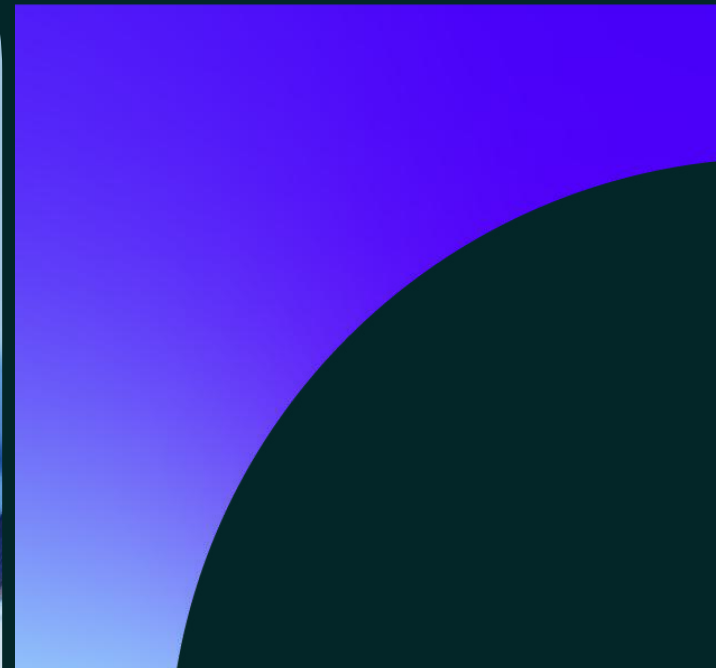
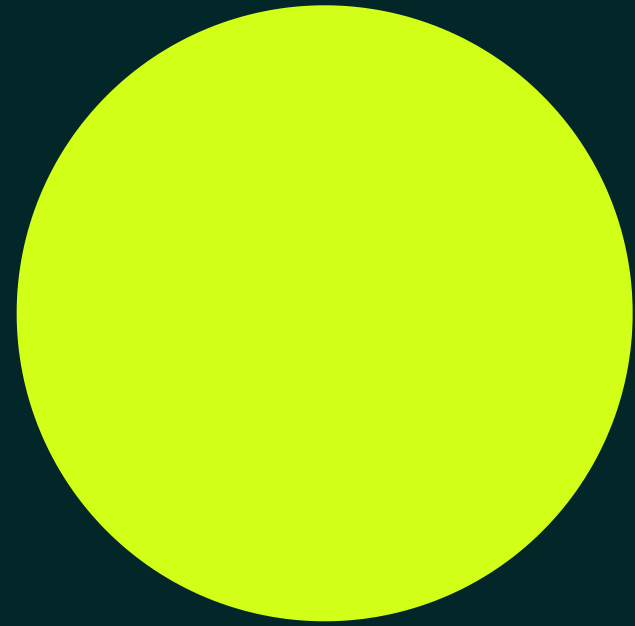


13 Questions That Matter



13 Questions to Ask When Designing a Program or Policy Solution

Creating effective programs or policies isn't just about having a good idea—it's about **asking the right questions** at the right time.

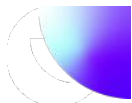
These 13 questions serve as a core part of our method, ensuring that every project is built on **a deep understanding of the problem, a clear vision of success, and a strategy that will be embraced and supported on-the-ground.**

In this book, you'll find:



Essential questions

Each question serves as a critical checkpoint, ensuring your program or policy is built on strong reasoning and strategic planning.



Explanations of why each question matters

Understanding the purpose behind each question helps refine your thinking, leading to more effective solutions and better outcomes.



Real-world examples that illustrate how to apply them

We run these questions through an example problem—the **skilled trades shortage**—to demonstrate how they translate into actionable strategies.

To demonstrate how these questions work, we'll explore the **skilled trades shortage**—a major challenge in many countries. Through this example, you'll see how these questions uncover key insights, shape solutions, and drive better outcomes.

Example: The Skilled Trades Shortage

The skilled trades industry is struggling to keep up with demand. The problem isn't just about finding workers—it's about **systemic barriers** that prevent people from entering and succeeding in trades careers.

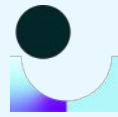


Main Challenges



Complicated Process

Registered apprenticeships require that a prospective apprentice secure a job to start on-the-job training, creating a barrier for newcomers.



Limited Awareness & Guidance

Schools often don't promote comprehensive information about trade career and training options, leading to poor awareness.



