

PSYCHOLOGY

What Edison's Trick Questions Tell Him

By MARJORIE VAN DE WATER

WHEN Edison made his latest invention, that puzzling question that he first tried on his 49 brightest boy candidates for coveted Edison scholarships, he was really bent on testing character.

Here is the way the question ran:

"You are the head of an expedition which has come to grief in the desert. There is enough food and water left to enable three people to get to the nearest outpost of civilization. The rest must perish. Your companions are—

1. A brilliant scientist 60 years old.
2. Two half-breed guides, ages 58 and 32.
3. The scientist's wife—interested mainly in society matters—age 39.
4. Her little son, age 6.
5. The girl you are engaged to marry.
6. Your best friend, a young man of your own age who has shown great promise in the field of science.
7. Yourself.

"Which would you choose to live and which to die? Give your reasons."

Psychologists agree that there is no one best answer to such a test query. Probably no two of them would answer alike.

But to score 100 per cent. the question must receive a definite answer. The important thing is to answer the problem and be able to defend your answer. Such a response as: "We'd all get rescued in time" or "I don't know" would score a big, fat zero. In other words, Edison's boy genius must be able to make up his mind. He must also display some ingenuity.

One of the questions in the Edison test last year was of the same sort. How would you answer this one:

"If you were to inherit \$1,000,000 within the next year, what would you do with it?"

Probably there are as many correct answers to that question as there are dollars mentioned. But any answer given would probably satisfy the mind of the wizard—can the boy make a plan without taking a week to think it over?

Questions With Many Answers

Here are some more of the same kind:

"What new discovery or invention do you believe would be the greatest benefit to mankind? Why?"

"What, in your opinion, should be done to improve the airplane?"

Ever since psychological tests were used so successfully to sort out the

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drafted personnel of the army in the World War, psychologists have been working trying to work out some means of testing character. Mental tests are being used in all the big industries today. Executives find that it is much better to give an applicant for a job a test than it is to ask his friends whether he is a bright boy.

But for most jobs it is not enough that the boy be bright. He must be honest; he must have backbone; he must be able and willing to stick to a job; he must be able to get on with his fellow workers and his foreman or chief.

Can such things be measured? Psychologists say yes, although they admit that the way has not been perfected so far. Perhaps Edison's test questions are a long step in the right direction. Only time, and the final success or failure of his scholarship winners will prove that to the satisfaction of cold science.

Other steps have been taken by psychologists and are now being tried out in laboratories on all sorts of people, good and bad. Some are giving excellent results; some not so good.

The following questions, for example, are not at all what they seem to be—but suppose you try them first; get some friend to take them, but don't tell him about the joker between the lines. It is only necessary to underline the answer to each question.

- | | | |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. Are you ever rude to members of your family? | Yes | No |
| 2. Are you always on time for your appointments? | Yes | No |
| 3. Are you broad-minded? | Yes | No |
| 4. Have you ever laughed at | | |

another person's misfortune, however slight?

Yes No

5. If a ticket agent gave you ten cents too much change, would you miss a train to return it?

Yes No

6. If a telephone operator gave you the number, and then returned your nickel by mistake, would you drop it back in the box?

Yes No

7. Do you always pick up papers you see strewn carelessly in the street?

Yes No

8. If you like classical music on the radio and your wife, or husband, likes jazz, do you always play the jazz?

Yes No

9. Do you always pay for personal calls you make on the office telephone?

Yes No

10. Do you always return borrowed books within two weeks?

Yes No

Test Character of Children

Questions like these are being used by psychologists to test the character of children, but not to find out whether they would actually do these things. If all the questions were answered "yes" with the exception of numbers 1 and 4, then the child would be judged "a pious fraud." It is seldom, indeed, that we find such perfection.

Here is another test where the "nigger in the woodpile" is more carefully hidden.

Read the following list of books and authors carefully and indicate which books you have read. Be sure to include only those you have actually read, not those you have merely heard discussed.

