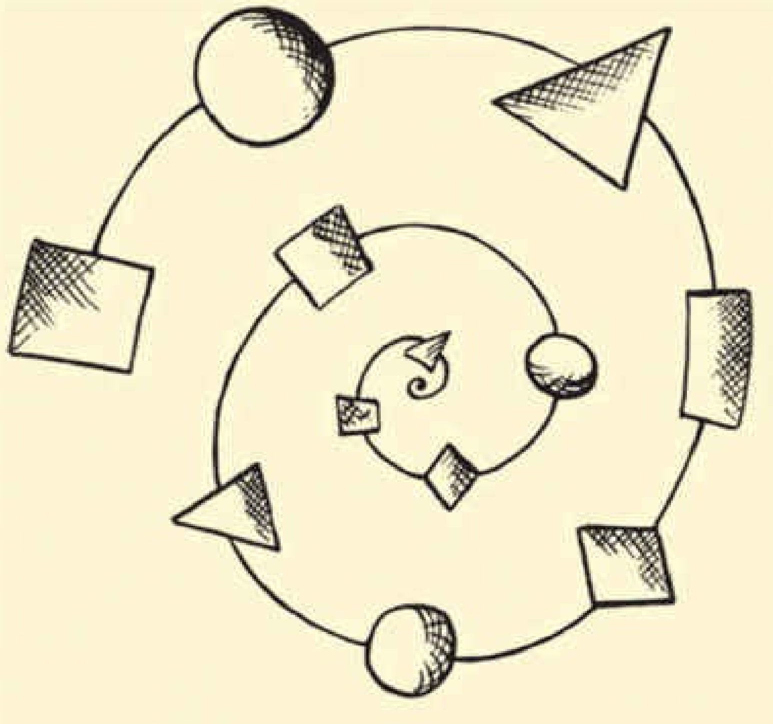
Cracking QUESTIONS

To help you really improve productivity



Jon Harvey

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QUESTIONS

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QUESTIONS

How to go beyond customer journey process mapping and really improve the productivity of your business

Questions and challenges that will help *you* generate the dozen-plus small creative ideas that will enable your organisation *to do more with less – and how to do this without* the need to bring in large teams of costly 'transformation' *consultants* or use forests of flip chart paper 'mapping processes'.

By Jon Harvey

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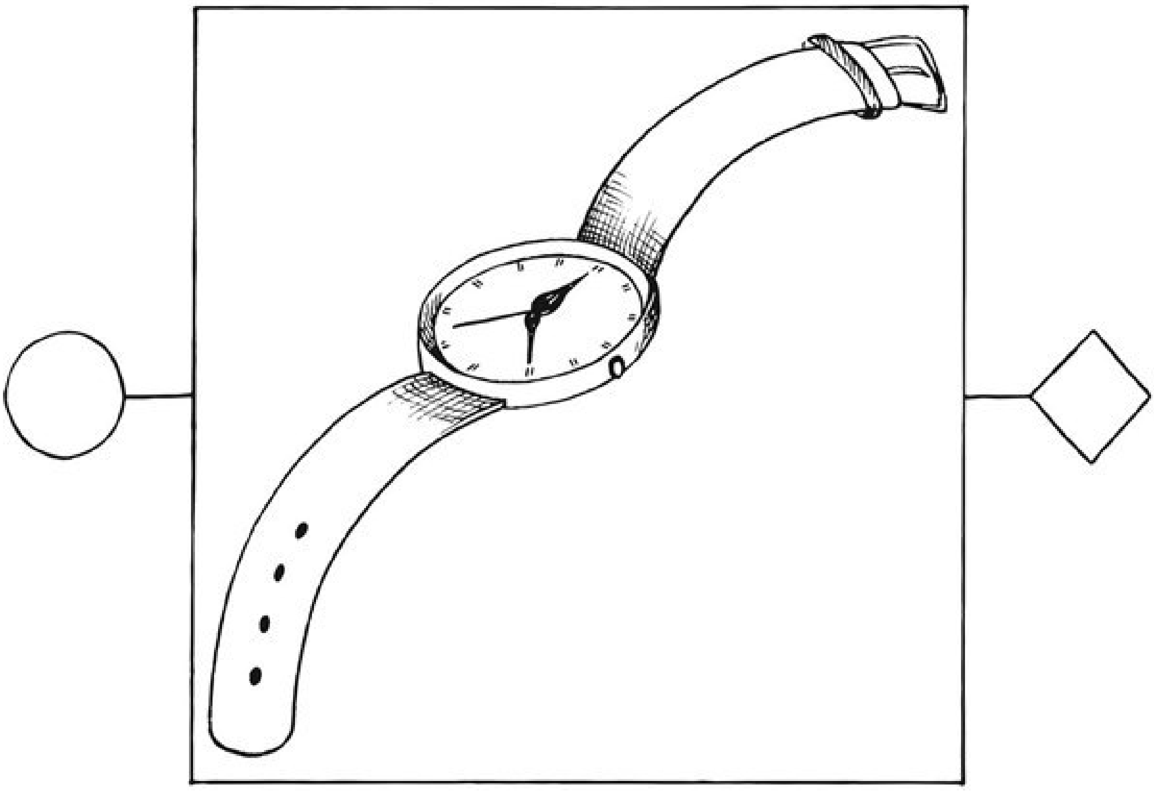

