

## CHAPTER 4

## Questioning in Business

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### Why do smart businesspeople screw up?

Clayton Christensen is today considered one of the foremost experts on business innovation. A veteran professor at the Harvard Business School, Christensen introduced the term *disruptive innovation* into the business lexicon two decades ago, and it has become both a cliché and a driving force in business ever since. His ideas

have been embraced by the likes of Intel leader Andy Grove and Apple cofounder Steve Jobs.

But back in the late 1990s, Christensen was a relatively unknown professor with a question he couldn't shake—a *Why* question that sprang from a phenomenon that was happening more and more in business and didn't make sense to Christensen. He saw that a number of successful, market-leading companies in the tech sector and other industries were getting blindsided by newcomers offering products or services that may not have been as good, but were simpler, more convenient, and more affordable. Even more puzzling, the companies suffering these sudden reversals of fortune seemed to be doing all the right things: serving their customers better, improving their products, increasing their profit margins. "They were doing exactly what they were taught in business school," Christensen says.

Christensen wondered, in particular, why the established business leaders weren't able to respond to these challenges. "For me, it always starts with a question," Christensen told me. "I knew the failure could not be attributed to managers' being stupid. So I framed the question as *Why are the smartest people in the world having this problem?* Just thinking of it that way made me look in different places."

What Christensen discovered was that while most of the companies getting in trouble were focused on innovation that aimed to make good products even better, the real potential for breakthrough innovation was at the low end of the market—this was true in business offerings that ranged from disk drives to automobiles. In an increasingly technical marketplace, if you could take a product that was expensive, complex, and exclusive and make it affordable and accessible, you could open up a mass market and change the game—toppling the established leaders. But why were only the newcomers seizing this opportunity? Why weren't the established leaders, with all their know-how and resources, able to dominate the low end of the market as well as the high end?

Christensen came to see this as a dilemma: To pursue disruptive innovation at the low end, companies would have to move away

from all they had worked so hard to build. As Christensen puts it, they faced this deceptively tricky question: *Should we make better products that we can sell for higher profits to our best customers—or make worse products that none of our customers would buy, and that would ruin our margins?*

If you were a smart business leader, you naturally opted for the former. And in making that seemingly logical choice, you sealed your company's fate.

After Christensen published his theory in the bestselling book *The Innovator's Dilemma*, the idea of focusing on "disruptive innovation" at the low end of markets became standard business practice, particularly in Silicon Valley, where Christensen's book was, for a time, a kind of innovator's bible. While it's a testament to Christensen's keen questioning ability that he was able to find and pursue the *Whys* and *What Ifs* that led to his discovery, nevertheless one can't help wondering:

*Why didn't others—particularly the smart people running those companies he studied—see the "innovator's dilemma" themselves?*

*Why did it take a business professor to point out what was going on in their businesses, their industries, under their own noses? Why weren't they asking the questions Christensen was asking?*

CHRISTENSEN HAS A theory on this, as well: They hadn't been trained to question. In business school these future chief executives were armed with management theory that was perfectly serviceable and sensible—up to the point at which the world changed and the old theory failed. When that point was reached, most leaders weren't able to step back and ask:

*Why isn't this working anymore?*

*What if the business market is now upside-down—and the bottom has risen to the top? And if that's the case . . .*

*How should my business respond to this new reality? How do we rewrite the old theories?*

Today, while market conditions and challenges have become even more complex, uncertain, and subject to radical disruption across industries, Christensen feels that business leaders, for the

most part, still aren't asking enough questions, and especially the right kinds of questions.

Keith Yamashita, a longtime consultant to top companies such as IBM and Coca-Cola, observes that in the business world at large "we're coming off a twenty-five-year post-1980s period of efficiency, efficiency, efficiency. I think the unintended consequence of that entire efficiency era is that people diminished their questions to very small-minded ones. In this quest for incremental improvement, it became all about asking, *How can we save a little bit of money, make it a little more efficient, where can we cut costs?*"

But Yamashita says the era of "small-minded questions" is ending. "Company leaders are realizing that if they're only asking the small questions, it's not going to advance their agenda, their position, or their brands. In order to innovate now, they have to ask more expansive questions."

What Yamashita is talking about is an evolution in business questions themselves. The old, closed questions (*How many? How much? How fast?*) still matter on a practical level, but increasingly businesses must tackle more sophisticated open questions (*Why? What if? How?*) to thrive in an environment that demands a clearer sense of purpose, a vision for the future, and an appetite for change.

