

Ask 'Blue Sky' Questions

Gain new perspective for a new year.

by **KINDRA GORDON**, *field editor*

Want to challenge yourself and your employee team to think and achieve bigger? Spend some time asking out-of-this-world, blue-sky questions:

- What would you do in the business if your budget were tripled?
- What would you do first if you were the manager?
- What would you do tomorrow if you won the lottery and didn't have to work anymore?

Warren Berger, author of the new book *A More Beautiful Question*, suggests that asking big questions reframes an issue and forces you to look at things in a different way.

He shares that the Polaroid camera came from a 3-year-old girl asking, "Why do we have to wait for the picture?"

"That's a beautiful question," says Berger.

In an *Inc.* magazine article, Berger said asking a question by stating, "How might we ...?" is particularly intriguing to people. It makes them want to discuss and work on coming up with a solution.

Additionally, Berger says fundamental questions like, "Why are we doing this?" and "What do people really care about?" should frequently be asked both about new and existing projects. He adds, when you ask questions, it opens your thinking.

Berger goes so far as to suggest that mission statements should be replaced with questions. He points out, "A statement says we've done it already." A question, asking "How might we ...?" declares the great thing you want to do with your business or organization.

"It's much more empowering," says Berger.

Berger says the process of inquiry triggers divergent thinking, in which the mind seeks multiple, sometimes nonobvious paths to a solution. Asking good questions and doing so often "opens people to new ideas and possibilities," says Berger. In a nutshell, asking the right questions either of ourselves, or of the people we work and collaborate with, doesn't allow for remaining passive. Questions often prompt reflection, followed by action.

Berger admits that most managers feel like they should have answers — not be asking questions. Yet Berger says, "Great leaders do ask questions, and that helps create a culture of inquiry."

He adds, "Great questions don't get answered in 10 minutes. They may take six months." When your team brings you great questions, everyone can work on them together.

Three starter questions

If you are a planner and want to chart your course for the future, business gurus suggest asking yourself three questions as you look ahead to the next five years:

1. What's important?
2. What should be the same?
3. What needs to change?

Simple questions, but it is surprising that we don't pause and ponder these points more regularly. Most of us are usually too focused on the now. To help

in answering these questions, also consider:

- What might you miss most if it were taken away?
- What legacy do you hope to leave, and to whom?

More great questions

Here are some of the “great questions” posed by others:

- How can we become the company that would put us out of business? — Danny Meyer, CEO Union Square Hospitality Group
- Are we relevant? Will we be relevant five years from now? 10? — Debra Kaye, Innovation consultant and author
- What is it like to work for me? — Robert Sutton, author and Stanford management professor
- What trophy do we want on our mantle? — Marcy Massura, digital marketer and brand strategist
- What counts that we are not counting? — Chip Conley, head of global hospitality for Airbnb
- What are the implications of this decision 10 minutes, 10 months and 10 years from now? — Suzy Welch, author
- In the past few months, what is the smallest change we’ve made that had the biggest positive result? What was it about that small change that produced the large return? — Robert Cialdini, author and Arizona State University professor emeritus
- Are we paying enough attention to the partners our company depends on to succeed? — Ron Adner, author and Tuck School of Business professor
- Are we changing as fast as the world around us? — Gary Hamel, author and management consultant
- How likely is it that a customer would recommend our company to a friend or colleague? — Andrew Taylor, executive Enterprise Holdings
- Did my employees make progress today? — Teresa Amabile, author and Harvard Business School professor
- What one word do we want to own in the minds of our customers, employees and partners? — Matthew May, author and innovation expert
- If I had to leave my organization for a year and the only communication I could have with my employees was a single paragraph, what would I write? — Pat Lencioni, author and founder of The Table Group
- What should we stop doing? — Peter Drucker, management expert and author

Questions for employees

Asking direct questions of employees can also be a valuable tool to gather insight about their role and the business, says Berger. Questions managers might ask: How do you like your current role?

What do you need from me to help you better succeed in your position? What could we be doing better or differently?

Providing a forum for employee input can often help a business move to a higher productivity and performance level. You just have to be open-minded — and ask the questions that will lead to that input.



Boss vs. Leader

A boss creates fear, a leader confidence. A boss fixes blame, a leader corrects mistakes. A boss knows all. A leader asks questions. A boss makes work drudgery, a leader makes it interesting. A boss is interested in himself or herself, a leader is interested in the group.

— Russell H. Ewing