Introduction

You will be glad to know this is not a long book.

I know how busy managers are: holding their teams together, tackling increasingly difficult performance challenges, making a profit and/or a difference . . . and still trying to have a life outside work. And yes, I know: you have read many other business management books, earnestly hoping to find the ideas that will really help you deliver those results as a manager and leader. (And there are some really good books around. I have listed some at the end of this one.)

But still you are searching for those flashes of inspiration that will give you and your team (department/business/organisation . . .) the edge. Everyone talks about the need to do more with less, but so often that seems in practice to be about working harder and harder but achieving less with less (whilst pretending it is more). And you are told you can only get there if you pay for some expensive management consultants who, in time-honoured fashion, may well borrow your watch, tell you the time and keep the watch. They may also persuade you (not due to sharp practice but because they believe in it too) to spend hours, days, weeks even, ‘mapping your business processes’ as an essential basis for redesigning them to become ‘lean’.

Every year, far too many organisations disappear down the rabbit hole of external management consultancy, some never to emerge again. But just as Alice didn’t need anyone to tell her what to do, nor do you. You can climb of the rabbit hole and go well out beyond mere customer journey *mapping*.

This book is, in part, designed as the antidote to management consultants. And the author is (somewhat ironically) someone who has spent 26 years being a consultant. I am not saying that management consultants *never* add value. Why would I say that? No. But what I am saying is that 85% of what consultants are hired to do could be far, far better done by the people inside the organisation themselves.

This book is about helping you make the most of consultants when you absolutely need to use them. External consultants *can* illuminate, facilitate and even expurgate.

But they should never be *hired to replicate* what is better done by those who know the organisation inside out.

So this short book is mainly about helping you and your colleagues do more *without* expensive consultants. The price of this book is roughly equivalent to just five minutes (or even less) of an expensive consultant’s time. I think that makes this book a worthwhile bet if not a great long-term investment. I hope you do too.

What you will find in this book

- Why customer journey/process mapping is a waste of time
- What ‘inductive’ problem solving is all about and how you can apply it
- A few questions, carefully phrased, to help you redesign your processes and whole organisation (if you want to)
- Some examples to illustrate these questions and make them come alive
- Ideas on how to take all this forward with your team/organisation
- Appendices: other resources that can help

Some thanks

Even a book as slim as this one is never a solo project. I am hugely grateful to my two professional pals Paul Evans and Justin Willett; together we are the SpeakEasy Collective. Not only have they helped me to stay sane in recent years but they both provided invaluable feedback on an earlier draft. Suzette Davenport, a good client and friend, gave me some very useful insights from her perspective on an earlier version too. And a family friend, Katie Mossman, gave me some useful feedback. I am indebted to Mor Golan, who helped me reframe my thinking around how to invite people to read this book.

A heartfelt thank you to Miles Bailey and the whole team at the Choir Press, especially editor Harriet Evans and designer Adrian Sysum for their careful work on this book and for helping to bring it into being.

And this book would not have come about were it not for constant nudging from my dear brother, Kevin, and my wonderful son, Sam. Finally, without the sparkling love, tireless patience and fathomless support from my inspirational wife, Julie, very little would happen in my life.

This book is dedicated to my mother, who taught me how to ask good questions. What more could a son want or need?

