

Questioning Your Way to Success

An Excerpt from BrainFishing: A Practice Guide to Questioning Skills

Gary T. Furlong and Jim Harrison
Queen's IRC Facilitators



Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
Faculty of Arts & Science
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6

Tel: 613-533-6628
Fax: 613-533-6812
Email: irc@queensu.ca
Visit us at: irc.queensu.ca

Preface

Many books have been written about negotiation strategy and the different approaches to negotiation, from interest-based to traditional bargaining to win-win to principled, and many more. Much less, however, has been written about the detailed mechanics of successful negotiation and problem solving, about the face-to-face tools and language skills we must master to be more effective negotiators. In particular, one of the most important skills is the “art of the question” -- the ability to ask effective, powerful questions and to combine that ability with strong empathy and listening. These are the skills that deliver better outcomes and win-win solutions.

This is why we wrote *BrainFishing: A Practice Guide to Questioning Skills*. This new book delivers clear, useful skills in a practical format. It is both a “how to” book for making questioning skills your forte, and an informative guide to understanding the neuroscience behind why the use of questions is far more effective than arguing, telling, or debating. It identifies many different types of questions and when to use them; it highlights the effective use of acknowledging and empathy statements; and it even offers a few “magic words” - words that facilitate effective engagement. It’s also a fun, fast-paced, and at times irreverent look at the skills we can all use to be successful in times of constant change, whether it be at the negotiating table, during a workplace interaction or in a social situation.

In the book, we equate “telling” with “hunting”, which is done by targeting other people by demanding and pushing them to see your point of view. We then equate questioning skills and “asking” with “fishing”, which is done by attracting and engaging the creative, powerful, problem solving parts of our brain.

In this excerpt from *BrainFishing*, we demonstrate why telling, in most cases, is a failed communication strategy, and why our brains nonetheless get trapped into telling, arguing and debating. We then offer some ways to start dramatically improving each and every interaction we have with other people.

Excerpt from *BrainFishing: A Practice Guide to Questioning Skills*
By Gary T. Furlong and Jim Harrison (Friesen Press, 2018)

Why “Telling” is a Failed Strategy

The single most common way we communicate and engage with each other is through “telling”. We talk *at* people. Spitting out words or phrases aimed at others. Targeting them with our brilliant thoughts. Explaining *ad nauseum*. Communication, to most people, means conveying information, giving others the gift of our thoughts, our reasons, our rationale. In other words – some version of *telling*. I tell you about my project, I tell you why it’s important, I tell you what I need from you, tell you why your idea won’t work, tell you I like you, tell you I don’t like you, etc. Here’s how that kind of telling usually makes people react:

- I tell you about my project (*Yawn*)
- I tell you why it’s important (*Who cares?*)
- I tell you what I need from you (*I’m busy*)
- I tell you why your idea won’t work (*Yours won’t work either*)
- I tell you I like you (*That’s just flattery and BS*)
- I tell you I don’t like you (*Well, I don’t like you either!*)

You can see the pattern. When we tell, when we assert something, it somehow causes the other party to take the opposite point of view.

Newton identified this principle back in the 1600’s, while studying physics. Newton’s Third Law of Motion states that:

“For every Action, there is an Equal, and Opposite, Reaction.”

Phrased in the BrainFishing way, it might sound like this:

“For every Tell, there is an Equal, and Opposite, Tell.”

In other words, if I assert that something is true, you tend to focus on and tell me the reasons it may *not* be true. If I tell you why my idea is good, you tend to see the ways it might *not* be so good. Even if I assert something you *know* to be 98% true, what do you focus on in your response? Most likely, it’s the 2%. So telling, in and of itself, draws an opposing argument – almost automatically (kind of like physics, right?).

The net result is this: When I tell, I tend to make my own job harder. I make achieving my goal – of finding any solution, let alone a solution that works for both of us – much more difficult. *I create the very resistance I'm trying to avoid.* I attract attention and *push-back*, instead of attention and *engagement*.

So BrainFishing is the art of attracting the right kind of attention. It's about consciously avoiding confrontation, while proactively – and consciously – triggering the curious and intrigued response.

So, how do we do this?

Brain Structure

First, a short lesson in brain structure. And one more Big Metaphor. Since we're talking about fishing for brains and not real fish, understanding how the human brain works is critical.

Very (very!) simply put, humans all come equipped with two different brains. What we'll call the Red Brain comprises two parts - the reptilian brain (the basal ganglia) and the paleo-mammalian brain (the limbic system, including the amygdala). These two parts of the Red Brain evolved first, and can be seen currently in creatures such as frogs and crocodiles (reptiles), and rabbits and tigers (mammals). These parts of our brain are specialized at keeping us alive in one of two ways: hunting, fighting, and killing; or running, hiding, and avoiding being killed. And boy is the Red Brain ever good at this!

The other brain we all have is the Blue Brain. This is the pre-frontal cortex, the so-called "higher brain", the rational, self-aware, thinking brain. The size of our Blue Brain is what makes us human, conscious, and different than almost all other species.

