

# Is There Such a Thing as a Dumb Question?

*The art and science of effective PPQA*

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# Topics

- Introductions
- Story time (Thrivent's PPQA Story)
- Musings About Questions
- Who (Leveraging Great People)
- What (Designing Great Questions)
- How (Using Great Mechanisms)
- Why (Anticipated and Realized Results)
- Lessons Learned
- Q & A



# Introduction – Mark Janning

- Senior Manager of IT Quality Assurance at Thrivent Financial for Lutherans (nearly 3 years in this new role) (mark.janning@thrivent.com)
- 7 years at Thrivent; over 20 years experience in IT (Financial Services, Database Marketing, Publishing industries)
- BA (Physics & Education), St. Olaf College (MN); MBA (Information Decision Sciences), Carlson School of Management, Univ. of Minn.
- Green Belt, Lean Six Sigma (Process Improvement)
- CMMI & ITIL (basic) certified; part of 2 SCAMPI-B appraisal teams
- Father of 2 teenagers, musician, “curious kid in a man’s body”



# Introduction – Thrivent Financial for Lutherans

- Not-for-profit, Fortune 500 financial services membership organization with corporate offices in Minneapolis, MN and Appleton, WI
- Largest fraternal benefit society in the U.S.
- Helps approximately 2.6 million members achieve financial security and give back to their communities
- Offers a broad range of financial products and services
- Over \$70 billion in assets under management in 2010
- Ranked 342 on Fortune 500 list based on 2009 revenue of \$6.5 billion



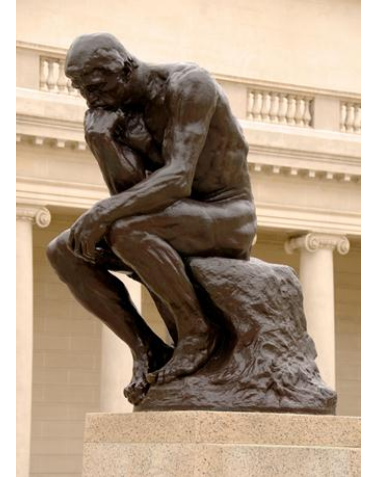
## A Brief History of Time (Thrivent's PPQA story)

- Merger of two 100-year-old companies
- Increase in size and complexity (project teams increased, became multi-site)
- Increase in use of consultants, out-sourcing, off-shoring (even 'multi-er-site' with less built-in contextual understanding)
- Projects with delays, inconsistencies, increase in re-work, necessary spin-off efforts
- Continuous Improvement (Lean Six Sigma) embraced / encouraged
- SDLC -> CMMI<sup>®</sup> (and ITIL<sup>®</sup>, and COQ) but what's the ROI?

Rather than risk somebody feeling uncomfortable about asking a dumb question: SDLC = Systems/Software Development LifeCycle; CMMI<sup>®</sup> = Capability Maturity Model Integration; ITIL<sup>®</sup> = Information Technology Infrastructure Library; COQ = Cost of Quality; ROI = Return On Investment. And PPQA = Process and Product Quality Assurance, a Support Process Area at CMMI Maturity Level 2

# Musings about Questions

- Where did “No Such Thing as a Dumb Question” come from?
- \*\* Architecture of a question
  - Construction (wording makes a critical difference!)
  - Scope
  - Assumptions
- \*\*\* Why do you ask?
  - Many possible intentions: obtain an answer, open a dialogue, show interest, signal your presence, encourage someone else to express themselves, demonstrate knowledge, lead someone to think or respond in a particular way, obtain the corresponding action implied, trigger a debate, commence a joke, or combinations of these and more!
  - And then there’s the dark side...