The illustrations

I am also hugely grateful to my daughter, Jess Harvey, who has contributed in very many ways to the creation of the book you are reading. In particular, all the illustrations are hers. You can find more about her varied work at http://www.jessharvey.com/

A promise

This book comes with my promise: if you do not find anything of value or use in this book, then please contact me and I will refund your money.

However, if the book helps you to find some ideas of great worth to you (as I hope and believe it will), please tell your friends and colleagues. And tell me too! I would love to hear your stories about how this book has helped create positive change.

Thanks.

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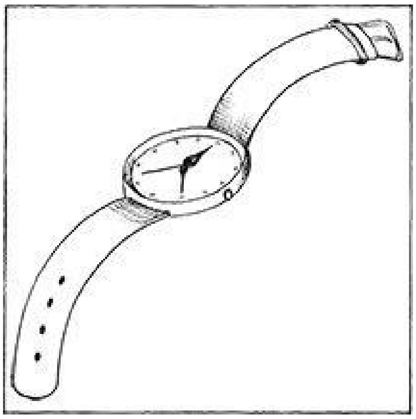
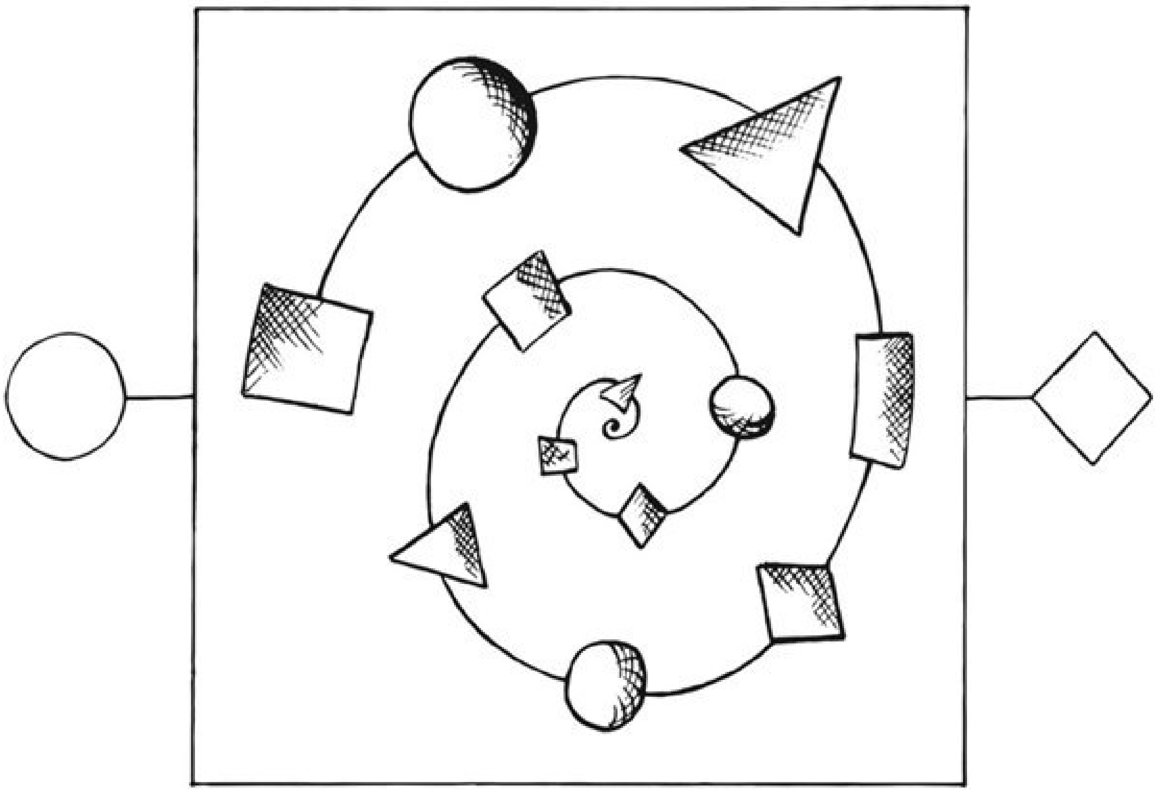




Why process mapping is a waste of time (and that includes customer journey mapping)

I believe that all you need to begin redesigning a process is a ‘light map’ which includes where/how the process starts and ends, with a few (probably no more than six) stages in between. This is enough to help you use the ‘inductive problem solving’ questions below.