Low Enrollment & Completion Rates

Fewer young people are entering trades, and those who do often drop out before completing trade certification.



Women & Diversity Challenges

Women and underrepresented groups face additional barriers, from workplace culture to lack of mentors.



Aging Workforce

Many skilled workers are retiring, and not enough new apprentices are replacing them.

By applying the 13 key questions to this issue, we can **comprehensively understand the problem and what is required to achieve our goal**, uncover root causes, identify leverage points, and design effective interventions.

What is the problem you are solving?

Many projects fail because they define the problem too broadly or focus on symptoms rather than root causes. A **vague problem** leads to **scattered efforts and ineffective solutions**.

This question forces **clarity**, ensuring that strategies **address the core issue**, not just surface-level challenges.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

At first glance, the problem appears simple: there aren't enough skilled trades workers.

However, a deeper look reveals multiple, interconnected issues.

The aging workforce means retirements are outpacing new entries, yet apprenticeship pathways remain unclear and difficult to access.

Schools often fail to promote trades as a viable career, reinforcing outdated perceptions that discourage young people from pursuing them.

Employers hesitate to hire apprentices **due to training costs, administrative challenges, and productivity concerns**.

Many apprentices do not complete—not due to a lack of motivation, but because the financial and administrative burden of in-class training is too high.

Women and underrepresented groups face additional obstacles, from **a lack of mentorship opportunities to exclusionary workplace cultures**.

If the problem is defined too narrowly as just a labour shortage, solutions may focus only on recruitment while failing to address **the structural barriers that prevent people from entering and staying in the trades**.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Clarifies the real problem

Helps identify all impacted stakeholders

Prevents wasted effort on wrong solutions

Leads to more effective interventions

What is your ideal future state?

Defining an ideal future state provides a **clear direction** for policy and program design. Without a **vision and definition of success**, solutions can become reactive rather than strategic. This question forces decision-makers to think beyond fixing immediate problems and focus on **long-term impact and sustainable change**.

A **well-defined future state** also helps align stakeholders, set the right measurable goals, and build momentum for implementation.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

The goal is not just to increase the number of workers but to create a **sustainable, accessible, and attractive skilled trades ecosystem**.

In an ideal future, there is a steady pipeline of trained tradespeople, with clear and efficient pathways for entering and completing apprenticeships.

Schools actively promote trades careers, and young people see them as valuable, respected professions.

Employers have the resources and incentives to hire and train apprentices without significant financial burden.

Women and underrepresented groups participate in trades at higher rates, supported by mentorship and inclusive workplace cultures.

The entire system—from education to employment—is structured to **remove barriers, improve retention, and create long-term workforce stability**.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Creates a clear vision

Aligns stakeholders

Helps measure progress

Guides decision-making

What is maintaining the problem?

Problems **don't persist by accident**—there are always underlying forces, structures, and behaviours that sustain them. This question helps uncover the policies, practices, and social norms that reinforce the status quo and prevent meaningful change.

By **identifying these forces**, decision-makers can **target root causes** rather than treating symptoms. Without this step, solutions risk being temporary fixes rather than systemic improvements.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

The skilled trades shortage isn't just caused by a lack of interest or awareness—it's reinforced by **institutional barriers, outdated policies, and industry challenges**.

The apprenticeship model requires individuals to secure employment before starting a registered apprenticeship, which creates **a significant entry barrier**.

Employers often struggle with the **costs and logistical challenges** of hiring and training apprentices, leading to **limited job openings for entry level apprentices**.

Schools and career advisors continue to **prioritize university pathways**, making trades **less visible and appealing** to young people.

The challenges of attending in-class training can prevent apprentices from completing, and women and underrepresented groups face **workplace culture challenges** that discourage retention.

These factors **interact and reinforce each other**, making the shortage a persistent issue rather than just a temporary gap in workers.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Reveals hidden barriers

Prevents ineffective solutions

Highlights policy and industry gaps

Leads to long-term change

What is the problem from the perspective of your stakeholders and end-users?

A problem can look very different depending on **who is experiencing it**. Decision-makers, employers, and workers might have very different understandings of the same issue. This question ensures that solutions are **informed by the actual needs and experiences of those affected**, rather than just assumptions. By incorporating stakeholder perspectives, policies and programs become **more practical, effective, and sustainable**.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

Different stakeholders experience the skilled trades shortage in unique ways.