- | | | |
|---|-----|----|
| 1. Charles Dickens— <i>Oliver Twist</i> | Yes | No |
| 2. Ernest Hemingway— <i>Farewell to Arms</i> | Yes | No |
| 3. Rev. Arthur Stowe— <i>Tree of Life</i> | Yes | No |
| 4. Mrs. Gaskell— <i>Cranford</i> | Yes | No |
| 5. Clyde Wilton— <i>Romance of Architecture</i> | Yes | No |
| 6. E. M. Hull— <i>The Shiek</i> | Yes | No |
| 7. Norman Douglas— <i>South Wind</i> | Yes | No |
| 8. Robert Stevens— <i>The Usurper</i> | Yes | No |
| 9. Lt. Percival Ogden— <i>Espionage</i> | Yes | No |
| 10. Leo Tolstoi— <i>Anna Karenina</i> | Yes | No |

Perhaps you feel discouraged because you have had to put "no" after so many titles. Don't worry! It works the other way. The person who answers "yes" to too many has given himself away as one with extraordinarily poor memory or as a deliberate deceiver, because many of the titles belong to no books that have

Is it worth your while to direct the fate of a mythical stranded expedition?



ever been written. Of course you have never read them! Numbers 3, 5, 8 and 9 are the false titles.

And here is another way that is used to catch the fellow who will cheat if given a chance. An ordinary examination is given. The subject does not matter. Perhaps it may be spelling. Then the papers are collected and another test is given.

Then, without the knowledge of the people taking the examination, the answers of each one are copied off by the examiner. Later on the papers are returned to the individuals with a list of correct answers and the request that they score their own papers. The examiner leaves the room, and plenty of opportunity is given to erase answers and change them so as to increase the score.

The conscientious boy will, of course, leave his answers just as they were first handed in—right or wrong, but some boys will take a surprising amount of trouble in erasing even ink, especially if a prize is at stake.

Persistence Definitely Measured

Persistence is another quality that psychologists have found definite means for measuring. In fact, this is much more easily tested than honesty. Just give a person a particularly long and tedious task like the copying of a large table of figures or copying longhand the names in a telephone book. Time him, and see whether he keeps up an even rate, or whether he soon slows down and begins to look out of the window.

He may even give it up after a short time.

Some psychologists believe that the chief value of the crossword puzzle is as a test of persistence. Really, any sort of intricate puzzle, either mechanical or mental, is excellent for this purpose.

Here is one that has been used:

"Four boys arrived at a river and found a boat that would carry just 200 pounds but no more. None of them knew how to swim, so they had to manage to cross in a boat. Tom weighed 200; Jim weighed 200; Bill weighed 100 and Dick weighed 100. How did they get across?"

Yes, there is a way of working it out, but as a matter of fact it would serve the purpose just as well if there were no answer, just so that fact was not obvious.

Mechanical puzzles, such as the familiar wire ring to be separated from the larger triangle, or the irregular blocks of wood to be fitted into a seemingly impossible design, which may be found in the Japanese, magic or souvenir store, serve a double purpose of testing both persistence and mechanical ingenuity.

If your boy will work at one of these little tricks by the hour until he has solved the problem, you can be sure that he has one of the traits that Edison regards as most important to business success—the "will to work."

Another type of persistence is the ability to concentrate on a task in the face of various distractions, whether of an annoying or amusing character. This is a trait that is very necessary in business. The person who can work only when alone and undisturbed and uninterrupted will find success a difficult matter, for such ideal conditions simply do not exist for the most part.

Testing Distractibility

Here are several ways in which this trait may be tested. The first is to give a routine test of any kind; arithmetic is a good subject. For ten minutes you are allowed to work quietly.

All at once a dog or a mouse is let loose in the room. Or someone comes in and starts to read loud. Can you keep your mind on your work and make a good score in the second ten minutes? Psychologists have discovered that most people are more easily distracted by something which frightens or startles them than by anything which merely annoys, angers or embarrasses them.

A simpler way of measuring the same trait of distractibility is to see how well people can keep at a routine task like the adding of figures, while an interesting puzzle picture is kept in tantalizing fashion before their eyes.

Many people are very easily distracted. It is because of this weakness of human nature that advertisers can afford to pay the thousands of dollars charged for space in our popular magazines. The reader's eye will stray from even the most interesting story to the gay-colored picture on the facing page.