Become a Company That Questions Everything

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Imagine you're a bright, inquisitive person working for a company with long-established policies and work processes in place (or maybe you don't have to). Now let's say you've noticed one of those processes is not as efficient or effective as it might be, which leads you to reasonably ask: *Why are we doing it this way? Is there a better approach?*

What happens next in this scenario could be a good indicator of whether your company has a culture of inquiry or one of acceptance and conformity. If it's the former, that question you raised will be carefully considered and may trigger ongoing discussion — and possibly action — by the company's managers and leaders. You might be praised and even rewarded, just for asking it.

If, on the other hand, yours is a company that doesn't value or appreciate questioning, you might hear something like: "This is the way we've been doing things for 20 years — who are you to second-guess us?" Or the always-popular, "Around here, we expect people to bring us answers, not questions."

In my research on business and questioning, I found that many more companies seem to fall into the second camp. And it's easy to understand why. The consultant Dev Patnaik of Jump Associates points out that many of today's larger, well-established companies "were designed on a military model" with a hierarchical structure and top-down management. Within that structure, questioning by employees can be perceived as a challenge to authority.

Questioning is also seen by many business leaders as "inefficient," according to the author and Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen. As Christensen notes, these leaders are often so anxious to "get things done" they have little patience for questions that may slow down meetings, challenge accepted practices, and force managers to spend time explaining and defending their approaches.

So why open the floodgates? For companies seeking to innovate, adapt to change, and maintain an edge in fast-moving, competitive markets, a questioning culture can help ensure that creativity and adaptive thinking flows throughout the organization. "One of the ways successful companies

consistently create separation from the competitive pack is by critically examining and improving the business model from end to end," says Chris Shimojima, the CEO of Provide Commerce. "This requires a leadership team and work force that is always trying to ask the questions that can light up the big honking issues."

How can a company create an environment where people are more inclined to question? And is it possible to encourage the "right kind" of questions — the ones most likely to lead to productive results? Based on studying a number of companies that have done seem to be doing a good job at creating a culture of inquiry, here are four key observations:

A culture of inquiry starts at the top — with leaders who question. Today's business leaders should take on the role of "being 'chief question-asker' for their organization," says Patnaik. That's not easy because, as Patnaik notes, many business executives rose through the ranks because "they were good at giving answers, not at formulating questions." A leader who questions well won't just ask highly-practical, interrogative queries (*How much is it going to cost us? Who's responsible for this problem?)*, but will also ask more open, exploratory questions — the kind that can help anticipate what's coming and where new opportunities lie, enabling the company to move in new directions.

Leaders should use questioning to solicit input from people throughout the company, using surveys and other tools to ask employees, "'We're thinking of doing this — what do *you* think we should do?,'" suggests Dave Goldberg, CEO of SurveyMonkey. At the same time, leadership should be willing to *answer* tough questions — from all levels and departments. Google offers a good example with its wide-open (and sometimes chaotic) weekly "TGIF" sessions: all employees are invited to submit questions to the company's top executives, and the ones voted up by the rest of the company — often the toughest, most controversial questions — are then fielded on the spot by the bosses. It sets the tone that anyone can ask anything of anyone else.

Questioning should be rewarded (or at least, not punished). To encourage company-wide questioning, The Lean Startup's Eric Ries says, "It's not about slogans or putting up posters on the wall — it's about the systems and the incentives you create to promote the behavior." Ries points out that at most companies, "the resources flow to the person with the most confident, best plan. Or the person with no failures on their record." He says companies should direct more budgetary resources to those who are exploring unanswered questions, conducting promising experiments, and taking intelligent risks.

It's also critical for company leaders to be on the lookout for ways in which questioning gets punished — perhaps unintentionally. The business writer Dale Dauten has described a common situation in which people who inquire about a problem at their workplace — involving, say, something the company is not doing as well as it might — are then told, "You found the problem; now it's your job to fix it." That's a surefire way to get people to stop finding problems and asking questions, because most are not seeking to add to their workload (and besides, the question they've identified may be too big for them to answer on their own). The better approach is to ask the problem-finder if and how much they'd want to be involved in working on that issue — with the understanding that they'll be given time and support as needed, and that, even if they never find an answer to the question, they've earned credit just by asking it.

Give people the time and space to question deeply. People may need to "step back" from day-to-day tasks in order to tackle deeper questions and problems. The various, well-publicized personal time policies adopted at companies such as Google, 3M, and W.L. Gore, allowing people to devote 10-20% of their time to "passion projects," have yielded innovative, marketable ideas — but to get to those breakthroughs, people need room to pursue ambitious questions that may not be part of their everyday work. They may also need freedom to allow their curiosity to wander outside the corporate bubble, via field trips, time spent on customer frontlines, and other excursions. IDEO's chief executive Tim Brown points out that a lot of breakthrough questioning happens as people "venture out into the world to observe and listen." On-the-ground insights can spark the "why" and "what if" questions that eventually lead to innovation.

Provide the tools to question well. Questioning is a skill and a way of thinking; it is our ability to "organize our thinking around what we *don't* know," according to the Right Question Institute, a nonprofit foundation that studies and teaches questioning. To sharpen this skill, companies can employ group exercises, such as those developed by RQI, that allow participants to practice question formulation and teach them how to analyze and improve their own questions. There are other questioning techniques that can be taught, ranging from the "5 Whys" to the "How might we" group-questioning approach employed by Google, IDEO, and other innovation-driven companies.

For those managers worried about being flooded with "stupid questions," the solution is to guide employees — through training and exercises — toward more informed, potentially productive questions. Steelcase's former CEO Jim Hackett points out that the goal should be to encourage the formulation of questions rooted in deep critical thinking about the particular challenges and issues of the company, its customers, its industry.

But even while trying to encourage smarter questions, companies should be careful about discouraging fundamental, seemingly naïve questions — which can be a valuable tool for challenging the most basic assumptions about why and how your company does what it does.

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