- For **apprentices**, the process of entering a trade is confusing, with unclear guidance on where to start and how to secure an apprenticeship. Many rely on **personal networks** rather than structured pathways, making access uneven.
- For **employers**, hiring new apprentices is costly and time-consuming, with challenges in providing adequate on-the-job training while maintaining productivity.
- For **training providers**, ensuring apprentices complete their programs is difficult when financial pressures force many to drop out.
- For **women and underrepresented groups**, additional barriers—such as lack of mentorship, workplace culture, and unconscious bias—make entering and staying in the trades even harder.

By understanding these perspectives, we can **design solutions that remove obstacles at every level, rather than assuming one-size-fits-all fixes will work**.



It is best practice to directly engage stakeholders and end-users in answering these "13 questions that matter" to gain a full and accurate understanding of their perspective.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Uncovers unexpected barriers

Ensures solutions are user-centered

Increases stakeholder buy-in

Improves long-term success

Revisiting the problem: Is the problem still what you originally thought it was?

As you gather **more information and engage with stakeholders**, your understanding of the problem may evolve. Initial assumptions might be **incomplete or even incorrect**. This question **encourages a structured reassessment to ensure that solutions are targeting the right issues**. Without this step, programs and policies risk addressing symptoms rather than root causes or failing to adapt to new insights.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

At first, the skilled trades shortage might seem like a simple supply-and-demand issue—too few workers to fill jobs. However, after examining the perspectives of stakeholders, systemic barriers become more apparent.

The real challenge isn't just **a lack of interest in trades**, but also **complicated apprenticeship entry processes, employer burdens, financial constraints, and exclusionary workplace cultures for some workers**.

For example, many **prospective apprentices don't know where to start to secure an apprenticeship without previous experience**.

Employers aren't necessarily unwilling to hire apprentices, but **they struggle to train inexperienced first year apprentices**.

Women in trades may not be deterred by the work itself, but rather **by a lack of support systems and workplace inclusion**.

By **revisiting the problem** with deeper insights, the focus shifts from simply recruiting more workers to **fixing the structural issues preventing people from entering and staying in trades careers**.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Strengthens problem accuracy

Prevents wasted resources

Incorporates new insights

Leads to better solutions

What and who in the current state needs to change to advance your future state goal?

Solving a problem isn't just about **identifying what's wrong**—it's about **understanding who has the power to make meaningful changes and what specific shifts need to happen**.

Change rarely occurs in isolation, and most challenges involve multiple stakeholders, policies, and systems. This question **ensures that solutions are realistic, actionable, and targeted at the right areas**, rather than relying on vague aspirations.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

For the skilled trades shortage, several key players must take action to create a sustainable workforce.

- **Employers** need support and incentives to hire and train entry level apprentices, including financial assistance and streamlined administrative processes.
- **Training providers** should develop more flexible programs that align with employer needs and provide direct connection to registered apprenticeships.
- **Governments and policymakers** must streamline apprenticeship pathways, ensuring they are clear, accessible, and designed to encourage participation, clarity and ease of completion.
- **High schools and career advisors** should promote trades careers early with comprehensive information, ensuring young people understand the opportunities available.
- **Unions and industry organizations** can play a role in mentorship, ensuring new apprentices receive guidance and support to gain access to the full scope of the trade and access in-class training.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Targets key change-makers

Creates actionable steps

Encourages systemic thinking

Improves accountability

How might we solve this problem?

Understanding a problem is important, but real progress happens **when solutions are explored creatively and openly**. This question shifts the focus from analysis to **problem-solving, encouraging stakeholders to think beyond limitations**.

Instead of assuming the status quo cannot change, this question asks, “What if anything were possible?”—**helping generate ideas that are both innovative and practical**.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

Addressing the skilled trades shortage requires **policy changes, industry incentives, and cultural shifts**, but solutions depend on **how we frame the problem**.

Rather than seeing apprenticeship pathways as fixed, we might explore **alternative entry points for accessibility**.

Instead of assuming financial incentives alone drive completion, we can consider **what additional support apprentices and employers need**.

Schools and career advisors may rethink **how trades are presented**, shifting perceptions to highlight career growth.

Increasing diversity may require **going beyond recruitment to address structural and cultural barriers**.

Engaging **key stakeholders and end users** provides deeper insight into **needs, possibilities, and reframing challenges**. Exploring solutions openly—without dismissing ideas due to funding or policy constraints—**leads to more effective, practical change**.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Encourages innovation

Removes limiting beliefs

Engages stakeholders in problem-solving

Leads to practical solutions

What are your operational design assumptions?