The Thinker, by Auguste Rodin

\*\* Source: The Art of Powerful Questions - Catalyzing Insight, Innovation, and Action by Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown, & David Isaacs © 2003

\*\*\* Source: <http://www.linkedin.com/answers?viewQuestion=&questionID=695501&askerID=41435431>

## Musings about Questions (cont.)

- When and Where and How do you ask?
  - Tone
  - Non-verbal communication
  - Setting
- What can a powerful question do? (*see Appendix*)
- So is there such a thing as a dumb question? Survey says...
  - There are no dumb questions, but there are a lot of inquisitive idiots
  - There are no dumb questions, but some questions deserve dumb answers
  - There are no dumb questions, only stupid people
  - Yes – if it is asked for the sole purpose of annoying the person being asked
  - The only dumb question is one left unasked
  - Like music, questions and answers are extremely subjective



Who ARE these people?

# Who – Leveraging Great People

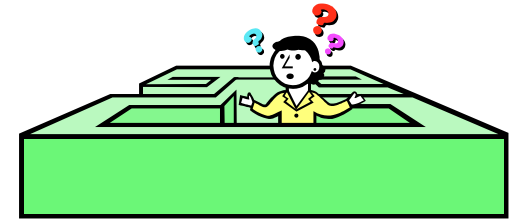
- Who wants to know?
  - Internal or external to group?
  - Level of authority & credibility (perceived or real)
  - Size & make-up of all participants / witnesses
  - Relationships (level of trust) among participants
- QA activity as close to the work as possible
- “Virtual Pool” of Auditors
  - Build a Community of Practice / Center of Excellence
  - Background / skills needed (Project Managers, facilitators / interviewers, set the right tone, etc.)
  - Leverage people differently, including other areas that also do this work
- Other considerations





# What – Designing Great Questions

- Where do you start? (Build or Buy?)
  - Purchase questions and / or tools, check out the web, find freebies from willing sources (hint, hint), collaborate with your ‘Process Owners’ / stakeholders to write your own . . .
  - Consolidate & organize / categorize / map – checklist(s)
- Where do you want to go (“Point Of Arrival”)?
  - CMMI continuous or staged representation?
  - Focus on your company’s pain points & goals!
- The journey is the fun part
  - Feedback loops (the good kind)
  - Evolving questions (& mechanisms & people!)
- Some tips (to embrace) and pits (to avoid falling into)

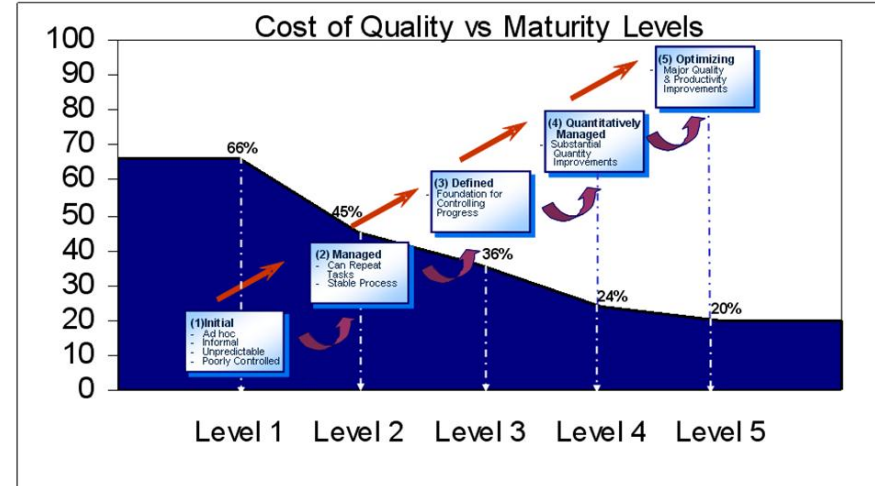


## How – Using Great Mechanisms

- Lots of possibilities – how do you choose?
  - Don't forget DAR (Decision Analysis & Resolution) – pick your criteria
  - Consider current culture, past experiences, organizational goals, reporting needs, available resources (people, technology, funding), leadership bias, industry trends, etc.
- Spectra to consider (these also apply to “who” and “what”)
  - Stick or carrot?
  - Black & white or grey?
  - Fast or time-consuming (richer, more thorough, more coach-y)?
  - Free-form or codifiable?
  - Electronic or In-person?
  - Can you find ways to turn “or” into “and”? (combinations, creative approaches)
- Beware over-engineering!

