Critical Questions Job Aid

Use this job aid to help identify the appropriate questions (and question areas) to ask clients at particular stages of the performance diagnosis.

1. **Client Expectations and Alignment**
   - Ask questions like: "what would success look like?" and "How will you know when we're done?"
   - Push upstairs and across boundaries ("Who else makes decisions about this issue/problem?" or "Who's bonus is affected by this problem?" or "What other departments/processes does this show up in?").

2. **Business Priorities**
   - Identify critical goals ("What would success look like?" or "What results is this group accountable for?" or "What targets do you need to hit for this FY to be successful?" or "What are your priorities within the Agencies' plan?"). Determine what the ultimate outcome is the client seeks—check for hidden agendas and assumed outcomes ("If we improved morale and nothing else happened, would you be okay with that?").
   - Get measurable priorities (amount and timeline) and confirm they're valid.
   - Use business priority questions to transition from a transactional focus to a strategic one ("Help me understand the context these performers operate in—what targets do they have to hit?").

3. **Performance Drivers**
   - Identify the performance that is critical or has the most impact on whether or not the priorities are achieved.
   - "What results/output/performance numbers have to happen if you're going to make this goal?" or "What area has the biggest impact on whether or not this objective gets met?" or "What results drive this goal?" or "Are there some performance results that have more impact on this goal than others?"
   - If the client can't identify this, offer to find out for them. Without a clear sense of the performance drivers, you can't determine what the true priorities should be.

4. **Performance Analysis and Measures**
   - Seek exemplars or top performers ("Is there someone who consistently has higher numbers with this part of the work?" or "How do you measure performance on this work? Who's results tend to be better than anyone else's?"). Identifying exemplars and

what makes them so good is the fastest way to improve performance.

- Think in terms of outputs or accomplishments ("In order to do what?") —especially measurable ones. Ask how performance is measured now. When the client focuses on behavior, push to find out what the positive result from the behavior is supposed to be (ie: "hustle" should lead to "reports completed on-time").
- Ask in terms of "task" and "steps" and also environment or conditions.

5. **Cause Analysis**
   - "Why?" is always a great question for getting to the root cause.
   - Look to bound the problem: "When did it first appear?" and "Where in the organization does it show up?" are two good places to start.
   - Understand the work and it's environment. "What are the consequences for doing this wrong?" or "How does the performer know it's wrong?" or "Describe how they get feedback on their work" or "What else is going on when they fill this request?" or "How does the exemplar do it differently?"
   - Recognize that where a problem shows up (or manifests itself) is not likely to be where it was caused. Be willing to look "up-stream" which requires identifying the work process. Good questions to get at this are: "Who handles the work before you do?" or "what is the step in the process prior to this stage?" or "how does the step prior to this affect the work?" or "what headaches or aggravations do you face waiting for the work handoff?"

6. **Change, Commitment and Acceptance**
   - Ask about failures ("Why was the last project unsuccessful?" or "Have you tried to deal with this issue before?")
   - Ask about motivation for action ("Why now?")
   - Test commitment ("Is this project in your budget?")