to know, and why they want to know it. The process begins by having learners select an issue that is of concern to them, then they begin the four structured steps of the technique:

1. **Brainstorming:** In this first step, participants think of as many questions as they can about the issue. By brainstorming questions, rather than ideas, they start to come up with questions without stopping to analyze, explain or answer them. This step allows participants to get more comfortable with the formulation of questions, to get beyond the initial emotionally loaded questions, and to hear different perspectives without entering into a discussion. Participants who may be comfortable with brainstorming are often challenged by the task of brainstorming questions. That is why this part adheres to posing only questions. All the questions are recorded exactly as formulated validating the learner’s input and instilling a new confidence in their ability to participate. The recorder can be a volunteer participant or the facilitator of the exercise. Once brainstorming is completed they learn how to distinguish between closed and open-ended questions, discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each and which to use depending on the kind of information they are seeking.
2. **Prioritizing:** Participants are asked to prioritize their questions and, by analyzing them, to select the top three that they want to pursue further. They then choose one of those three to focus on. This step provides an opportunity for discussion and assessment of the different issues that have surfaced. It requires give and take between the members of the group.
3. **Branching-off:** Once participants choose the one question they want to focus on, they are asked to branch off that question and brainstorm more questions about it. This process will help them discover how to ask more questions to help them get closer to the answers they need. They will also discover new questions they will want answered. Those who had difficulty brainstorming questions in the beginning will feel more comfortable now.
4. **Prioritize again:** Finally participants prioritize again from the last list of questions they generated and choose the three they want to get answered first. Now they are ready to work together to design their own action plan for getting their questions answered. Going through the steps sequentially engages people in a critical thinking process that deepens their ability to think independently and enables them to discover new layers of complexity and understanding of the issues that they are concerned about.

**The Focus on Decisions** helps learners use their question formulation skills to probe a particular decision and decide on what actions they need to take by focusing on:

1. **The process used to make a decision:** Questions are used to help learners uncover the steps used in making a decision; the who, when, where and how.
2. **The basis used to make the decision:** Here learners focus on discovering the rules, regulations and policies that the decision is based on to determine if the decision is legitimate.
3. **The opportunities to participate in the process:** Learners question to determine the role they can play in the process.

For more information about *The Right Question Project* and its work, go to [www.rightquestion.org](http://www.rightquestion.org) or call (617) 492-1900.