Every solution is built on assumptions about how things work in practice. If these assumptions are **incomplete or incorrect**, even the best-designed policies or programs can fail.

This question **helps decision-makers identify and test the assumptions underlying their solution**, ensuring it aligns with **real-world conditions**. It provides a clearer understanding of what is truly required to **drive meaningful change on the ground**.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

Several assumptions influence how solutions to the skilled trades shortage are designed.

One common assumption is that **if more young people learn about trades, they will naturally pursue them as a career**.

However, this ignores the **financial barriers, apprenticeship structure, and social perceptions** that still discourage participation.

Another assumption is that **employers will invest in apprenticeship programs if provided financial incentives**, but this depends on whether they have the time, resources, and internal training capabilities to support apprentices.

There may also be an assumption that **increasing mentorship programs will help retain women in trades**, but this only works if the workplace culture is also welcoming and inclusive.

By identifying these assumptions early, **solutions can be adjusted to ensure they align with real behaviours, needs, and constraints**.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Prevents unrealistic solutions

Identifies risks early

Encourages flexibility

Strengthens solution design

What capacity is required to implement your solution?

Even the best-designed solutions can fail if the necessary resources, expertise, and infrastructure aren't in place. This question **ensures that proposed solutions are realistically achievable, considering the people, funding, and systems required for success.**

By **identifying gaps early**, decision-makers can plan for **capacity-building efforts** rather than launching an initiative that lacks the necessary support.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

Solving the skilled trades shortage requires multiple layers of capacity.

- **Employers** need resources to train apprentices effectively, including structured training programs, experienced mentors, and financial support.
- **Educational institutions** must have the capacity and incentive to enroll learners with the capacity to be successful on-the-job, align curriculum further with industry needs and practices, and connect learners directly with registered apprenticeship opportunities.
- **Government agencies** need the ability to implement incentive programs, monitor effectiveness, ensure accountability and reduce administrative burdens.
- **Industry organizations and unions** must provide mentorship and career support to help retain workers and ensure they complete required in-class training and certification.

Without these elements in place, even well-intended policies—such as financial incentives for apprenticeships—could fail if businesses or training institutions **aren't equipped to support apprentices to gain the skills and experience required to complete their certification.**

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Ensures feasibility

Identifies resource gaps

Strengthens planning

Improves long-term sustainability

What is your operational theory of change or recipe?

An **operational theory of change focuses on how actions work in practice to drive outcomes**. Without clear steps, a policy or program can become ineffective or hard to measure.

This question **helps map what must change on the ground**, including behaviours and processes that enable success. Understanding what sustains the current state reveals key operational shifts needed for better results. A strong framework ensures efforts are logical, measurable, and practical.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

To address the skilled trades shortage, a clear theory of change is needed.

For example, the desired outcome is a **steady, diverse, and well-trained pipeline of skilled workers**.

To achieve this, several key steps must occur: **increasing awareness of trade careers among young people, simplifying apprenticeship entry requirements, ensuring training programs connect learners directly with registered apprenticeships, removing financial and administrative burdens for apprentices and employers, and improving workplace conditions for retention**.

If these steps are followed, the assumption is that **more individuals will enter and complete apprenticeships, employers will be more willing to hire and train new workers, and the industry will have a sustainable labour force**.

Without a well-structured theory of change, efforts may focus on only one aspect of the problem, such as recruitment, while failing to address structural issues like retention and employer engagement.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Clarifies the path to success

Ensures logical decision-making

Identifies structural barriers

Improves accountability

Do you want innovation?

Be clear on the rules and expectations.

Innovation can drive better solutions, but it **needs structure to be effective**. Without clear expectations, teams may either play it too safe or introduce ideas that don't align with strategic goals.

This question forces decision-makers to **define what kind of innovation is encouraged, where risks are acceptable, and what success looks like**. It ensures that **creativity is balanced with feasibility** and that **innovation efforts contribute to real impact** rather than unnecessary complexity.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

Innovation can help solve the skilled trades shortage, but it requires **a culture of experimentation, learning, and tolerance for failure**.

Traditional systems focus on compliance and meeting minimum expectations, which can **disincentivize bold approaches**.

Instead, decision-makers must **trust, reward, and encourage partners** to test new solutions and adapt based on real-world insights.