This affects new companies as much as the established ones. Start-ups have always had to ask tough questions about their reason for being (*Why does the world need another company? Why should anyone care about us? How in the world are we going to break through?*), and that's truer than ever in a market now crowded with newcomers.

But established companies in old-line industries may need questioning even more. Many are dealing with new threats and volatile changes that are suddenly calling into question why they're needed, what they do, and how they do it. Small wonder, then, that for top business consultants such as Dev Parraik of Jump Associates "questioning is now the number one thing I spend my time on with clients."

IT'S NOT EASY to bring questioning to companies; most of them weren't built for it. American businesses in particular, and many major post-World War II European companies, "were designed on a military model that came out of the war, built by people who'd been through that war, and the businesses were organized around that mind-set," Parraik says. Central to that was the idea of a formal hierarchy and chain of command that didn't leave much room for calling into question the accepted practices and procedures.

That old model doesn't lend itself particularly well to a business market that favors speed, flexibility, and collaborative inquiry. But changing that established business model—specifically, to allow for more questioning—requires difficult shifts in ingrained policies and approaches. For example, Eric Ries, the pioneer of the Lean Startup movement, which teaches entrepreneurs and other companies how to adopt more agile, flexible approaches, points out that an incentive system has been built through the years to encourage answers, not questions. "The industrial economy was all about knowing the answer and expressing confidence," Ries said. "If you did your homework, you were supposed to *know*. If you had unanswered questions, that meant you did a bad job and wouldn't get rewarded."

Another challenge is that while rapid change makes it necessary for businesses to question more, it also causes businesspeople to feel as if they don't have time to question what they're doing. Tony Wagner, the Harvard education expert who has studied the role of questioning in business, notes, "The pressure on short-term results tends to drive questioning out of the equation."

For those inclined to question, the difficulty may be in knowing what to ask. "With all the uncertainty out there," Parraik says, "organizations don't even know what they don't know." Figuring out the questions that are most critical for a particular company to consider, given current challenges and market conditions, may be the first order of business. While the key questions vary depending on the individual business, a good place to start is at the most fundamental level—with questions of purpose.

## Why are we in business? (And by the way—what business are we really in?)

Almost every company would acknowledge that it is in business to make money so that it can *stay* in business. But most companies, if you trace their origins, were started for more complex reasons than that. Many of the companies featured in this book—Patagonia, W. L. Gore, Nike, Airbnb, Panera, Netflix—started out on a quest to fill an unmet need, to make some aspect of our lives a bit easier, more convenient, more enjoyable. Most good companies are born trying to answer a question and solve a problem, which provides an early sense of purpose.

But that motivating principle gets buried over time. Asking Why questions can help to unearth it. (And if, after being dug up, that sense of purpose needs to be revitalized, freshened up, and made relevant again, questioning can help with that, too.)

There are different ways of thinking about purpose. A furniture retailer might choose to think its purpose is to sell people furniture. But it could also approach the business in a very different way: Its higher purpose might be that the company brings a sense of style into the lives of those on a budget; or that it enables people to express their creativity through home furnishings. Getting this right is subtle; advertising sometimes attaches generic or artificial purposes to companies. But if the leaders of a company think hard enough, and question well enough, about where the company came from, what it does best, and whom it serves, they will often uncover a more meaningful and authentic purpose in the company's origins.

Yamashita uses a set of questions when he works with companies to try to identify purpose. One of the main ones is fairly straightforward, if a bit grand:

*What is our company's purpose on this earth?*

Yamashita acknowledges that this may sound high-minded for a company. But the new business environment increasingly demands that companies think in terms that go beyond mundane corporate concerns. To arrive at a powerful sense of purpose,

Yamashita says, companies today need “a fundamental orientation that is outward looking”—so they can understand what people out there in the world desire and need, and what’s standing in the way. At the same time, business leaders also must look inward, to clarify their core values and larger ambitions.

To figure out the internal values, Yamashita urges company leaders to look back in time and consider this question:

*Who have we (as a company) historically been when we've been at our best?*

At the finest moments in a company's history, Yamashita holds, its core values usually came shining through. But from time to time it may be necessary to revisit that past to reaffirm the company's higher purpose.