But first let me tell you why I think many consultants will seek to persuade you to do lots and lots of process mapping (instead of my approach based on a light map):

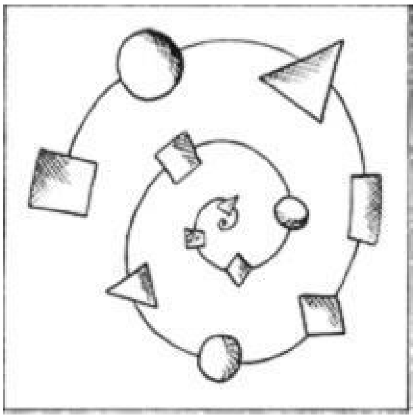
It is what they were taught to do and therefore it is what they believe you need to do as well.

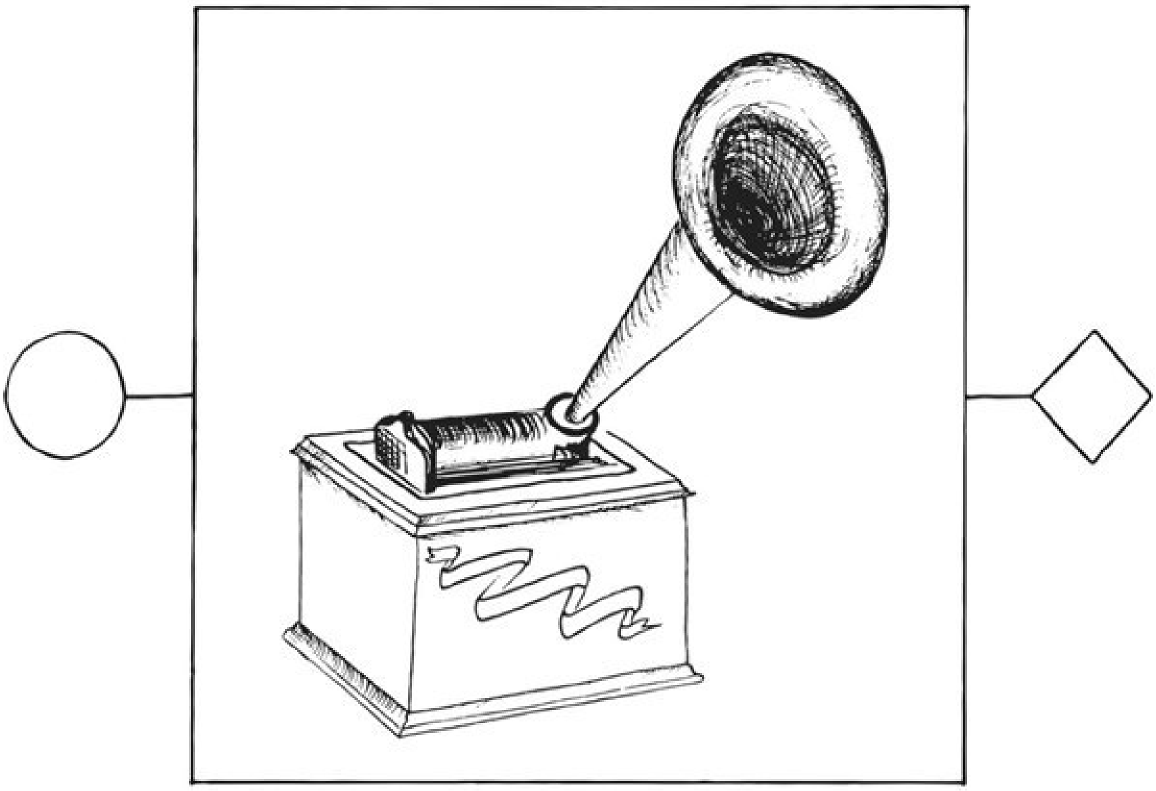
- They are often technically or procedurally minded people with a computer programming background; mapping processes out in detail is just what they do.
- They believe that you need to know exactly, to a high level of detail, how things currently work in order to create a new shape for the future. You don't, in my view.
- Process mapping takes a lot of time and consumes large budgets of consultants' fees (or am I being just a tad too cynical here?).
- It looks very complicated and reinforces the notion that this is something that you could not possibly do without their help.
- It gives clients a warm secure feeling that they are getting something tangible for their money.
- Customer journey mapping often means you don't even have to involve real customers; you just pretend that you do by using the label.

