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Questions Are the Answer

A Breakthrough Approach to Your Most Vexing Problems at Work and in Life

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Social Skills / Asking Questions

Innovation / Creativity / Group Creativity

Take-Aways

- To get the best answers, ask the best questions.
- People can learn to become better questioners.
- The best questions are catalytic. They blow up barriers like false assumptions and spark productive thinking.
- Instead of brainstorming for the best answers, try brainstorming for the best questions.
- You can't learn if you're talking. Ask your questions, and then be quiet.
- The more significant your questions are, the more influence they will have.
- Back up your big questions with bigger actions.
- People need to ask "keystone questions."
- If you're wrong, be willing to keep looking for the best answers.

Recommendation

Asking the best questions can spark innovation and invention. The problem is that society doesn't value probing questions or questioners. Schools, for example, often smother children's instincts to ask about things. MIT professor and leadership scholar Hal Gregersen offers strong opinions on the need for great questions and explains why unfettered questioning is essential to human progress. He explains what constitutes a quality query and details how to pursue good answers. Gregersen's comprehensive overview on the value of always asking will boost inquisitive thinkers everywhere.

Summary

To get the best answers, ask the best questions.

If you want the most useful answers, try to ask the most useful questions. Asking sharp questions isn't a passive exercise. You can't merely hope the best questions will magically occur to you. Take active steps to create promising conditions for the best questions to emerge, plan what you will ask and then elicit the best answers.

People can learn to become better questioners.

People who know how to ask great questions aren't "born different"; they simply practice their questioning skills more often. But anyone can learn to become a better questioner. To ask better questions, adopt the perspective of childhood, a time when curiosity is natural and doesn't arouse suspicion. Great questioners are like kids in that regard. They have a "beginner's mind."

"Anyone who has spent much time around kids knows that humans start out full of questions and are uninhibited about asking them."

The idea of skilled questioning connotes creativity and innovative thinking. Innovators exhibit a "high Q/A ratio" that reveals itself in the number of questions they ask compared to the number of answers they give in transcribed interviews. The right questions help people develop insights and solutions to the problems they confront. Often, the right question can lead to significant breakthroughs and higher levels of cognition. Great questions help people think in a more innovative way. Without the right questions, you can hope to achieve only "incremental progress." Asking the right question often involves reframing an older or more conventional question.

When Albert Einstein questioned the general concept of time, he went on to create his groundbreaking thesis on relativity, even though he was working full-time at a patent office. His search for answers about time led to findings that radically transformed theoretical physics and astronomy.

The best questions are catalytic. They blow up barriers like false assumptions and spark productive thinking.

The best questions are catalysts for new thinking. Great questions avoid consensus thinking and the status quo. As therapist-consultant Marilee Adams explains, “Learning to ask the right question is like cracking the code on change.”

“Questions are places in your mind where answers fit. If you haven’t asked the question, the answer has nowhere to go.” (disruption expert Clayton Christensen)

Researchers argue that questions take two forms. “Convergent” or “closed questions” look for a simple correct response. “What is the average temperature in Hawaii?” is a convergent question. “Divergent” or “open questions” seek multiple answers and promote creative thinking. “How should societies respond to climate change?” is a divergent question.

The story of Kodak exemplifies the power of great questions that lead to great answers. In its earliest days, photography involved extensive equipment and complicated processes. It was strictly for professionals and well-motivated, well-heeled amateurs. Born in 1854, George Eastman was in his mid-20s when he started the photography business that eventually became the Eastman Kodak Company.

As a neophyte entrepreneur, Eastman’s one central question was whether he could make photography less complicated so the average person could enjoy it. He and his associates conducted extensive research to find the answer. As a result, in 1888, Eastman introduced the first relatively easy-to-use Kodak camera. Amateur photographers no longer had to learn a complex process to develop their photographs. Instead, after shooting a full 100-shot roll of film, they could mail their cameras to Eastman Kodak, where specialists processed the film and sent back printed photos.

In 1900, Kodak introduced the \$1 Brownie camera, which was easy enough for a small child to use and tough enough for troops to take into combat. Game changer George Eastman had answered his own question and, in the process, revolutionized photography. Despite the clear value of questions like Eastman’s, adults often don’t question the status quo. This reflects a lesson that many kids learn in school, which often quashed their tendency to be curious and ask questions.

“In the word ‘question,’ there is a beautiful word – ‘quest.’ I love that word.” (Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel)

The modern education system is set up to transmit comprehensive information to students. It isn’t usually set up for students to question such foundational knowledge. As young people enter the workforce or the military, everything becomes further standardized, questions are unwelcome and information is tightly locked down. In society, asking questions often revolves around the display of power more than the quest for innovative thinking. In most give-and-take exchanges, questions have nothing to do with exploring knowledge. To overcome this, you must first recognize the current sad state of questioning. Then ask better questions.