Casey Sheahan, the CEO of the outdoor-apparel company Patagonia, admits that even a company such as his—with a strong, well-defined mission that is tied to encouraging outdoor activity and protecting the environment—has to revisit questions about purpose and mission regularly. “There is great tension every day in the company between being successful in terms of growth, and what this means in terms of our environmental impact.” The bigger Patagonia gets, the more challenging this becomes. Sheahan grapples constantly with the question *How can we minimize the environmental impact of the tremendous carbon footprint of operating a \$70 million business?*

What helps guide the company at all times, he said, is the knowledge of how it began. “When the company was started by the founders, it was basically about protecting what they loved, nature, and trying expand the sphere of influence in order to inspire others.”

Not only is that the reason Patagonia exists—it's also the reason people come to work there, to this day. “It's why they're going up the stairs two steps at a time to get to their jobs,” Sheahan says. The company has enjoyed strong financial growth in recent years, but that's not the Why factor for most people working there. When Sheahan talks about financial results, there is mild interest: “but when I say something like, ‘By the way, we're sending fifty people

down to the Gulf to help with the cleanup efforts down there—suddenly people are on their feet cheering. *That's why they're here.*"

Not every company has a clear environmental mission like Patagonia's, but Sheahan maintains, "For any organization, it is galvanizing to have a strong purpose and values, no matter what they might be." A good way to surface that is by looking back to when the business was founded and asking, *What was that higher purpose at the outset? And how can we rally people around that today?*

At the same time, as Yamashita points out, it's just as important to look forward when asking big questions about purpose. He urges clients to work on *Whom must we fearlessly become?* That can be a difficult challenge, he says, because it requires "envisioning a version of the company that does not exist yet."

PURPOSE QUESTIONS ARE important because if you can answer them, that frees up company leaders to pursue all kinds of far-reaching opportunities and questions, knowing all the while that they are on firm footing. "Producers come and go, leaders come and go, trends come and go," says Yamashita, "but through all of that, you need to know the answer to the question *What is true about us, at our core?*"

Knowing that answer becomes especially critical when a company finds itself in the midst of dramatic change. The digital revolution has forced many companies to rebuild and rethink, sometimes pushing them into unfamiliar territory. A company that has figured out the basic questions of identity and purpose is in a better position to handle unsettling new questions such as *What business are we in now?*

Nike provides an instructive example of how a company can continually adapt through constant questioning of its most basic approaches. The company tends to guard its secrets closely, but a few years ago I had an opportunity to talk to a design researcher who'd done some work with Nike and got an up-close look at how it ventures out into the ball fields, courts, and running tracks with athletes (both pros and the weekend jocks) to study their movements and to detect their needs.

About a decade ago, Nike's researchers observed a profound change that digital technology was having on athletes such as runners. The many more ways to measure, improve, and enrich the running experience also created complications. Runners were fumbling with various gadgets—stopwatches, heart monitors, music players—as they ran. Nike went into classic *Why mode (Why does this problem exist? Why hasn't anyone addressed it?).* Then, in considering *What* if possibilities, the idea emerged of creating a hybrid, networked tool, somehow connected to a Nike running shoe, that could encompass many of the new needs a runner has: from measuring distances, to charting progress, to getting pumped up by music, to connecting with other runners. In effect, Nike was proposing:

*What if a running shoe could run your life?*

Are we really who we say we are?

But getting to the *How* of this was another matter: Nike was a sneaker company, not a digital-device maker. The company figured that the only way to pull off something as audacious as this was through a partnership with a tech company. Striking a collaborative deal with Steve Jobs and Apple wasn't easy. (According to a press report, Jobs initially berated Nike chief executive Mark Parker for trying to expand into digital: *stick to the sneakers* was Jobs's message, with a profanity or two thrown in.) But eventually, Nike won over Jobs and produced a hybrid product, Nike+, which wirelessly connected a Nike running shoe to an Apple iPod device, which was in turn connected to a website. A classic "smart recombination," it enabled the runner to program music, track running and

*The Sopranos.*

health data, communicate with other runners, find running partners, share tips, and so forth.

But it did something more important for Nike—it helped them begin to think outside the shoebox. Nike now has a line of digital products, including its highly successful FuelBand wrist tracker. It is gradually becoming a digital company as much as it is a shoe company. So if you ask, *What business is Nike really in?*, the answer is constantly changing—though it's grounded in the core purpose of serving an athlete's lifestyle needs, in whatever form they might take.

