

# QUESTION THINKING AND ITS RELEVANCE TO SOFT SKILLS

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**Abstract:** *In today's competitive world obtaining educational qualifications does not really guarantee that a person possesses all the skills and competencies to be successful in life nor does it ensure that a person would be able to get a desired job commensurate to his/her qualifications in the Job Market. Although a formal educational qualification is considered essential in the eyes of the employers, a degree is not always a guarantee that a person is fully equipped with the skills required to meet the needs of the job market. The main reason for this is employers require people not only with hard skills but also with soft skills. The importance of soft skill training at every stage of a person's life right from childhood is yet to be fully understood for implementation. While enough awareness and research are available within and outside India to emphasize and include soft skill development at college and university level, there are still huge gaps in our education system towards such formal inclusion and implementation. While researchers and trainers heads towards focusing on such skills to empower people, it is also very important to laterally develop awareness and learning on the sub skill sets of Soft Skill Development. One such critical sub skill is the Question Thinking Skill. **Question Thinking** is an important facet of soft skill development as this skill is intricately related to the very generation of thought and the ability to direct one's thought in the form of questions. Hence, soft skill development without the understanding of question thinking would be incomplete and inadequate. It also would prove to be not totally effective to face and find solutions to the ever increasing problems of the world through routine soft skills training .Therefore there is surely a need to be aware as to how Question Thinking can be a powerful tool towards improvement of Soft skill development. Also there is a necessity to know the vast scope of **QTS (Question thinking skill)** and its practical applications. Further progress on this field to create specific QTS modules for every field of life would surely enhance quality of human resource in soft skill development.*

**Keywords:** Critical thinking, Lateral Thinking, Questioning ability, Question thinking skill, soft skills.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

According to Gloria.A.Meeks(2017)[1] having a college diploma or a technical degree does not guarantee that a person has the competencies to be successful in the work environment, nor does it guarantee a job. Although a degree is important to employers( Association for Talent Development, 2012[2] ; Eisner, 2010[3] ; Jackson 2009[4]) a degree is not always a guarantee that a person is fully equipped with the skills to meet the needs of the job market (Casner-Lotto Barrington, 2006)[5]. Employers are looking for people who can offer hard skills as well as soft skills. Soft skills are competencies that can help an individual better meet the needs of a particular

job and help an individual advance in his or her career (Cobo, 2013[6], Robles, 2012[7]; Zhang, 2012[8]). Brungardt (2011)[9] noted that today's workers have less repetitive job tasks and need more autonomy and superior soft skills due to the flattening of the organizational structure. Data derived from the literature review also indicated that soft skills are important for labor market outcomes (ATD, 2012)[1]. Moreover, new technology and changing organizational aspects have made soft skills more important at work (Borghans, Weel, & Weinberg, 2014)[10].

## **2. DEFINITION OF SOFT SKILL**

According to Abbas(2013)[11] Soft skills is a term relating to a collection of personal, positive attributes and competencies that enhance relationships, job performance, and value to the market. Soft skills refer to a set of skills that determine how we interact with others. Soft skills play a highly important role in the work place as well as in one's career success. These skills are applicable to every field of work, and are usually behavioral traits inherent in an individual. Soft skills are typically hard to observe, quantify and measure. Soft skills are needed for everyday life as much as they're needed for work. Some of soft skills are: communication skills, critical and structured thinking, Problem solving skills, creativity, teamwork capability, negotiating skills, self-management, time management, conflict management, cultural awareness, common knowledge, responsibility, etiquette and good manners, courtesy, self-esteem, sociability, integrity, empathy, work ethic, project management, business management. Almost all of the sub skill sets mentioned by Abbas [11] would involve question thinking in varying degrees. Barbara Cinatti(2016)[12] has said that it is evident that the school must provide students with soft skills not only to find a job, but to flourish as human beings and citizens. This highlights the importance of learning the right thinking practices right from school education for which the philosophy of question thinking can be a forerunner.