Back to the Red Brain, and what it does for us. The Red Brain is always on, always working. Day and night, it is scanning the environment for one of two things – treats or threats. When the Red Brain sees a treat, it goes after it. When the Red Brain sees a threat, it goes into emergency mode, what is known as "fight or flight"¹. It doesn't matter what threat triggers the Red Brain because the result is almost always the same – an immediate, unconscious reaction of fight or flight. Red Brain characteristics include:

- The Red Brain handles all unconscious processes – breathing, heart rate, first impressions of people, and all automatic or habitual actions. Have you ever gotten in

¹ Some cite a third reaction, called "freeze", which is neither fight nor flight. Unfortunately, when the brain thaws, it defaults back to either fight or flight.

your car preoccupied by something and driven home, but can't actually remember doing the driving – and yet, you arrived safely? Thank you, Red Brain!

- The Red Brain can process vast amounts of information in parallel, assessing input from all of your senses virtually simultaneously (at Comic-Con, this is referred to as “Spidey-sense”).
- The Red Brain operates below the level of conscious thought, and it can react to the environment about five times faster than your Blue Brain.

Sounds pretty good, right? There is a problem, though – it uses all that capability and capacity for only one goal, which is to keep you safe and alive. And it does this by signalling “fight” or “flight” as quickly as possible. But there is a lot more to being effective than just surviving.

Over to the Blue Brain, and how it helps us not just survive, but thrive. The Blue Brain, when it is engaged and working, provides things like this:

- The Blue Brain is capable of sustained focus on a problem or issue, and is very good at finding creative ways to solve almost any kind of problem or issue.
- The Blue Brain is highly analytical, able to deal with complex information and complicated situations -- but it works slowly, and can work on only one issue or problem at a time.
- The Blue Brain requires enormous resources from the body – the brain as a whole uses about 20% of the body's resources, and the Blue Brain uses the lion's share of this. (The full brain of a gorilla, for example, only uses 8% of their bodies' resources – they have much smaller Blue Brains.)

Basically, it is the Blue Brain that allows us to be conscious, rational, and intelligent problem-solvers. The Red Brain simply helps keep us alive and safe.²

Both of these functions are critically important. But there is an even bigger problem: when we are faced with a “problem” or “issue”, one that triggers any feeling of threat or risk, our Red Brain kicks in first (roughly four to five times faster than the Blue Brain) and takes us instantly into a fight or flight response, right from the start.

When the Red Brain takes over in that fight or flight response, this is what happens:

² For a much more detailed and intelligent description of these two thinking systems or “brains”, check out Chapter Three, or go directly to *Thinking Fast and Slow*, by Daniel Kahneman. Kahneman calls them “System One” and “System Two”, but they refer to broadly similar processes. Or try the Dr. Seuss classic *One brain, two brain, red brain, blue brain*.

- Our body starts pumping adrenaline. This kicks up the heart rate, numbs sensations of pain, tunnel visions our sight onto the threat, and jumps us into action – either attack or retreat, fight or flight.
- More significantly, the blood flow to rest of our brain, i.e. the Blue Brain, is severely restricted, if not actually turned off, because of the enormous resources it uses. In other words, our Blue Brain, our rational brain, is disabled even before it gets a chance to assess or understand the problem or issue in any depth! After all, if there is indeed a threat, the muscles need all the blood they can get to successfully run or rumble.

Reflect on this. Think of a time where you had to react quickly and make an urgent decision, and later thought to yourself, “How could I have been so stupid?!” Know this – it wasn’t you (i.e. your Blue Brain); it was your Red Brain driving that bus.

Regardless, the most important outcome of a Red Brain takeover is this – *We Stop Thinking. Period.*³

Back on the savannah when we were physically in danger (which was, like, most of the time), our Red Brain kept us alive and did a great job. But the Red Brain is not very sophisticated. It knows a threat when it sees one, but it can’t tell the difference between the threat of being attacked by a predator and the threat posed by an angry customer or boss. It reacts exactly the same way.

Pick a Brain, Any Brain

So, when the Red Brain is triggered, we go into either hunting (fight) or prey (flight) mode. But the reverse is also true – when we voluntarily choose to solve any given problem by hunting (i.e. telling and arguing), we are also triggering our Red Brain into action. When we spend our time declaring, demanding or ordering other people around, our Red Brain, and likely their Red Brain, is taking over. We both argue, defend, and resist. Or we ignore, hide, and avoid. And all of this behaviour means the issue or problem is not solved or resolved between the parties -- it is either won or lost, or it stays completely unresolved. We are simply acting out a modern version of fight or flight.

³ Numerous books and research papers have identified this under the heading of the “Amygdala Hijack”. Google it. Or go to Chapter Three for more details and depth.

Even worse, hunting – engaging our Red Brain with the other party’s Red Brain – can threaten or damage the relationship. When operating in our Red Brain, we always see the other person as a threat to be addressed, not a partner to work with.

On the other hand, when the Blue Brain is in charge, we become curious, interested, and engaged. We naturally start asking questions instead of telling. And the reverse of this is also true – when we choose to solve a problem the BrainFishing way by asking questions instead of telling, we automatically engage the Blue Brain, both ours and theirs. It works in both directions. Leading with our Blue Brains also creates connections, partnerships, and strengthens our relationships.