Nike isn't the only company going through these kinds of core changes of late. A recent article in *Fast Company* pointed out that a number of today's leading companies—Nike, Apple, Netflix—have increasingly been finding success by moving outside their primary area of expertise. The article, with the provocative headline “Death to Core Competency,” suggests that whatever a company's specialty product or service might be—whatever got you to where you are today—might *not* be the thing that gets you to the next level. Even newer companies must make these kinds of major shifts: In 2008, Facebook—having already achieved remarkable early growth in terms of attracting nearly 100 million users—brought in a new executive, Sheryl Sandberg, who reportedly posed a fundamental question to the company's leaders and employees: *What business was Facebook in?* With all of its rapid subscriber growth, the company had yet to settle on a model for making money. Sandberg's question prompted internal debate—and resulted in a new strategy that was much more advertising-focused.

It's a sobering realization for many businesses: They can't rest on what they've already done, or what they know. The need to bring a “beginner's mind” to business may make it necessary to—if only temporarily—set aside all history, and all notions of what has worked in the past, in order to ask questions from a fresh perspective.

### What if our company didn't exist?

Early in its history, the microprocessor company Intel found itself facing a difficult decision. The company had started out making computer memory chips, and its success with that product established Intel. But as the memory-chip business began to slow down, Intel's cofounders, Andrew Grove and Gordon Moore, had to decide whether to shift the company's focus into more promising areas. Yet they were torn: Chips were central to their identity—and Intel wouldn't have gotten to where it was without them.

Then Grove posed an interesting question to his partner:

*If we were kicked out of the company, what do you think the new CEO would do?*

Grove and Moore reasoned that a new leader would feel no emotional attachment to the declining memory-chip business and would probably leave it behind. So they did likewise, shifting Intel's focus to microprocessors—which set the stage for remarkable growth in the years to follow.

When companies are facing disruptive change (and these days, what company isn't?), old habits and traditions can sometimes get in the way of progress. One of the things hypothetical What If questioning can do is remove those constraints, if only briefly, to allow for more fresh thinking.

You could ask, as Grove and Moore did, *What if different leaders were brought in?*, but Clay Christensen suggests a bolder version of this question: *What if the company didn't exist?* That question allows you to take a clean-slate approach in thinking about the industry and your place in it. Christensen points out that thinking about your company as if there were no history enables leaders to stop focusing on preexisting beliefs and structures—“the stuff they've already invested in”—and consider new possibilities. That's particularly useful “if, at any point in the future, you see the possibility that the core business might slow down,” Christensen says. (While contemplating a world in which your company did not exist, another question worth considering is *Who would miss us?* The

answer to that can help clarify who your most important customers are and what your real purpose is.)

It's not easy for a company to move away from what it has done in the past. The consultant Jack Bergstrand of Brand Velocity thinks one of the most important questions companies should ask regularly is *What should we stop doing?* Company leaders naturally tend to focus on what they should *start* doing. Bergstrand notes that coming to terms with what you're willing to eliminate is always harder. Yet if you can't answer that question, he maintains, "it lessens your chances of being successful at what you want to do next—because you'll be sucking up resources doing what's no longer needed and taking those resources away from what should be a top priority." Moreover, if you can't figure out what you should stop doing, it might be an early warning sign that you don't know what your strategy is.

Bergstrand explains that it's difficult for most companies to stop doing things—especially putting an end to programs or products that were once successful—because "we don't like to kill our babies." In addition, corporate politics can get in the way; individuals or groups within a company are naturally inclined to protect their own projects. "Even asking the question about 'what should we stop' makes people inside a company uncomfortable," Bergstrand says. For that reason, it may be necessary to adopt the *What if the company didn't exist?* mindset—so that you can then be willing to cut ties with old programs, products, and practices.

HISTORY AND ROUTINE aren't the only things that can impede a company's forward movement. Various real-world constraints can also inhibit a company's ability to adapt and innovate: for example, being overly concerned with practical issues such as costs and budgets tends to limit the scope of creative thinking. That's why some business leaders (including Steve Jobs when he headed Apple) have been known to use *What If* hypothetical questioning to temporarily remove practical constraints. One such approach is to encourage teams working on projects to ask

themselves, *What if money were no object? How might we approach the project differently?*

By temporarily removing these restrictions, people's imaginations are freed up to find the best idea, cost notwithstanding. You might end up with a groundbreaking possibility that can then be scaled back to make it more affordable.

