



## DISTRICT PERSPECTIVE

Nader I. Twal

# THE RIGHT QUESTIONS CAN SHARPEN OUR FOCUS ON EQUITY

**Coaching is one powerful way to ask questions and create a supportive space for processing the deep thinking they provoke.**

**S**tories have the power to humanize those around us. They provide insight and data that numbers alone can't communicate. I have often spoken of this power in the professional learning I lead, and I did so in the last issue of this journal. But what I never realized until recently was how deeply my own story, rooted in my upbringing and my family's culture, shaped my approach to education and leadership.

Growing up, when my siblings and I would do something that brought the family honor, my parents would say (in Arabic) that we "lifted their heads." The saying connotes that our choices and our success caused them to stand taller, knowing that what they sowed in us reflected well on the family. My family's Jordanian culture, like many Middle Eastern cultures, is deeply steeped in honor and shame. Each individual has a responsibility not only for himself or herself, but also for the family name.

What surprised me was not that I had internalized this value, but how it expressed itself in my professional life. My district had contracted with an outside organization to engage us in two years of professional learning on design thinking. My colleagues and I were working through a challenge about how to temper our identities as experts in the field with our need to be lead learners who may not have immediate answers.

During one of our discussions, the topic of professionalism came up, and I spoke with great passion about professional attire, explaining my belief that how we choose to dress at work communicates our respect (or lack thereof) for the work environment. Though many at the table agreed, including my leader at the time, she asked me one question that caused me to pause: "Do you think you feel as passionately about this as you do because of your culture?"

She then told her own story of being married to someone from a different culture who was horrified when she would go to the grocery store in her "house clothes." She explained that as a minoritized man, her husband never felt he had the luxury to dress down for fear of feeding negative stereotypes that people from his background are unkempt and "less than." She articulated how this helped her see her own privilege, as a woman who fit the mainstream culture's definition of "normal" or "appropriate."

That conversation made me realize that so many of the standards and rules that we hold dear may be influenced by our cultural biases. It was a moment of critical consciousness, a moment that caused me to consider how my race, culture, and home of origin have shaped my beliefs about teaching and leadership, including the ways that honor and shame have framed many of my ways of being at work.

That moment transformed the way I view my own role as a district administrator and equity



### TO LEARN MORE

Visit [www.liberatorydesign.com](http://www.liberatorydesign.com) to learn more about Liberatory Design and download the resource guide.

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leader because it provoked three dimensions of what adult learning expert Jack Mezirow (2003) called transformative learning: critical self-reflection (internal awareness of values, biases, and beliefs), critical discourse (meaningful conversations to challenge perspectives), and praxis (change in practice).

Mezirow (2003) described transformative learning as “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference — sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) — to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (p. 58). But how are we to surface those frames of reference? I was lucky that my leader asked me the question she did. How can I — and you — ask questions that encourage such thinking?

Coaching is one powerful way to ask questions and create a supportive space for processing the deep thinking they provoke. Meaningful coaching conversations start with inquiry, and I have found the following coaching stems helpful in moving me from theory to inquiry to practice in my own equity leadership journey.

The questions, which can be used in multiple professional learning formats, are built on and adapted from a resource guide from the developers of Liberatory Design, an approach to addressing

equity challenges and change efforts in complex systems (Anaissie et al., 2021).

**Critical self-reflection:**

INDIVIDUALLY AND COLLECTIVELY CONSIDER...

- Who am I? How do I define myself to others? Why might I prioritize these identity markers?
- How do I understand the role and work of a leader? How might this perspective be shaped by my culture?
- What blind spots might I have, and who can I talk to to surface them? How does that manifest in my actions? How does it impact others?

**Critical discourse:**

COLLECTIVELY CONSIDER...

- Based on my identity, what are my and our team’s relationships to opportunity and institutional power? How does that relate to the opportunity and power of the people most impacted by our work?
- How might cultural norms be triggering unconscious biases in our work?

**Praxis:**

INDIVIDUALLY AND COLLECTIVELY CONSIDER...

- What inequitable patterns of

experience and outcomes are playing out in our system? How do we know? Are we only using quantitative data, or are we also considering “empathy data” (the deeper understanding we gain from people’s stories, contexts, or lived experiences) from the field?

- What might need to change in the way I do my work for those who are least served by our system to be seen and heard?

These questions can lead to powerful conversations, but those conversations will not take root and create impact if our coaching moments remain transactional, with one person transmitting information to another. Rather, they should evoke deep thought about underlying assumptions and beliefs that frame how we see the world. It is a harder path, but the outcomes tend toward equity. These conversations, realizations, and changes take time, but they are worth the investment.

**REFERENCES**

Anaissie, T., Cary, V., Clifford, D., Malarkey, T., & Wise, S. (2021). *Liberatory Design*. www.liberatorydesign.com

Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 58-63. ■

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