And here is why I don't believe process mapping is worth the investment:

- It depletes the energy of the people involved in the process such that when the stage comes to redesigning the process creatively, there is nothing left in the tank and people are bored.
- No process map can capture just how things are really done. No matter how intricate the process map, real life is always more complex, idiosyncratic, contextual and therefore variable than a frozen image.
- It fixes people's attention on what is, rather than what could be.
- Process maps befuddle people and make them feel like cogs in a machine, whereas I believe that you actually want people to consider themselves to be (and indeed be) skilled actors in a play that they are helping to write.
- Because process mapping is and feels like a very technical approach, often only technical improvements emerge, whereas improvements can come from many different sources.
- Since so much effort is expended on process mapping, a range of small creative ideas are overlooked in the search for some single big fix that is proportionate to the effort.

In summary, only the lightest of 'mapping' is needed in order to find radical and transformational ways to deliver more with less. You can do this yourself without a) expensive process mapping software, b) expensive process mapping consultants and c) endless workshops to make sure the map is ‘accurate’, when it cannot ever be so anyway.





What ‘inductive’ problem solving is and how you can apply it

First, a quick recap on *deductive* problem solving. This involves a careful analysis of the current issue and then a suitably detailed set of investigations/experiments/statistics to work out the main causes of the problem. Solving the problem then becomes a task based on this analysis where the root causes are removed (or at least the effect of them is neutralised).

It is an essential method and one which forms the basis of most scientific endeavour as well as much organisational performance improvement. It starts with the problem and works inwards, and then forwards to a new solution. *But it is not the only method . . .*

Inductive problem solving, on the other hand, starts with a solution and explores whether it might fit the problem in question. It is a more random approach and relies more on serendipity but is also often far more creative.

Take, for example, Edison’s invention of the phonograph. It is reputed that when he came up with the invention, he was mostly focused on finding a way to record people’s dying wishes and bequests. It took others to suggest the myriad of ways in which the basic idea could be adapted, including to the recording of music. In other words, Edison’s solution was applied to many more problems or scenarios than he himself had ever considered.

Another famous example is of the 3M scientist who invented a glue that would not really stick. It took another 12 years before someone else happened upon the idea of Post-it notes, and the rest is history, as they say.

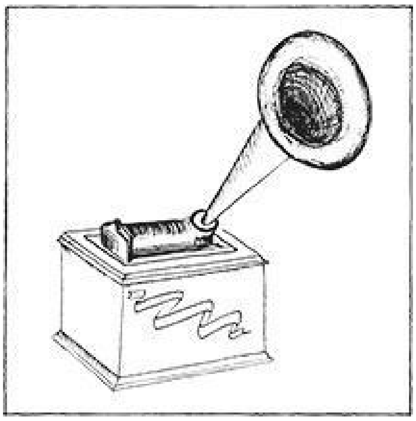
All the questions below have solutions embedded within them. Many of these embedded solutions will not fit the processes you are looking to improve. But several almost certainly will. If you ask the questions seriously, you may well find a solution for doing more with less that you will be frankly amazed you have not thought of before. Solutions for greater performance are often staring us in the face, sometimes for years! Or you may just find a few smaller improvements that could add up to make a big difference.