Conversely, using *What If* questions to *impose* constraints can also be effective. By challenging people to think about creating or achieving something within extreme limits—*What if we could only charge ten bucks for our hundred-dollar service?*—it forces a rethinking of real-world practicalities and assumptions. Sometimes the fantasy becomes reality. As the business consultant and Dartmouth University professor Vijay Govindarajan notes, hospitals in India have developed incredibly inexpensive (yet still safe and reliable) surgical approaches to provide operations for a fraction of their cost in other countries—in part because they were forced by market pressures to question the prevailing assumptions about surgical costs.

### **What if we could become a cause and not just a company?**

As businesses throw off constraints and imagine bold *What If* possibilities, some may consider an ultra-ambitious one: Can a

company transform itself into a cause? And why would it want to do so?

The answer to the second question partly has to do with a new dynamic in the relationship between consumers and business. Because of the Internet and social media, people know more about companies and brands than ever before. And they care more than ever about how companies are behaving, what a company's values are, what that company stands for.

Employees feel this even more strongly. Younger workers, in particular, have shown they want to align themselves with companies that support principles and values similar to their own, and companies that are contributing to a greater good. "The modern worker is not the salary worker of old," says Tim Ogilvie of the consulting firm Peer Insight. "Increasingly, they're saying, 'I want to do something I really believe in.'" So to the extent a company can stand for something more than just what it sells or creates, it can develop a deeper relationship with both consumers and employees.

Keith Yamashita says companies can try to find their cause by asking, *What does the world hunger for?* This may require some contextual inquiry—venturing beyond the corporate bubble to spend time with the people who are your customers—to figure out what they care about or feel passionate about. The next step is to identify what may be standing in their way—an obstacle, a problem. To the extent you can alleviate that problem, your company can be seen as more than just a business out to make money.

A case in point is Panera Bread, the growing U.S.-based chain of bakery/restaurants. Panera CEO Ron Shaich recalls that as the company sought to find a more meaningful role in communities, it looked for a problem that matched up well with its capabilities and resources. At one point, Shaich had a conversation that questioned:

*What does the world need most . . . that we are uniquely able to provide?*

Shaich says he wrestled with that question for a while, then worked his way to an answer with the launch of Panera Cares—an

initiative to open a number of pay-what-you-can cafés that are identical to the chain's other restaurants, except customers pay what they wish or can afford (based on suggested donation amounts).

With so much fresh-baked bread in so many outlets, Panera has always been "uniquely able" to

provide leftover bread to people in need—and the company has, for years, been a contributor to community food pantries. But there's a difference between donating to charity (something many companies do, almost by rote), and fully committing to a cause. "We started asking ourselves, *What more can we do?*"

Shaich says, "I felt like, I want to put our bodies on the line."

What gradually became clear was that Panera could provide not just bread giveaways, but a more complete dining experience for those going hungry. That extra level of involvement—"putting bodies on the line," to use Shaich's words—made the effort bigger and more distinctive than a standard corporate charity program.

The first Panera Cares café opened about two years ago. Now, the five cafés around the country serve over a million people a year (and for the most part cover costs, as high donations from some customers tend to balance out lower ones by others).

SHAICH NOTES THAT as the company was developing the Panera Cares idea and putting it into practice (with the CEO himself working at the first café), a number of tough choices were made to ensure the integrity of the program: offering a full menu

How can we drive more ounces into more bodies, more often?

During the years Jeffrey Dunn was a top executive at Coca-Cola, the "unbeautiful question" above was central to the marketing of Lake's sugary soft drinks. Coke wasn't alone of course. Author Michael Moss has revealed that companies throughout the snack food industry have been similarly focused on ingenious questions and methods aimed at increasing consumption of products loaded with salt, sugar, and fat—even as America's obesity epidemic has steadily worsened. Today, Dunn has moved on to a more healthful product, as the head of the carrot company Bothhouse Farms (which pioneered the marketing of "baby carrots" after a local grower, tired of throwing away misshapen or gnarly carrots, wondered, *What if I peel off the skin and cut them into perfect mini-carrots?*). At Bothhouse, Dunn has been promoting baby carrots as crunchy treats available in snack-packs—an endeavor to answer his new question, *What if we marketed baby carrots like junk food?*



instead of a limited one, using donation boxes at the cafes instead of cash registers (Shaich was concerned that the latter could create psychological pressure on customers to pay). At each step, Shaich says, the company had to ask, *Do we want to take a shortcut on this or do it right?*

As Peer Insight's Tim Ogilvie observes, being true to a cause often requires making tough decisions and sacrificing at times. "When you come to the point where you can't serve both the bottom line and the cause, one or the other must suffer," says Ogilvie, pointing to the Whole Foods supermarket chain, which stopped selling live lobsters for an extended time until it found a supplier that did humane harvesting. "Those are hard choices, but when you opt for the cause over the bottom line, employees can see that, and then they believe in the company and the cause even more."

