THE IDEA

# Foreword Thinking

*Five practical ways to think before you decide.*

## Better thinking can be taught.

Before the decision, the action, the investment or the launch, there's the thinking that comes before. It decides what gets noticed, what gets questioned and what ends up on the table.

Most leadership development works on the decision. Foreword Thinking works on what shapes it.

The advantage isn't knowing more. It's having more ways to think about what you know.

The workshop teaches five techniques. Each comes with a story that shows it working, practical questions that make it usable, and an exercise that puts it to work on a real challenge.

THE FIVE TECHNIQUES

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Did we spot the clock?** | Spotting what others overlook | |
| **Is there a better question?** | Questioning assumptions | THIS SAMPLE |
| **What happens when we put them together?** | Connecting unrelated ideas | |
| **Can we steal a formula?** | Borrowing from unexpected places | |
| **What can we lose?** | Cutting through complexity | |

This sample takes you through the second technique: the story behind it, what it helps you recognise, an exercise you can complete in ten minutes, and what it should help you see.

THE TECHNIQUE · 2 OF 5

# Better the Question

*Is there a better question?*

Better the Question is about questioning assumptions. Most problem-solving starts by accepting the question and working hard on the answer. This technique starts one step earlier, with the question itself.

SPORT · BRENTFORD FC, 2016

## Brentford closed its academy.

Bigger clubs could take Brentford's best young players before they ever reached the first team. Everyone in football was asking how to develop their own young players. Brentford asked a different question: why compete for the same talent as everyone else?

It closed the academy and built a B team from players other clubs had released or overlooked. Five years later, Brentford reached the Premier League for the first time in 74 years.

## Most leaders challenge the answer. Few challenge the question.

MUSIC · TAYLOR SWIFT, 2021. Everyone asked what it would take to buy her masters back. Swift asked what would happen if she made them again. Every rerecording released went to number one in America.

WHAT IT HELPS YOU RECOGNISE

### When the question is the problem.

Sometimes the problem isn't the answer. It's the question everyone agreed to answer.

### Which assumption is doing the work.

The assumption nobody mentions is usually the one doing the most work.

### A reframe from a rewording.

If a new question leads to the same answers, it's a rewording, not a reframe.

THE EXERCISE · 10 MINUTES

# Find the question that makes the problem disappear.

*A better question can make the original answer unnecessary.*

THE CHALLENGE

*Work alone or in pairs. Or swap in a challenge your own team is facing.*

A software company sells to mid-sized firms. Too many new customers leave within 90 days. Over the past year the team has rewritten the onboarding emails, added training webinars and given every new account a success manager. Churn hasn't moved.

**The question on the table:** how do we stop new customers leaving in the first 90 days?

## 1 Write down the question

1 min

Write the question your team is trying to answer, exactly as it's being asked.

*The question is…*

## 2 Go up a level

3 min

Ask what the question is for. Finish the sentence, then write the question again from there.

*We're asking this so that…*

## 3 Find the assumption doing the most work

3 min

List what the question takes for granted. Circle the assumption that matters most, then ask what would follow if the opposite were true.

*It assumes…* *If the opposite were true…*

## 4 Write the better question, then test it

3 min

Does it lead somewhere the old one couldn't? If it leads to the same answers, it's a rewording, not a reframe.

*The better question is…*

☐ It leads somewhere new ☐ It's a rewording. Back to step 3.

THE LEARNING

# What the exercise reveals

There’s no single right answer. If your new question moved the problem somewhere the old one couldn’t reach, the exercise has worked. Here’s one way through the challenge.

| | |
|---|---|
| The question on the table | How do we stop new customers leaving in the first 90 days? |
| The assumption doing the most work | These are the right customers, and the problem starts after the sale. |
| If the opposite were true | Some customers were never going to stay. The problem starts before the sale. |
| The better question | **Which customers stay, and how do we win more of them?** |
| Where it leads | Out of onboarding and into who the business sells to. A year of fixes was answering a question that didn’t need answering. |

USING IT AT WORK

**Before a strategy is written.**

Every strategy answers a question. Write it at the top of the page and check it’s the right one before anyone starts on the answer.

**When the options all look alike.**

If every option is a version of the same answer, the question has set the limits. Change the question, not the options.

**When the fixes stop working.**

Effort that keeps producing no movement is often pointed at the wrong question.

THE FULL WORKSHOP

## This was one technique. There are five.

In the full workshop, your leadership team works through all five, each with its stories, practical questions and an exercise on challenges you bring. It ends with how to recognise which kind of thinking a situation calls for, before you act.

**Your team leaves with** five ways to think before what happens next, practical questions they can use straight away, and fresh thinking on challenges of their own.

## You don’t need all five. You need the right one.

To bring Foreword Thinking to your leadership team: **chris@chrisbailey.london**