Enabling innovation means being **clear on the goal but flexible on the how**. A **structured operational theory of change** can define key parameters while leaving room for experimentation.

Without this balance, rigid policies and narrow KPIs may **stifle creativity**.

Shifting the system to embrace **new approaches, risk-taking, and continuous learning** is essential for long-term, sustainable workforce solutions.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Encourages useful innovation

Prevents wasted resources

Sets clear boundaries

Aligns innovation with strategy

What do you want to learn from implementation?

A well-designed program or policy isn't just about execution—it's an **opportunity to learn what drives real change and refine strategies**.

This question **ensures decision-makers gather data, measure impact, and adapt based on real-world insights**. Tied to the operational theory of change, it **helps identify what enables change on the ground and captures new approaches that can be scaled for future success**.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

Implementing solutions to the skilled trades shortage presents an opportunity to **gather valuable data on what works and what doesn't**.

For example, if financial incentives are introduced for employers hiring apprentices, it's important to track **whether this actually increases the number of entry level apprenticeships created** or if other barriers—like employer's capacity to hire apprentices without experience—still limit opportunities.

If schools start promoting trades careers earlier, measuring **whether enrollment increases and how many students complete their apprenticeships** provides insight into program effectiveness.

Similarly, if mentorship programs for women in trades are launched, tracking **whether these initiatives improve retention and job satisfaction** can guide future improvements.

Defining these learning objectives in advance ensures that the program **remains adaptable and data-driven**, rather than static and reactive.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Encourages continuous improvement

Prevents repeating mistakes

Strengthens decision-making

Maximizes impact

How will your program or policy enable continuous improvement?

Even the best-designed programs and policies will need adjustments over time. This question **ensures that there are systems in place to track progress, gather feedback, and make necessary improvements**. Without mechanisms for **continuous learning and adaptation**, programs risk becoming outdated, ineffective, or misaligned with evolving challenges. A **well-structured framework** should be **flexible, data-driven, and responsive to real-world outcomes**.



Applying This Question to the Skilled Trades Shortage

To address the skilled trades shortage in a **sustainable and scalable way**, solutions must evolve through **real-time feedback loops** that foster continuous improvement.

If apprenticeship enrollment increases but completion rates remain low, **financial support or mentorship structures** may need adjustment. If employer incentives drive hiring but **training quality declines**, stronger oversight and support should be introduced.

A robust framework includes **regular data collection, stakeholder feedback, and built-in mechanisms for ongoing policy adjustments**.

This could involve **annual program reviews, employer and apprentice surveys, and workforce performance metrics**.

A well-designed **continuous improvement system provides accountability to end-users and stakeholders**, ensuring programs evolve based on real-world insights rather than requiring **radical redesigns every decade** to remain relevant and effective.

Key Benefits of Asking This Question

Ensures long-term success

Encourages adaptability

Strengthens accountability

Promotes data-driven decision-making

Conclusion: Built for Success on the Ground

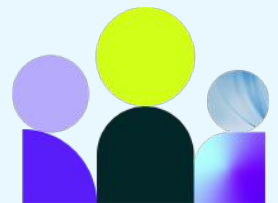
Designing an effective program or policy isn't just about having a solution—it's about **asking the right questions to ensure that solution is strategic, targeted, and built for long-term success on the ground.**

These **13 questions** serve as a **framework for deeper thinking, helping decision-makers move beyond surface-level fixes to address root causes, systemic barriers, and real stakeholder needs.** By applying this structured approach, solutions become more actionable, adaptable, and impactful. Whether tackling workforce shortages, improving public services, or driving social change, these questions ensure that efforts align with reality, engage the right stakeholders, and evolve over time.

The best programs aren't just well-designed—they are **continuously improved, shaped by data, and focused on meaningful results.** The power of asking the right questions isn't just about problem-solving; it's about **building solutions that last.**

We'd love to hear your insights! Share your feedback at **feedback@opus.group** and let us know what you think about these questions and their impact on effective problem-solving.

Book a consultation with us to explore how we can help refine and execute your strategy. **[Visit our website](#)** to schedule your session today.



About the Authors & Team

This book was created by a team of experts dedicated to turning **insights into execution.** With expertise in social impact strategy, solution design, and policy, they provide practical frameworks for real-world impact.

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Execution is the **Difference**— Let's Make It Happen

Asking the right questions leads to the right execution and continuous improvement.

Contact us today to turn insights into action and create solutions that last.

[Get in Touch](#)