## **3. QUESTION THINKING THEORIES**

The Socratic questioning or Socratic maieutics was named after Socrates, the great philosopher who utilized an educational method that focused on discovering answers by questions from his students. The disciplined practice of thoughtful questioning enables scholar / student to examine ideas and be able to determine the validity of those ideas(Socratic dialogue unknown[13]; Socrates Biography 2017[14]). It is right to say so because it is this thought which being so powerful has changed the entire world and the mother earth. For it is the ability to think which has segregated and differentiated mankind from the rest of the animal kingdom. According to Cecilia

Heyes (2012)[15], humans are animals that specialize in thinking and knowing, and our extraordinary cognitive abilities have transformed every aspect of our lives. During the times of Socrates and Plato, the thinking process was based on argumentative methodology in which the ideas proved wrong had no place. Therefore a better thinker always questioned the logic of other person. If he wins the argument then he wins over the thought. Question thinking here was applied on a limited scale as questions were asked to criticize, counter, corner and disprove. Aristotle followed the integrative and exclusionary method. With the development of parallel thinking, the argumentative thinking process was given a new dimension and in fact to some extent replaced by parallel thinking. One such method was the six hats method which found wide acceptance and produced enormous results in the field of lateral thinking (Edward De Bono, 1985)[16]. It is the thinking ability which has helped civilization to progress and develop. It is this attribute which has resulted in so many discoveries, creations, innovations and socio economic developments. This thought is the mother of all problems and solutions. The thought of curiosity and craving to find answers to this complex universe has directed human thought towards such search and research which is constantly attempting to get answers. (Dan Moulthrop, 2015)[17]. If one observes carefully towards the process of thought generation, it is self generated, environment generated or influenced by both as highlighted by Jessica, Jonathan & Nathan (2014)[18]. The will to survive and reproduce (Charles Darwin, 1859)[19] has surely made mankind to work towards certain needs as explained by the Theory of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Abraham Maslow, 1943)[20]. Further investigation and scrutiny will reveal to us like what Michael Vaughan (2015)[21] in his speech highlights that it is the thoughts in the form of deep questions which trigger our energies to find answers. We generally ask safe questions which do not bare the truth or uncover the biases. We ask only stereotype questions to get standard answers and results. Knowingly or unknowingly we are conditioned to ask questions to know about something and when questioned we are expected to answer. Therefore all discoveries and inventions are thoughts of questions which were worked upon to get thoughts of answers finally put to practice. Questions have a great role to play in developing creativity (Ali, Davood & Masoud ; 2011)[22]. Joseph Benn [23] in his book Brilliant Business Idea, says that creativity is about linking objects together in a way that they have never been linked before. Asking intelligent questions sends instructions to our brain to start making new connections and look at old connections in new ways. Therefore question thinking is the ability to think and ask the right questions to oneself and to others to produce required results the questioner wants. (Brent Iverson, 2018)[24]. Practically when we see, the person who asks questions always takes control of that environment (Alex Shalman [25]) In the traditional sense its only the person at the higher echelon who always questions and the person who answers is generally lower in

position of authority or stature or status and responsibility. These situations could be at home between Parent - children or at school between Teacher - Student or between the boss - subordinate at office(Terry.J.Fadem,2009)[26]. Questioning ability or question thinking if learnt correctly can phenomenally improve the decision making ability of a person by bringing in more clarity in thought process. The power of question thinking can be utilized only when we learn the art of asking the right questions(Allan Pease and Barbara Pease)[27].Therefore if the problem in hand is clear, by asking the right questions we can move to the right answers. It is pertinent to mention that from the above facts , it is sure that QTS(Question Thinking Skill) has a positive impact almost on all the subsets of soft skill and its learning. In India, few universities have started including soft skills training as part of their college and university curriculum but in isolation. Formally it is yet to be included in the college or university curriculum (Mythili,2015)[28].

#### **4. QUALITY OF QUESTION THINKING**

The most important component of question thinking is the ability to ask the right question without offending the questionee(Karen,2017)[29]. Anyone can ask questions. It is not the number of questions one asks to find answers, but it is the quality of the question which is important (Jackie & Beth,2017)[30]. Sometimes with just one right question one may get the required answer. Whereas after numerous wrong questioning one may not get the required answer. Therefore asking the right question with the ultimate result in mind is a skill which needs to be learnt (Brent Iverson,2018)[24]. By learning to ask the right question an individual learns to get the required information. Individual is able to negotiate better, think with more clarity, take correct decisions.