One of the challenges for marketers in becoming a cause is that while they may be used to saying they're "for" certain things, they rarely go the other way and ask themselves, *What are we against?* As part of its stand against excess consumerism, Paragonia went out on a limb when it considered:

*What if we asked people not to buy from us?*

The company decided it was willing to risk losing sales in support of a larger cause and ran ads urging people *not* to buy its clothing (or at least, not to buy a new jacket if they didn't actually need it). Says Paragonia's Sheehan, "Those ads were just asking people to question their consumerism and maybe be a little more mindful about the stuff they're purchasing." Still, it was a high-risk message, though Sheehan says it actually helped the brand gain market share by attracting more customers—who presumably admired the stand Paragonia was taking with the ads.

## How can we make a better experiment?

Questioning also has an important role in everyday business matters such as product development. As Lean Startup's Eric Ries

points out, it is central to testing out new ideas to see what works. Ries believes one of the most important questions businesses need to ask today is the one above. It's somewhat counterintuitive for most managers—who tend to think in terms of "making products," not "making experiments." But as Ries points out, anytime you're doing something new "it's an experiment whether you admit it or not. Because it is not a fact that it's going to work."

So how do companies get better at experimenting? Ries says you start with the acknowledgment that "we *are* operating amid all this uncertainty—and that the purpose of building a product or doing any other activity is to create an experiment to reduce that uncertainty." This means that instead of asking *What will we do?* or *What will we build?* the emphasis should be on *What will we learn?* "And then you work backwards to the simplest possible thing—the minimum viable product—that can get you the learning," he says.

Just this one change—before you get to any of the more complex Lean Startup methodology—can make a world of difference, Ries insists. For one thing, it can help unlock the creativity that's already there in your company. "Most companies are full of ideas, but they don't know how to go about finding out if those ideas work," Ries says. "If you want to harvest all those ideas, allow employees to experiment more—so they can find out the answers to their questions themselves."

Peer Insight's Tim Ogilvie points out that it's also important for

What is your tennis ball? (and other entrepreneurial questions)

Drew Houston, founder of the online storage service Dropbox, thinks all would-be entrepreneurs should try to answer the above question. "The most successful people are obsessed with solving an important problem, something that matters to them," according to Houston. "They remind me of a dog chasing a tennis ball." To enhance your prospects, "find your tennis ball—the thing that gnaws you." PayPal cofounder Peter Thiel believes entrepreneurs can find ideas to pursue by asking themselves, *What is something I believe that nearly no one agrees with me on?* If self-examination doesn't work, try looking around: Brian Spaly, a serial entrepreneur in the apparel industry, advises, "Whenever you encounter a service or customer experience that frustrates you, ask, *Is this a problem I could solve?*" Lastly, don't just focus on the mercenary question *Will consumers pay for this?* The startup business coach Dave Kashen thinks the better question to ask about any new venture is, *Will this make people's lives meaningfully better?*

companies to give people a safe place to test ideas and run experiments. To that end, he says, companies need to be able to answer:

*Where is our petri dish?*

That question is really asking, *Where in the company is it safe to ask radical questions?* "As an established business," Ogilvie says, "you've got all these promises you're keeping to your current customers—you have to stay focused on that. But that may not have a future." So the question becomes "Where, within the company, can you explore heretical questions that could threaten the business as it is—without contaminating what you're doing now?"

Company leadership needs to "provide permission and protocols for experimentation," he says. That means providing the time and resources for people to explore new questions, as well as establishing methods: "How might we?" questioning sessions, ethnography, in-market experimentation. It can also mean cordoning off this area of the business—although a clear line of visibility should remain between the core business and the "petri dish" part of the company, so that each can influence the other.

Ogilvie says that yet another way to phrase this question is *Where is the place we can be a start-up again?* Surprisingly, he thinks it's a question that even start-ups should ask themselves. "Start-ups are so desperate not to be a start-up," says Ogilvie (himself a former start-up CEO). "They're so anxious to be postrevenue and post-profit that you can almost give up what's great about being a start-up too soon. They get built for execution, and once they're having success, they'll very quickly start thinking, 'We've got to stick to our knitting.'" All of which means they've outgrown their original petri dish—and might need a new one.

