



The Question That Will Change Your Organization

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by Polly LaBarre | **Comments (32)**

Some fifteen years ago, in the early days of starting up *Fast Company* magazine, co-founder Alan Webber shared one of his rules of thumb with me: "A good question beats a good answer." That pithy wisdom sunk in and took hold immediately.

The first thing you notice when you have your ears pricked for questions is that most people (especially businesspeople) are more interested in presenting solutions, making assertions, and sharing their vision. This isn't surprising. School programs us to focus on producing the right answer, and the job description of a leader for the last century has basically been "the person with all the answers."

That's why it's so refreshing (and instructive) to spend time with people who lead with questions rather than answers. Why? Why does inquiry beat certainty every time? Here are just three reasons:

1. Questions are a powerful antidote to hubris, which inevitably arises in a culture that celebrates mastery, values decisiveness, and reveres the top guy (or gal). Genuine questions unleash humility, curiosity, even vulnerability. That turns out to be a powerful approach to leadership in a world of expanding complexity, immense challenges and intense change. No single individual can possibly have all of the answers. But an open and curious one can attract more perspectives, surface more possibilities, and enlist more help than one closed off by certitude.

As Vineet Nayar, CEO of the \$3.5 billion global IT services firm, HCL Technologies, puts it: "The CEO should be the Chief Question Asker, not the final provider of answers." He keeps a list of twenty questions (<http://www.managementexchange.com/blog/twenty-questions-i-ask-myself-every-day>) and makes time to think about them on a regular (almost daily) basis. He's asking for trouble when he wonders:

- Should people who create value be governed by people who control it?
- What things do I control that I should not control?
- Could we throw out the entire company rulebook?
- Would my children (or my employees' children) want to work in a company like mine?
- What would happen if there was no CEO at my company (or at any company in the world)?

He professes not to have the answers, but one thing is certain: the more disruptive the questions, the greater the chance his organization will create the future — rather than be conquered by it.

2. The best questions are the bedrock of all change and creativity.

Those classics — Why? Why not? What if? — invite possibility rather than doubt. They are fundamentally subversive, disruptive, and playful — and they switch people into the mode required to invent anything new. Even better, anyone can ask these questions (anyone who has ever spent time in the company of a three-year-old understands this). You don't have to hold a position of authority to ask a powerful question, and the people with the most powerful questions stand to make the most impact.

That was certainly true for Jane Harper, who spent a nearly 30-year career at IBM asking the kinds of questions most people don't want to touch. In 1999, she dared to ask: "Why would really great people — the best technical and

managerial talent in the world — want to come work at IBM?" In an era when every young, gifted programmer, engineer, or entrepreneur's first instinct was to write their own business plan or head to a fast-growing startup, life as a foot soldier in Big Blue's global army was a pretty hard sell. Harper understood that great people want to work on exciting, high-impact projects, with a small team, in a dynamic setting. So she created exactly that in a Cambridge, Massachusetts lab and launched a wholly original and powerfully effective internship program called Extreme Blue (<http://www-01.ibm.com/employment/us/extremeblue/>), which has since grown into a thriving platform for innovation and talent development.

3. Asking good questions trades control for contribution. A question asked and explored as a group (whether that group is a team, a company, or a community) generates more solidarity, engagement, and progress than a proclamation from on high. Spend any amount of time with Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh, whose organization is celebrated for exuding a powerful sense of purpose and passion from every corner, and you'll hear him repeatedly refer to "the questions we ask ourselves."

Questions create conversations — and those conversations are how thriving groups think up their future together and stay true to their core. One enduring and powerful question at the heart of Zappos is: "How do we sustain this culture as we grow? How do we stay true to the core and inspire ever more creativity and energy to tackle the future?" That question is actively explored across the organization and even results in a book — the annual *Culture Book* (<http://www.zapposinsights.com/culture-book>) — which features the "true feelings, thoughts, and opinions of the employees," who view themselves as vital custodians of that culture.

Of course, there is no *one* right question, but one of the most productive questions when it comes to engendering a deeply-felt sense of purpose and inspiring the kind of passion that fuels organizations to do extraordinary things is: "What ideas are we fighting for? What do we stand for (and what are we against)? Why does what we do matter?"

The inevitable corollary to that question is: "Are you really who you say you are?" Unless you're willing to hold a brutally honest and transparent conversation (both inside the organization and beyond) about where you're living up to your ideas and ideals and where you're falling down, those values will become meaningless words on the wall.

What's your question? Share it here and join the Beyond Bureaucracy Challenge (<http://www.managementexchange.com/m-prize/beyond-bureaucracy-challenge-creating-inspired-open-free-organizations>) to share your stories, ideas, and practices about what it takes to make our organizations more inspiring, open and free.

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