

## A Question For Innovation

*by Jon Craighead*

In Warren Burger's book [A Most Beautiful Question](#), the noted author writes about the power of inquiry. He states that questioning may be the most underappreciated tool at our disposal. We learn to use it well in infancy, and then abandon it as we grow older. Questioning, he says, while critical to learning, is often discouraged in our schools and workplaces. This reluctantly used skill could unlock new commercial opportunities, reinvent industries, and spark creative insights at multiple levels, all the while providing transformative new outlooks on life both imaginatively and profoundly.

**Innovation** is defined as a new idea, device, system or method. In business parlance, innovation is a new or revised design necessary for production efficiency. Routine productivity review begins with an intentional disruption of business-as-usual, stopping the action to measure a performance activity. Once this status is clearly reviewed, an assessment is made to validate if the measures prove the system is performing as intended. If the review is negative, corrective action to insure success is instigated. This can be corrected by an entirely new application or corrective innovative design. Innovation intervention can also be instigated by unexpected system breakdown as well. Sustainable organizations must have such a structure for all contingencies.

In the strategy industry there is a term "imagination gap" which cautions against absolute certainty regarding any planning. Frequently, when the future arrives and becomes the present we are startled by unexpected outcomes. To minimize such unanticipated surprises is the established, ongoing assessment of our convictions and theories. This is a challenging process, but it can also provide a rewarding experience because failure often leads to the next success.

Innovation exploration provides both boundless expectations and disappointments. Many startling innovative products and services become new standards. Computers have transformed from bulky machines confined to air-conditioned rooms to pocket PDAs which are now so indispensably necessary that people never leave home without them. Technology now automatically controls heat, lighting, security, fire protection, and internal movements in buildings. Traffic control systems operate automatically without human intervention. And Hospital surgical teams can perform surgeries robotically. These are just a few innovative creations that were previously unthinkable and are now operational standards. Innovations such as these are now invented on an accelerated and continual routine basis.

Innovation initiates inquiries into what might be. This is a process of forming thoughts and ideas to invent what's possible without any certainty. This process may be instigated both individually and cooperatively. It's a structure for formulating imaginative ideas into an actual reality – ideas as diverse as imagining a flying car and designing a self-driving automobile. It could be an imaginary spaceman cartoon to an astronaut actually walking on the moon. It could be replacing a failing human heart with a donated healthy heart. This list goes on and is only limited by our ability to imagine and develop the technology. These are actualities we never thought could happen but that we now take for granted. Such are the possibilities of innovation.

How does one start on this great adventure? It begins with questions. These are game changing inquiries that are rarely asked enough. Our timidity towards questioning is based in our inherent inability to “not know.” We think we should know already, and to not know highlights our perceived inadequacies. It takes a mindset like that of a child eager to learn and willing to ask the same question over again until they get the answer they are seeking. As any dutiful parent will readily confess, this process can be extremely annoying; but they also realize it is essential to the child's learning development. This is what is required to break through the bounds of ignorance. Learning demands a persistence to find results and not be deterred - to try and fail and try again. This is hard work that demands a certain resilience. And that explains why there are so few innovators.

When we grant ourselves “unknowing,” it opens a panorama of new ideas. This is a state of being that unlocks new pathways to learning. It frees us from the guilt of ignorance and allows us to venture into exploration. It is where the unimaginable becomes the imaginable and kick-starts a thrilling journey of inquiry that brings even more discovery. It is a win for us all.