To be clear – hunting does work sometimes. The deer is shot. The village has a feast. Everyone celebrates! It can, on the surface, succeed.

Consider this, however: While hunting can get you what you want at times, it does so in spite of, or at the expense of, the other person (think of the deer’s experience of the feast for a minute). It is a short-term, win-lose strategy.

BrainFishing: A Tale of Two Shifts – or “One Good Shift Begets Another”

The move from hunting to BrainFishing actually entails two shifts. And they are directly connected.

The First Shift occurs within our own Blue Brain when we make the conscious and mindful choice to stop telling, telling, telling, and intentionally start asking, asking, asking.

The First Shift, the foundational shift to BrainFishing is this – make the conscious choice to ask questions. Regularly. Yep, that’s it. That simple. And just remember, “simple” is not the same thing as “easy”. But simple is good.

And as you may have figured out – since your Blue Brain is fully engaged at the moment, right? – the First Shift is what actually creates the Second Shift. This Second Shift occurs in the brain of the other person, the person you are communicating with when you ask them a question. They shift from working out of their Red Brain, to engaging with you from their Blue Brain. They start working *with* you instead of *against* you. They become curious, they participate in creating sustainable win/win solutions to problems, and they help to establish a relationship based on

consideration and respect. A good question is more than an invitation to think – it’s an invitation to engage and collaborate.

So the First Shift – a conscious choice to ask good, relevant questions – generates the Second Shift, the move to deep and engaged problem solving. The Blue Brains take over, helping the two of you actually communicate and start to build a relationship of trust and respect.

In other words, one good shift begets another.

So BrainFishing is actually about Blue BrainFishing, it’s about engaging and attracting the best part of each other, about two Blue Brains actually working to solve problems. It is about engaging the most creative part of each other’s brains; it is about building effective working relationships; it is about singing the Red Brains softly to sleep so our Blue Brains can actually come out and play.

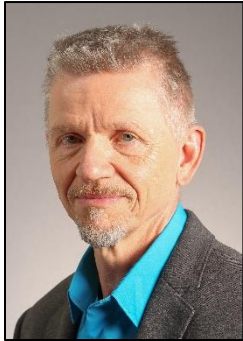
Remember, play can be vigorous, demanding, even rough and tumble at times. But when you are fishing for Blue Brains and you catch them, you are engaging the very best in everyone around the table. Blue Brains working together get faster and better outcomes than fighting with our Red Brains ever can. And BrainFishing is the specific way we attract, lure, and engage other people’s Blue Brains. We make the First Shift. The First Shift in us causes the Second Shift in the other person. The result is two Blue Brains collaborating to solve problems.

Enough about the problem. It is this core interaction, this First Shift to deliberately engaging others instead of pushing and directing others, that can improve 90% of your interactions. By making the First Shift, we cause the Second Shift in the other person, allowing us both to be more effective.

BrainFishing is about capturing their interest, inviting them to play, to think, to be creative. It’s about carving the pegs to fit the holes, instead of pounding harder.

Excerpted from *BrainFishing: A Practice Guide to Questioning Skills*, by Gary T. Furlong and Jim Harrison, Friesen Press, 2018.

About the Authors



Gary Furlong has extensive experience in labour mediation, alternative dispute resolution, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Gary is past president of the ADR Institute of Ontario, is a Chartered Mediator (C. Med.) and holds his Master of Laws (ADR) from Osgoode Hall Law School. Gary has delivered collective bargaining negotiation skills training for both management and union bargaining teams, bringing a strong focus of effective and collaborative skills to the table. Gary specializes in leading joint bargaining training for intact negotiation teams just prior to negotiations, with a focus on helping parties maximize joint gains at the table. In addition, Gary also conducts relationship building interventions to strengthen day-to-day union-management effectiveness away from bargaining. Gary is also the author of *The Conflict Resolution Toolbox*, John Wiley and Sons, 2005; the co-author of *The Construction Dispute Resolution Handbook*, Lexis Nexis 2004; and *The Sports Playbook*, Routledge, 2018.

Gary is a facilitator for the Queen's IRC [Negotiation Skills](#) and [Managing Unionized Environments](#) programs.



Jim Harrison is an international consultant and facilitator focused on strategy, sales and talent management for mid-sized to large organizations, including government, public service and healthcare organizations. Jim started his career in financial services, working as a money trader for RBC/Dominion Securities. He has over 30 years' experience in consulting, training, and executive coaching. He works with clients in North & South America, Europe, Australia, and Asia, and regularly facilitates strategy and training sessions for such well-known companies as IBM, Accenture, PwC, KPMG, Deloitte, Fuji, AGFA, TD Bank, AT&T, Deutsche Bank, and HSBC. Jim received his B.Sc. degree in Finance from Florida State University and a Master's Degree in English from the University of California, Irvine. He has been married for over 30 years to Arlene Vandersloot, a midwife and therapist, and they have four awe-inspiring children.

Jim is a facilitator for the Queen's IRC [Linking HR Strategy to Business Strategy](#) and [HR Metrics and Analytics](#) programs.



Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6
irc.queensu.ca