### If we brainstorm in questions, will lightning strike?

In the business world these days, brainstorming has a mixed reputation. Increasingly, it's understood that people tend to do their

best creative thinking—particularly in coming up with fresh insights and random associations by way of connective inquiry—in informal, relaxed settings, when they're not really trying.

A brainstorming session runs counter to that: Everyone is stuck in a room trying desperately to come up with original ideas. "There is too much pressure and too much influence from others in the group," according to Debra Kaye, author of the book *Red Thread Thinking*. "The free association done in brainstorming sessions is often shackled by peer pressure and as a result generates obvious responses."

But many businesses are reluctant to walk away from brainstorming because they recognize the critical importance of being able to tackle challenges as a group. Collaborative thinking in problem solving is essential because it brings together multiple viewpoints and diverse backgrounds. While it's understood that creativity sometimes requires solitude ("Be alone, that is when ideas are born," Nikola Tesla said), we also know that it flourishes when diverse ideas and thoughts are exchanged.

One solution to this conundrum may be to shift the nature of brainstorming so that it's about generating questions instead of ideas. Interesting findings about this are coming from a number of groups and individuals, working in both the education and business sectors.

The Right Question Institute—which specializes in teaching students to tackle problems by generating questions, not solutions—has found that groups of students (whether children or adults) seem to think more freely and creatively using the "question-storming" method, in which the focus is on generating questions. The ROI's Dan Rothstein believes that some of the peer pressure in conventional brainstorming is lessened in this format. Answers tend to be judged more harshly than questions.

In the business world, Hal Gregersen has been studying the effectiveness of question-storming at major corporations and has found it to be far more effective than conventional brainstorming. "Regular brainstorming for ideas often hits a wall because we only have so many ideas," Gregersen says. "Part of the reason we hit that

wall is we're asking the wrong questions." When people in a group are struggling with an issue and find "they're getting nowhere, they're stuck," Gregersen says, "that's the perfect point to step back and do question-storming."

Gregersen will typically advise group members to try to generate at least fifty questions about the problem that's being "stormed." As those questions are being written down for everyone to see, "other team members are paying attention and thinking of a better question." It's usually easier to come up with questions than ideas; we don't have to divine a solution from the air or connect ideas in a fantastically original manner; we just have to come at the problem from a slightly different angle of inquiry.

After observing about a hundred Q-storm sessions around the world, Gregersen has noted some patterns: "At around twenty-five questions, the group may stall briefly and say, 'That's enough questions.' But if you push on beyond that point, some of the best questions come as you get to fifty or even seventy-five."

The ROI approach to question-storming focuses less on volume and moves more quickly to "improving" the questions generated by the group, by opening closed questions and closing open ones. The key is to converge around the best questions, as decided through group discussion. This gets to one of the big problems with brainstorming in general: Many ideas are tossed out, but the groups often don't know how to winnow down to the best ideas. It can be easier to winnow down questions because the best questions are magnetic—they intrigue people, make them want to work more on those. ROI recommends coming out of a session with three great questions that you want to explore further.

Question-storming can be more realistic and achievable than brainstorming. Instead of hoping that you'll emerge from a meeting with "the answer" (which almost never happens and thus leaves people feeling frustrated), the goal is to come out of it with a few promising and powerful questions—which is likely to provide a sense of direction and momentum.

As I was examining the ways some of today's cutting-edge companies are trying to reinvent brainstorming, an interesting trend surfaced: a specific form of questioning using three words—*How might we?* It's a simple way of ensuring that would-be innovators are asking the right questions and using the best wording. Proponents of this practice say it is surprisingly effective—and a restatement to the importance of wording a question just right to spark creative thinking and freewheeling collaboration.

When people within companies try to innovate, they often talk about the challenges they're facing by using language that can inhibit creativity instead of encouraging it, says the business consultant Min Basadur, who has taught the *How might we?* (HMW) form of questioning to a wide range of companies over the past four decades. Basadur explains, "People may start out asking, 'How can we do this?' or 'How should we do that?' But as soon as you start using words like *can* and *should*, you're implying judgment: Can we really do it? And should we?" By substituting the word *might*, he says, "You're able to defer judgment, which helps people to create options more freely and opens up more possibilities."