# Why – Anticipated and Realized Results

- Great things anticipated!
  - Achieve CMMI Level 3
  - Achieve associated COQ savings (double project productivity to support our business better!)
- Some great things are happening
  - Process Owners learning and taking ownership
  - Practitioners trying, gaining experience
  - Process improvements being suggested and made
  - Audits (“Evaluations”) are not seen as ‘scary’
  - Starting to see less rework, more consistency
  - CMMI gaps are closing!



# Anticipated Results Not Yet Realized

- Some not-so-great things are happening, and some great things are not yet happening
  - Haven't reached CMMI Maturity Level 3 (but at least we know it, with detailed gap awareness)
  - It is taking longer than hoped to:
    - “Thrivent-ize” processes (decomplexify, clarify appropriate situational usage/tailoring, etc.)
    - Get enough “coaches” to understand enough and spend enough time with projects
    - Move people from initial resistance and complaints to trying with an open mind and appreciation of the processes' potential benefits
    - Get traction on some particularly ‘new’ CMMI areas / concepts – need “golden samples”
  - Management support / messaging is sometimes inconsistent
  - Finding and communicating tangible, credible (measurable) business benefits is challenging
  - Technical and people resources are limited, for example ‘measurement repository’ (of course this is often true, but recognize the significant impact it has on the rate of progress)
  - There are some significant inconsistencies across various processes and projects

## Lessons Learned (slide 1 of 5)

- Coming up with the right (great, effective, non-dumb) questions is more challenging than you might think! Consider buying vs. building, but OWN your processes and your PPQA details
  - We didn't originally have the insight that we have now (perhaps we counted on our consultants TOO much or for TOO long?)
  - Start simple (realistic, meaningful expectations about people adopting new processes), and don't rely completely on high-maturity consultants whose business model / paradigm is different; make sure procedures and explanations really 'fit' your organization
  - QA areas can lead but must collaborate (on determining best questions & mechanisms)
- Process coaching and training capability / activity should be in place prior to auditing (or have auditors do more coaching initially)
- Minimize surprises around audits (share potential questions / areas to be audited; hold "prep" meetings and / or training of auditees regarding PPQA activities)

## Lessons Learned (2 of 5)

- Know that the organization does (or will soon) have a great appetite for useful PPQA findings, whether they know it or not – be ready to provide it!
  - Design QA mechanisms (including gathering and reporting) to be as simple as possible
  - Start reporting right away and consistently; establish a rhythm (initially it’s o.k. to say “we’re learning our way through some of this, and there’s only limited data at this point”)
- Effective auditing can be taught, but soft skills and solid tools & training are key
  - Share the concepts noted earlier in this presentation with auditors
  - The power of coaching also applies to ramping up new auditors – always observe & coach rookie auditors, and occasionally do the same with seasoned auditors
  - Great attitude, rapport-building, active listening and empathy, combined with confidence and at least some personal experience / stories (about processes that helped) are a good mix
  - Auditors do NOT need to know all the details of all processes all the time, but with effective preparation / “field work” and good mechanisms (effective checklist with questions clearly tied to CMMI, expectations, reasons) during audits, they will be well equipped to succeed

## Lessons Learned (3 of 5)

- Distributed QA works (several areas / levels with collaboration)
  - Can help keep QA activity closer to the actual work being done (but don't forget to at least provide spot-checks from a more distant / objective QA area / resource)
  - Virtual Pool / rotating auditors help spread the good word / mindset / awareness
- Remember to point out that benefits of following a process may not always be evident or applicable to the 'here and now' or to an individual project being audited
  - Many CMMI procedures help with organizational success and contribute to future projects more than to the individual project doing the activities (e.g. root cause selection as one logs defects during a peer review of a design document)
  - Link this sort of connection in the Question Checklist itself to remind auditors (and auditees)
  - Don't ask a question if you can't understand and explain the associated business value!
  - A good "Auditor Community of Practice" standing agenda item relates to business benefits and how processes connect to and help one another