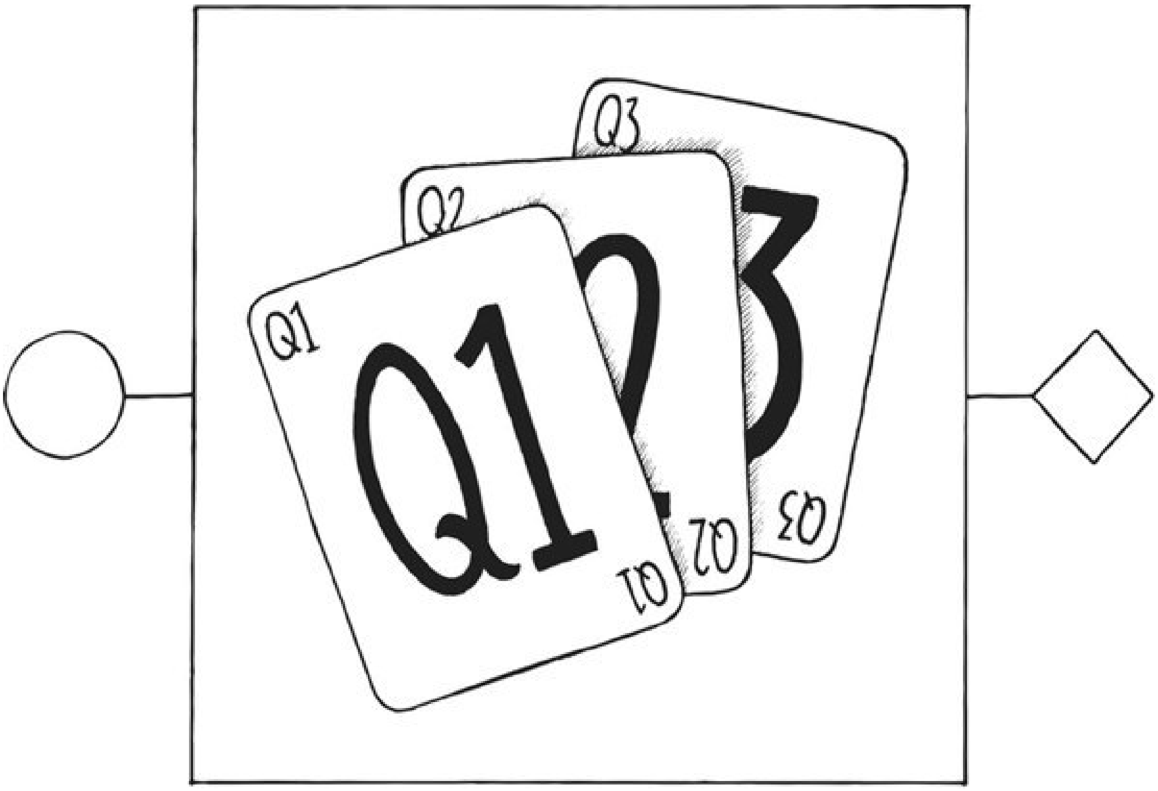
But I don’t know.

But nor do you you *until* have asked the questions, carefully, openly and without any pre-set assumptions.

And in case you have not realised this yet: this does not have to be a lone activity. You can ask these questions and come up with inductive solutions in small groups and teams, and large multiple-stakeholder conventions. The chances are that there are several people you work with who have some excellent ideas about how to improve efficiency and effectiveness, both inside and outside your organisation, but for a variety of reasons they have not come forward with these ideas. Asking these questions in an engaging way may just provide the opportunity for them to do so. Moreover, magical things can happen when good conversations occur.

There are several effective ways to engage large and wider groups in this improvement activity. An Open Space process (see Appendix A) would be particularly effective at harnessing creativity, commitment and complexity in pursuit of ingenious solutions.





The 24 questions that will help you change the way business is done in your organisation

Further on is an explanation of each question, but here in one ready reckoner are some critical *process* redesign questions. (Later on there is a set of critical *service* redesign questions, aimed at helping you look at your overall organisation or business.)

1. Have we agreed the stakeholder requirements of the process?
2. Are those who run the process adequately trained?
3. Are there too many ‘handovers’?
4. Is the process being done in the right order?
5. Could it be made simpler with a ‘triage’ stage?
6. Could we make better use of technology?

7. Where are the sources of rework?
8. Why does performance vary (and by how much)?
9. Could some parts of the process be done at the same time?
10. Are there too many checks and controls?
11. Could we get the users/clients/customers etc. to do more?
12. Could we get our partners/suppliers to take action?
13. Could different people or agencies be running the process (or part of it)?
14. Could we create an expert system to make it work more elegantly?
15. Is there a ‘standard’ way of carrying out the process?
16. Where are the delays or bottlenecks in the process?
17. Have we made any cultural or professional assumptions that are getting in the way?
18. Could we stop doing the process altogether?
19. Are decision-making protocols getting in the way?
20. Have we overlooked some well researched evidence-based practice?
21. Does the process contribute to our overall outcome goals?
22. Are we missing efficiency opportunities by not building in fail/stop gateways?
23. Have we listened to customer/client/user feedback enough?
24. What is really our ‘bottom line’ with this process?

