Change the World:
Consider Your Questions

By Royce Holladay

Have you ever sat in a meeting that you knew was going nowhere? The conversation continued to swirl around questions no one in the room could answer. You all bemoaned the uncertainty of it all. Or you were convinced that this time, one more conversation would get the answers you knew were out there. Or you were just stuck and didn't know what to do, other than explore the question again.

At best those conversations are frustrating. Often the unanswered questions just suck your energy and leave you tired and defeated. At worst, they are dangerous. They can trigger desperation that leaves you open to magical thinking. Or you come to rely on charismatic leaders who tell you they have the answer. You can fall prey to the bully who pushes you do it his way—even if it's wrong.

In my work in human systems dynamics, I have learned that uncertainty is an inevitable part of life and that there are ways to leverage what we do know. One tool helps prevent those interminable conversations is called the "Question Sorter." It helps your conversations move forward without ignoring people's concerns, without missing an opportunity to bring in information that can be critical, or without looking for expertise you may not have.

The Question Sorter model offers options for dealing with your questions.

► **Known** – Some questions can be answered by someone in the room. This means you can ask the question, get the information you seek, and move on. Talking about "Known" questions helps you stay in the present, looking to the future and moving on. Naming what's "Known" helps you listen to people that you sometimes overlook or ignore when dominant voices carry the conversation. Examples: Questions about specific data or events that can be immediately answered.

► **Unknown** – These questions are answerable, but not by anyone in the room. You make assignments or requests for people to bring that information to the next conversation. This practice helps you, as a group, make intentional growth together. Examples might be data or historical information that is archived or known only to specific individuals. This may also be questions about unknown information that is a part of someone else's expertise or experience.

Nothing is intractable.

► **Unknowable** – These questions are about the uncertainty in life and actually have no answers. The best you can do is speculate or argue, without end, about your opposing views. Conversations about the ultimate impact of a decision or the specific causes of events fall into this "bucket." Often everyone in the room has an opinion, but no one can know the real answer. Start a list and keep it with you to explore patterns and trends, but don't count on the list for certainty.
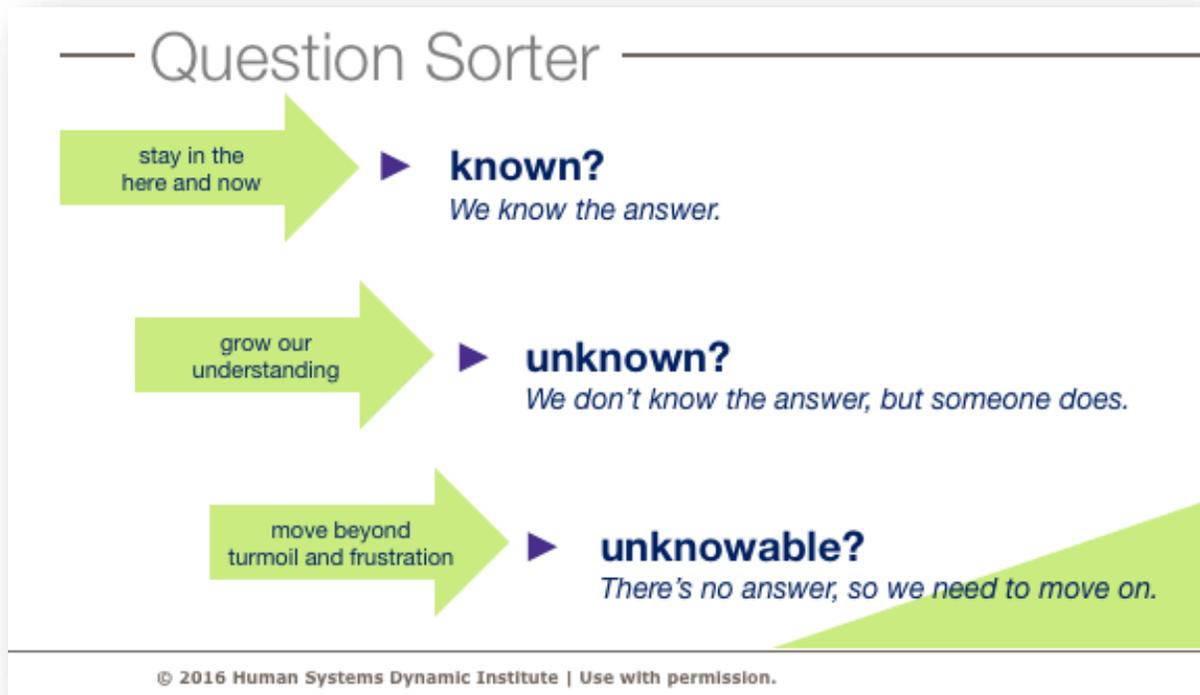
Use the Question Sorter the next time you feel stuck in a conversation that has no answers. See if it can bring a perspective that helps you learn what you can, gather the data that's available, and move forward in the face of uncertainty.

Let us know what you find.

Royce

Nothing is intractable.

— Question Sorter —

stay in the
here and now ▶ **known?**
We know the answer.

grow our
understanding ▶ **unknown?**
We don't know the answer, but someone does.

move beyond
turmoil and frustration ▶ **unknowable?**
There's no answer, so we need to move on.

When questions emerge in the course of a conversation:

▶ If it's **known**, find the answer and move forward.

▶ If it's **unknown**, arrange for someone to find the answer and bring it to the next conversation.

▶ If it's **unknowable**, make a note of it and put it aside, knowing that further discussion about it is non-productive. You may return periodically to the list of what is "unknowable" and see if you have any movement or new insights about the questions.

Nothing is intractable.