Instead of brainstorming for the best answers, try brainstorming for the best questions.

Conventional brainstorming sessions search for answers to problems. To energize your team and spark creativity, consider brainstorming for the best questions.

“You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions.” (Egyptian writer and Nobel Laureate Naguib Mahfouz)

At Zappos facilities, CEO Tony Hsieh set up “questioning spaces” to spur “creative collisions” among employees. This is in keeping with his imaginative alternative to bureaucracy, which he calls “holacracy.” As he envisions it, holacracy involves unending active relationships among people who are willing to mix it up with their peers. Such an environment nurtures the breakthrough questions that lead to breakthrough answers. Step out of your comfort zone to question things in productive ways that will make you more aware and will likely stimulate productive creative conflict. Spark these catalysts in three ways when your team discusses questions:

1. **Surprise** – Novel experiences stimulate people and help them see things in innovative ways.
2. **Distraction** – Everyone has individual routines that stifle innovation. When you become distracted, a new “problem-solving path” can present itself and open up your thinking.
3. **Conflict** – How you view things isn’t the only way to view them. Jacob W. Getzels and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who wrote about the concept of flow, find that fresh visions, feelings or ideas can spark creativity.

You can’t learn if you’re talking. Ask your questions, and then be quiet.

National Geographic photographer Sam Abell believes that the secret to his success is that he doesn’t take photos; he makes photos. He follows his father’s advice: “Compose and wait, Sammy. Compose... and wait.” This is great advice for people who want to ask effective questions. Never ask questions to force perceptions and insight. Use questions that arise naturally. Ask your question, and then be quiet, so you can hear and understand the answers.

The more significant your questions are, the more influence they will have.

Novelist Herman Melville explained why he wrote *Moby-Dick* by saying, “To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme.” The same principle applies when you develop “mighty questions.” If your question focuses on a major problem, its reverberations can make a difference.

“What makes us human...is an ability to ask questions – a consequence of our sophisticated spoken language.” (English anthropologist Jane Goodall)

Consider the enormous influence of Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which educated the world about the dangers of pesticides. Like many great thinkers, Carson used mighty questions to

spotlight monumental problems. Her questions were catalysts that led to the development of the global environmental movement. With her mighty questions, Carson changed the world.

Back up your big questions with bigger actions.

Private equity professional Rose Marcario was sitting in a limousine stuck in a New York City traffic jam while en route to yet another fundraising meeting. Looking out the limousine window, she saw an obviously mentally ill person wandering around in the middle of the street. She could identify the symptoms quickly, since her mother had suffered from schizophrenia. But this wandering person's troubles meant nothing to Marcario. She had places to go, and the person was delaying her business rounds. Suddenly, Marcario noticed her reflection in the limousine window. She appeared tense, frustrated and irritated, and her mirrored image made an impression on her.

"Moving out of your element transforms you into a more active seeker of input. You become highly receptive, ears perked up, trying to pick up the scent."

Concerned about how she suddenly saw herself, Marcario asked the limousine driver to pull over. She walked to Central Park, in search of its soothing peacefulness. There, she asked herself, "Is this what I've become? Is this what success is?" These two catalytic questions radically changed her life. Marcario quit her prestigious job. She spent time figuring out what she could do with her life to make it more meaningful and how she could help make the world a better place. Marcario became first the CFO and, within five years, the CEO of apparel maker Patagonia – itself an inspirational sustainability champion. She found that talking the talk isn't enough. You must back up your words with actions.

People need to ask "keystone questions."

Ask keystone questions: the motivational questions that people pursue in the quest for self-improvement. Keystone questions will change as your circumstances change. These questions guide people on their life journeys. This type of question motivated Steve Jobs when he looked in the mirror and asked himself, "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" Great questioners are reflective and thoughtful. Asking the right questions is an exercise in humility.

If you're wrong, be willing to keep looking for the best answers.

A willingness to be wrong means you will keep looking for the right answers to the questions you ask. People who think they are always right about everything stopped looking for answers a long time ago. You can't challenge the status quo if you think you're always right. As a noble search, great questions lead to great answers. Spend the necessary time asking the right questions. Espouse the philosophy of asking good questions. Especially promote the value of questioning to young people, since they will fashion the future. Society always needs great questioners to spark innovation. Great questions and great questioners can and do transform the world.

About the Author

MIT Leadership Center executive director **Hal Gregersen**, PhD, is a senior lecturer in leadership and innovation at the MIT Sloan School of Management. He has authored or co-authored 10 books, including the best-selling *The Innovator's DNA*.



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