Tim Brown, the chief executive of IDEO, says that when his firm takes on a design challenge of almost any type, it invariably starts by asking *How might we?*

Brown observes that within the phrase, each of those three words plays a role in spurring creative problem solving: "The *how* part assumes there are solutions out there—it provides creative confidence. *Might* says we can put ideas out there that might work or

What would Neil Patrick Harris do?

Andrew Rossi of the marketing firm M Booth has found that one of the best ways to stake creativity during brainstorming sessions is to ask people in the group to think about the problem they're trying to solve from an unusual perspective. So, for example, if a company is introducing a new toothpaste, they might ask: *How would NEA tackle a challenge like this?* Another approach is to add in an odd constraint, such as *What if your idea had to involve speed dating?* Rossi's group sometimes suggests adopting the perspective of a well-known artist or entertainer: *What would Jay-Z do in this situation?* *How would J. K. Rowling think about this?* *What might Neil Patrick Harris do?* (The latter has been described as "an actor, singer, dancer, producer, director, writer, child stardom survivor, evil genius, amateur puppeteer, and magic enthusiast"—so he might do just about anything.)

might not—either way, it's okay. And the *we* part says we're going to do it together and build on each other's ideas."

Although the HMMW has been used at IDEO for a number of years, its origins can be traced back fifty years to Sidney Parnes, a leading creativity expert at the time who headed up the Creative Problem Solving Institute in Buffalo, New York. Min Basadur studied at the CPSI during his tenure as a creative manager at Procter & Gamble in the early 1970s, and he adapted some of Parnes' brainstorming ideas to help P&G's marketers—who, at the time, were working themselves into a lather as they tried to compete with Colgate-Palmolive's popular new soap, Irish Spring, which featured a green stripe and an appealing "refreshment" promise.

By the time Basadur was asked to assist on the project, P&G had already tested a half dozen of its own copycat green-stripe bars, though none could best Irish Spring. Basadur figured the P&G team was asking the wrong question (*How can we make a better green-stripe bar?*) and soon had them asking a series of more ambitious HMMW questions, culminating with *How might we create a more refreshing soap of our own?* That opened the creative floodgates, and over the next few hours, Basadur says, hundreds of ideas were generated for possible refreshment bars—with the team eventually converging around a theme of finding refreshment at the seacoast. Out of that came a coastal-blue and white-striped bar named (what else?) Coast, which became a highly successful brand.

As the Coast story suggests, there's more to HMMW methodology than just using those three words. Basadur employed a larger process to guide people toward the *right* HMMW questions. This included a number of Why questions (as in, *Why are we trying so hard to make another green-striped soap?*). He also urged the P&G team to step back from their obsession with a competitor's product and look at the situation from a consumer perspective. For the customer, it wasn't about green stripes—it was about feeling refreshed.

Basadur maintains that it's common for companies to expend efforts asking the wrong questions and trying to solve the wrong problems. "Most businesspeople have limited skills when it comes

to 'problem-finding' or problem definition," he says. "It's not taught in MBA programs." To fill that void, Basadur opened a consultancy, Basadur Applied Creativity, which developed its own "Simplex" process of creative problem solving for business—with HMMW questioning at the core of it.

Gradually, Basadur took the *How might we?* approach beyond P&G to other companies, including the tech firm Scient. One of his converts at Scient, the designer Charles Warren, then took the methodology with him as he moved to IDEO. IDEO's Brown confesses that when he was introduced to the notion of encouraging businesspeople to ask *How might we?*, "I was skeptical at first—it sounds a bit Californian." But before long, says Warren, IDEO was conducting companywide question-storming sessions with seven hundred people asking the question together.

When Charles Warren then moved from IDEO to Google, the infectious HMMW approach found a new host. Warren led the user-experience design team that took on the challenge of creating Google+. "We were asking *How might we?* questions every day," he says. At Google, such questions can run the gamut from *How might we predict whether a flu outbreak is going to happen, based on search queries?* to *How might we help more people feel more comfortable sharing more of their lives in social media?* Most recently, HMMW was carried from Google to Facebook by a member of the Google+ team.

HMMW proponents say this form of questioning can be applied to almost any challenge—though it works best with ones that are ambitious yet also achievable. Brown says it doesn't work as well with problems that are too broad (*How might we solve world hunger?*) or too narrow (*How might we increase profits by 5 percent next quarter?*). Figuring out the right HMMW questions to ask is a process, Brown says: "You need to find the sweet spot."

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# A More Beautiful Question

THE POWER OF INQUIRY  
TO SPARK BREAKTHROUGH IDEAS



WARREN BERGER

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