These questions are not listed in any particular order. Indeed, I would recommend that you print out this list and create a set of cards to be picked from at random. The idea is simple:

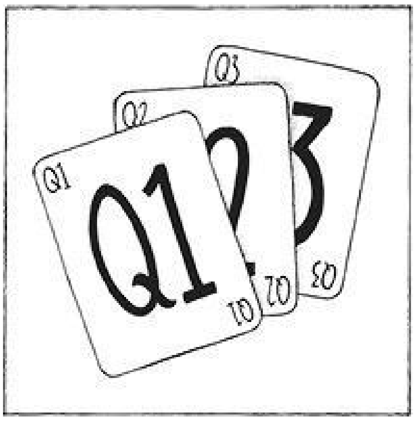
On your own, as a team/group or as a wider whole system or network of people, focus on the process needing to be redesigned, with the ‘light map’ in view.

- Pose each of these questions carefully, but exploratively . . .
- Then see what happens; the discussion can follow.
- Allow for plenty of silence while people think, use their imagination or reconcile themselves to very different ways of working.

And that is it.

I could *try* to make the process more complicated, write a few more chapters and so forth. But would that help you?

Meanwhile, here are some more explanations and stories behind each question.


Q1
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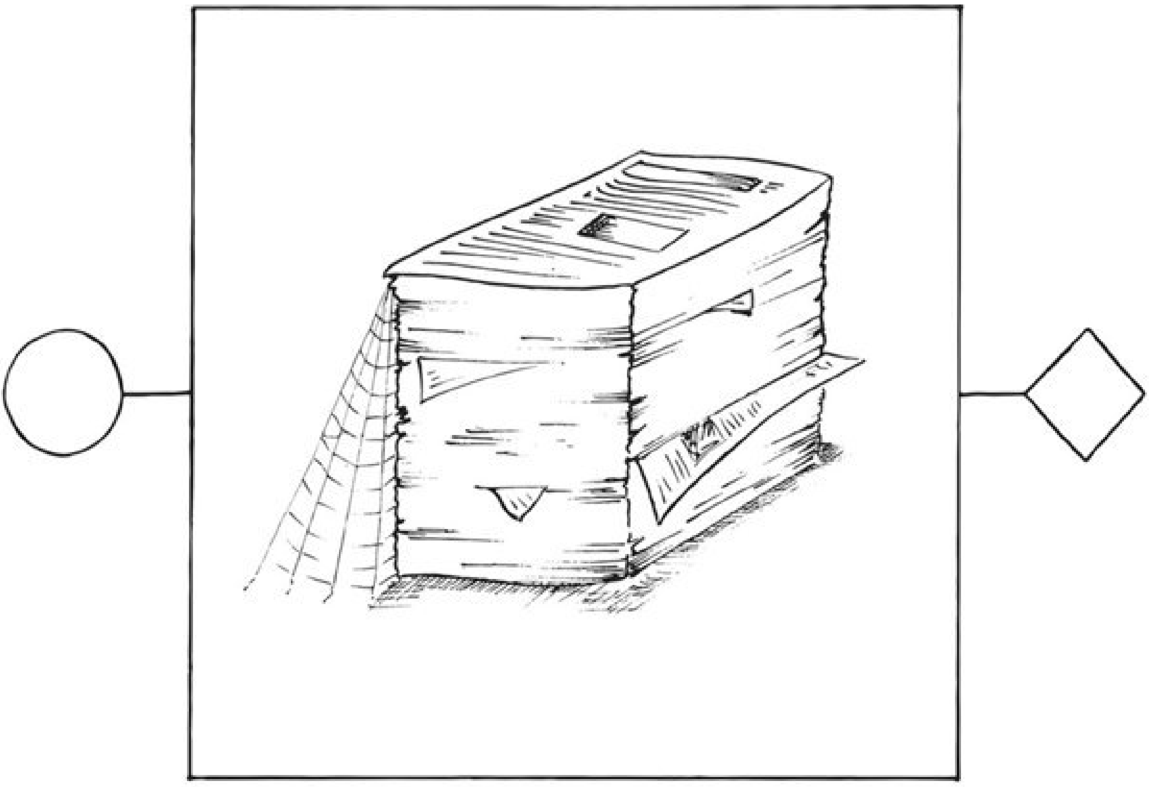The questions unpacked