## Lessons Learned (4 of 5)

- Industry / SEI data on how long it takes to achieve CMMI levels seems valid
  - A lot depends on things like leadership, culture, resource commitments, etc.
  - Try to avoid “cart before the horse” situations (i.e. auditing before coaching; expecting projects to absorb additional review or other process costs if they weren’t able to estimate those ‘new’ tasks initially; rolling out new complex processes without offering ‘golden samples’ and training; expecting complex metrics initially; etc.)
  - Project cycle time is another big factor – need people and projects to experience a few lifecycles with the mature processes to really consider it institutionalized, which can span well over a year
- “Eat your own dog food” (or “drink your own champagne”)
  - Use good project methodology to plan and complete all the things that go into improving processes at an organizational level
  - It will increase the odds of success and you’ll ‘feel the pain’ that the projects you’re auditing may feel initially.



## Lessons Learned (5 of 5)

- Process Owners are key, for ALL processes (especially Project Mgmt / Engineering)
  - Spread a ‘quality’ mindset – each Process Owner is responsible for the quality and the adoption of their processes & procedures
  - Collaborate on determining what is to be asked in audits, what focus areas are needed
  - Periodic “collaboration meetings” with QA area(s) and other individual Process Owners / areas are helpful
  - The Project Management Office is particularly critical – their commitment and a “here’s the best way to manage projects / programs” approach helps
- The concept of rework (‘failure’) is NOT very popular
  - Affects how people estimate and log their time
  - May affect vendor negotiation and work (i.e. ‘we can’t charge for our rework, so don’t log it’)
  - Can diminish the perceived benefits of process maturity (i.e. why worry so much about doing reviews and logging defects and analyzing root causes and trends?)

# Summary

- Is there such a thing as a dumb question? What might make it so, and what makes a great question?
- How can we leverage the power of questions for good vs. evil? (Know who is asking whom what, and how, and why – it all matters)
- One company's CMMI journey, including starting a brand new PPQA area less than 3 years ago, has yielded a lot of insight (but we have a ways to go)
- It takes time, but with sufficient resources and leadership, designing QA processes with great questions that fit the organization's needs and values, and utilizing appropriately skilled and trained people and effective mechanisms, in collaboration with other process areas, and effective feedback mechanisms, will yield great, valuable results. A blend of art and science (and occasional run-on or incomplete sentences).

- Any questions, dumb or otherwise?
- Your feedback about this presentation will be much appreciated!
- Feel free to contact me – [mark.janning@thrivent.com](mailto:mark.janning@thrivent.com)

# Thanks?

Does putting a question mark at the end make it a question?



## Appendix (cont.)

### Quotes regarding questions:

- “Judge a person by their questions, rather than their answers.” - Voltair
- “To find the exact answer, one must first ask the exact question.” - S. Tobin Webster
- “If you want a wise answer, ask a reasonable question.” - Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
- “Quality questions create a quality life. Successful people ask better questions, and as a result, they get better answers.” - Anthony Robbins
- “He who asks a question is a fool for five minutes; he who does not ask a question remains a fool forever.” - Chinese Proverb
- “It is the question that enlightens, not the answer.” - Socrates
- “Most teachers waste their time by asking questions which are intended to discover what a pupil does not know, whereas the true art of questioning has for its purpose to discover what the pupil knows or is capable of knowing.” – Albert Einstein
- “After claiming that there was no such thing as a dumb question, I was asked what my favorite toe was” – anonymous
- “What is the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything? 42.” – Deep Thought, the computer from “Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,” after 7.5 million years of work