#### **5. TYPES OF QUESTIONS**

It is very important to understand the constituents and types of questions before one learns how and when to use them. Allan and Barbara Pease in their book of Questions and Answers have explained the different types of questions and how one could use them depending on the context and situation. Terry J. Fadem(2009)[26], in his book 'The art of asking' has elaborately listed the different types of like, Direct Questions, Indirect questions, Open Questions, Closed Questions, Stupid Questions, Filtering Questions, Double Direct Questions, Hypothetical questions(If, What If, Suppose), Provocative questions, Rhetorical questions, Reflective questions ,Leading questions, The Pause as a question, silent questions, One word questions, Clarifying questions, Divergent questions, Convergent questions, Redirecting questions, Negative questions, Either/or questions, Loaded questions, Trick questions and Dual answer closed questions. Further Knowing what these are and how

to use them in different situations is what every individual should aim to learn to increase their question thinking skill. The mastery of the juggling of different question types in apt scenarios and the flexibility to change the type based on the input required and result envisaged makes this concept a very interesting and practically effective one.

## 6. SCOPE OF QUESTION THINKING

The scope of question thinking skill application is wide and varied (Michael Vaughan,2013)[31]. Idea is nobody's monopoly. The global business market world surely feels the shortcomings in terms of soft skills amongst the employees. Be it in a manufacturing arena or provision of customer service, the deficiencies in soft skills amongst service providers are resulting in loss of revenues and profit(Hannah Thompson,2015)[32]. Many countries are yet to include soft skills in their formal education curriculum. India is no exception. The quality of workforce passing out from colleges and universities are found wanting in many softs skill components required for the various business houses (Brian Schooley, 2017)[33]. Therefore it is very important to include soft skills in the formal college curriculum and also in the higher secondary schools to some extent (Mythili, 2017)[28]. Since questioning ability forms the basics of almost all the subsidiary components of soft skills, it is important to have awareness about the QTS as an important skill of soft skills. Question thinking surely spreads its wings almost on all the subsets which involves emotional intelligence, IQ, level of questioning ability, understanding of body language, communication skill and power of verbal language, observation both self and others. Therefore question thinking ability is intricately related to almost all the attributes of Soft Skills as it primarily revolves around the generation of thought and organization of the thoughts in terms of relevant questions to arrive at probable decisions (Jackie & Beth, 2017)[30]. If learnt then this could be effectively used to learn creativity. Break stereotype learning as stated by Michael Vaughan (2015). Question intelligently without offending others (Terry, 2009)[26]. Help others to arrive at correct decisions. Provide solutions by way of integrative approach by questioning logically and ruling out unwanted options. Handle difficult people and their objections(Karen,2017)[27]. Answer intimidating questions. Be more effective as a boss by taking control of the situation by this concept. Obtain correct information from the subordinates. Help subordinates to set their own goals. Michael Vaughan(2013)[31]. Provide better customer service by understanding the questions of the customer and in case of doubts asking relevant questions to arrive at solutions. Make people commit and fix appointments and aid in better time management. Help special children towards corrective mechanism. Therefore question thinking skill could be specifically focused for use as different modules for schools, colleges,

business organizations, hospitals, customer service centers, Conduct of surveys, parenting techniques at homes. More awareness and learning about the skill will foster better relationship, improvement of one's personality, to be a effective manager and a good leader(Terry2009)[26]. This skill has a scope almost in all fields and disciplines provided this skill is researched further and training modules developed to suit the various fields and discipline. More and more research, training and trainers would be required initially to bring in awareness and teaching amongst the masses.

## 7. THE DYNAMICS OF QUESTION THINKING

Right from childhood people are conditioned to answer. When the child asks a question, the parents find it so difficult to answer to the child as it is very difficult to explain the child about something which the child cannot comprehend. Hence the parents give some other answer. Whenever an individual wants to know something we ask ourselves a question in the mind on the subject matter. If we are unable to know the answer, we try to ask someone. Questions are generally asked to find answers(Dan Moulthrop,2015)[17]. Few exceptions are there where in we ask to test whether other person knows the answer or not. In a self case study related to direct observation of three Bosses over a period of 10 years in an organization from 2004 to 2014, wherein autocratic style of leadership was advocated revealed that question thinking could help in providing solutions to organizational challenges faced by employees in their working environment. The case study is elucidated below:

The organization has a tight hierarchy wherein the boss gives orders and instructions and the employees are supposed to follow instructions and incase of any doubts or clarification then the queries are to be routed through the heads of the departments or branches who are known as branch heads. It was observed while serving under one of the branch heads, phenomenal time was being wasted in waiting to meet the Top boss as he wishes to know many things from many employees simultaneously or in tandem. Invariably the time taken for meeting the Top Boss was running into few hours everyday, resulting in the subordinates unable to complete their day's routine work which was affecting morale and motivation. In such a Top down hierarchy, no individual could walk up to the boss and complain fearing the consequences. The question as to how to find a solution brought in the idea of taking an appointment two days prior to obtain a commitment from the boss by way of application of question thinking in the form of choice questions. The same methodology was applied thereafter with two more top bosses over a period of 7 years with minor modifications and this helped to avoid time wastages and helped in better time management of employees. Here the appointment commitment puts the onus on the person who gives the commitment. However power position and posture would not permit a person in higher authority to be

bluntly questioned. Instead using choice questions to give the boss the option to choose the appointment time for the subordinate meeting resulted in not putting down his power posture and authority and further gave him a feeling of making a choice. Hence a win- win situation for the boss and the employee was achieved. It was realized after this that the waiting periods drastically reduced most of the times and others followed suit. The question as to how to resolve the extended waiting time was the trigger which made employees work out a solution. Therefore for every challenge or problem our mind could be trained to think in the form of right questions to find solutions for our day to day problems. According to Theiry(2002)[34], When we encounter danger, we get into a fight or flight response to protect ourselves physically from that danger. It is a natural reaction. This reaction may not be a conscious thought but surely a instinctive reaction which springs out on its own.(Theiry,2002)[32] However, when someone tries to affect or endanger our image or point of view or self esteem then it's a mental attack and even in that case we go through a fight or flight response and react. The reaction is again instinctive. Most of the meetings today are ineffective because of such reactions which are nothing but ego hastles resulting in difference of opinions being carried on to relationships(Laura Delizonna,2017)[35]. When Egos get hurt, defense mechanism tantrums to put down the other person gets into play. If during these situations if one trains his minds to act in a logical manner and keep the focus on the issue by way of question thinking skill, then the meetings would be more meaningful. Questions evoke a response. Every though need not evoke a response. But surely a question to oneself or to others will surely evoke a response. This response could be in the form of a question or answer(Terry,2009)[26] It is a fact that the person who answers gives a reply to the stimulus triggered by the question.(Michael Vaughan,2015). The questioner's intention may not be understood. Understanding the intention of the questioner through the question requires understanding of the essence of question thinking and its basics. Therefore question thinking is a powerful tool to understand the intentions of other people and to respond appropriately. The ability to question appropriately to obtain the required response is something which every one of us would desire. The ability to guide people to know what they want by a series of questions posed to them and that would in itself reveal the answers to the individual by way of self revelation(Terry.J.Fadem,2009)[26] They are guided to the required solution or answer. Today, correct diagnosis is a great challenge in the world and numerous patients are becoming victims of mis-diagnosis and wrong treatment(Grunworld, Dianna, Mary, Courtney & Maria;2008)[36]. Question thinking modules and its training to doctors can help to reduce such misdiagnosis to some extent. The ability to ask the right relevant question to the patient till the doctor is able to zero down on the disease or sickness is something which is a combination of the doctors knowledge, experience and the ability to ask relevant inputs

and correlate those inputs from the patient to arrive at the diagnosis. Questioning ability being a strong trait of question thinking will greatly help towards this. Clinical Psychology dwells on personal interviews and observation of their patients to study them. QTS could be effectively applied here (Damon & Michael, 2007)[37]. Question thinking skill (QTS) is just a tool. It could be used for handling any situation involving thoughts in providing solutions. It could be limited to an individual or group of people or entire nation or world.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Soft skill gaps exist amongst the youth who pass out of educational institutions and are found to be wanting in the soft skill sets required for the job profiles in various fields. Technological advancement has changed the complexity of job requirements in both hard and soft skills. Soft skills have become a specialized skill set and training on such skills take time. To be effective such basic soft skills sets have to be part of formal school and college education across the country. Legislation to that effect is a must at the earliest. Questioning skill being an important skills set of soft skill and life skill, should form part of such formal curriculum mandatorily. Spreading awareness towards question thinking skill and to learn soft skills through the mirror of question thinking must be a government initiative to kindle creative thinking and critical thinking amongst every person. A questioning mind is a creative mind and a creative mind is an intelligent mind.

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