

## The Power of Questioning

### Creating a Culture of Vigilance Rather Than Vulnerability

*by Jon Craighead*

Voltaire said, “Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers.” In today’s business environment we are bombarded with volumes of unfamiliar and unplanned changes. The quantity of general data alone is enough to overwhelm. As much as we might long for the good old days when time was on our side, we must learn how to deal effectively with our current world of constant change. There is just no alternative. The tendency is to want answers to the dilemmas we face as quickly as possible so that we can move speedily to the next thing in front of us. However, this compulsion is a precursor to poor decision making. Avoiding such an outcome necessitates a commitment to develop the ability to ask the appropriate questions.

The power of questioning is a solid platform for a more successful inquiry and appropriate action. Just as a healthy looking body may in fact have unseen medical issues, a seemingly healthy organization may conceal serious underlying systemic problems. Many organizations apply long-standing systems and unquestioned routines that can create an inaccurate illusion of viability. It is not uncommon, when one looks beneath the surface of many enterprises, to discover unreliable and ill-defined relationships that lack alignment and trust. This is a setup for potential calamity. It’s a grievous mistake to assume that any system is sacrosanct and unquestionable. The new normal requires that people and companies continuously reinvent themselves by making honest assessments of their processes and products. It is more reliable to organize around results and facts than historical information. While historical information can be a useful reference, it is unreliable as a sole source for planning a future.

One of the many advantages of questioning is what we call “situational awareness,” which attunes the workforce to critical signals and indicators, thereby preventing potential disruptions. Such alertness creates a culture of vigilance rather than vulnerability. Situational awareness emphasizes the utilization and practice of peripheral vision, an essential ingredient when planning ahead. It is of major consequence to train you and your staff to be highly sensitive to the environment and the marketplace. Peripheral vision is not about prediction as much as it’s about anticipation and alertness. The issue is not a lack of data but the lack of good questions. It is a process of scanning actively with an open mind, because the periphery won’t always come to you.

Situational awareness generates questions such as: What important signals are we rationalizing away? What are the mavericks and outliers trying to tell us that we are ignoring? What are our customers and competitors trying to tell us that we may unknowingly be dismissing? What surprises could hurt us – or help us? What emerging technology could be a game changer? And, is there an unthinkable scenario?

The point is that unconsciousness is extremely costly. Today's leaders must learn to look at the market in new ways, with new skills in tracking trends, seeking out latent needs, and creating a welcoming environment for open feedback, both positive and negative. Being masterful at studying the competition as well as being aware of the direction and impact of newly developed technologies is a major leadership responsibility. It requires effectively mining the available data from all sources.

This process not only increases vigilance but provides the seeds of innovation as well. Keen sensitivity to the market place is the primary source of disruptive innovation – the reinventing of an existing modality. The chain of action starts with progressive leadership, strategic thinking, knowledge sharing and configuration, and it results in a new culture of opportunity. This culture is a great preventer to group-think, which creates bubbles of isolation. Peripheral vision is everyone's responsibility.

Whenever you come up with an answer, you shut down the inquiry; when you operate from the question, you keep the conversation alive. This is not to suggest that one should live in a constant state of suspension. Rather it is about promoting excellence through thoroughness. Eliminating a rushed, slipshod approach to any situation prevents regret. There is no 100 percent sure-fire method of avoid mistakes; however you can significantly increase your odds with the power of questioning.