

Specialist Questioning Technique

Specialist input can be obtained by numerous methods. The Specialist Questioning Technique is an innovative way for Beef Profit Partnerships (BPP) partners and teams to engage effectively with specialists in relation to achieving improvements in profit.

The Specialist Questioning Tool can be effective for obtaining specialist input when analysing a situation. Specialists are needed because, as General Patton so succinctly put it, 'You don't know what you don't know.' But, as he also said, it's important to 'know what you know and what you don't know!'

This technique utilises the concept represented by the equation $(q + p) + Q = L$. That is, questions (q) asked by team members of the specialist lead to the specialist contributing some of their knowledge (p). This combination of $(q + p)$ can lead to the development of new and different questions (Q) by both the team members and the specialist and learning (L) for all those involved. Specialist Questioning enables individuals within teams as well as the outside 'specialist' to:

- Formulate questions to improve their understanding of current practices, processes, performance, systems issues, needs, problems and opportunities;
- Formulate new questions and ideas for improving the system;
- Become aware of ideas and opportunities that they do not currently have the knowledge and skills to create;
- Increase the pool of ideas and questions about an issue;
- Challenge their paradigms, perceptions, thinking, decisions, processes and practices;
- Build business relationships with specialists;
- Enable specialists to improve their understanding, ideas and questions about improving current practices, performance and about systems issues, needs, problems and opportunities.

Ideally, the Specialist Questioning Technique is applied in these steps:

Step 1 – Engaging the Specialist

- From the outset specialists (researchers, technologists and other people with specialist knowledge or experience) are involved in a plan to address an issue or an opportunity.
- Specialists are asked to think about current practices and processes, and to develop questions about the system that will enable practitioners to think about improving processes and practices.
- The questions should stimulate ideas and questions about current practices, processes, problems, opportunities and constraints.
- This step is enhanced if the specialist/s is involved in at least 1 face-to-face session.

Step 2 – Developing the Questions

- Practitioners are then asked to think about current practices and processes in the system, and to develop questions and ideas for improving the system (or specific components of the system).
- It is often difficult for people to develop questions about issues and opportunities that they may not fully understand — 'You don't know what you don't know'.
- Group-based facilitated face-to-face dialogue and discussion enhances this step.

Step 3 – Interacting with the Specialist about the Questions

- Practitioners then communicate with specialists (preferably in a facilitated face-to-face mode) to develop answers to their questions, and to develop thinking, and new ideas and questions about improvement.

Specialist Questioning has been successfully conducted using teleconferencing. Refer to:

O'Dempsey, N, Clark, R & Egerton-Warburton, K 1999, *Bestprac – specialist questioning using teleconferencing*, DPI Note, Agdex 430/934, Department of Primary Industries, Brisbane, QLD.