

Outside the BOX: Ask a few questions

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“Doc, the exam was too difficult. Did you spend hours trying to make it confusing or is that just your nature? Next time around, try this: Tell us what you want us to say, and then ask the questions that let us tell you.” In my early years of teaching, I would have handled this

statement with a long and vigorous defense of the exam and the methodology behind its creation, but not now.

“Tell you what, you can take a mulligan on this one, but here’s the exchange: Instead of taking the test over, write a better one. You have until Monday at 8

a.m.” Some 48 hours later, my phone rang and a pleading voice begged to just take a makeup exam because sorting out the important questions was proving to be a burden larger than anticipated.

Asking the right questions

Herein lies one of life’s little truths, asking the right questions is difficult and requires considerable heavy lifting, expenditure of energy and brain pain. The realm doesn’t matter — business, agriculture, parenting or relationships. We only solve problems when we are focused on the appropriate question(s).

Peter Drucker is considered by many to be the leading management thinker and consultant in modern history.

“My greatest strength as a consultant is to be ignorant and ask a few questions,” was his proclaimed secret to success.

Hiring someone outside the ownership and management circle of a business to provide a thoughtful and critical analysis is a good investment. Consultants usually begin by questioning the decisions, methods and practices that have been employed by an organization. The process of wrestling with those questions can go a long way to helping uncover value and missed opportunities. However, jump-starting the process can be done by starting with the following inquiries that underpin sound critique and analysis — who, what, where, when, why and how? Remember, asking a good question is difficult, so begin the process by creating two questions next to each of the headings: Who, what, where, when, why and how?

Who deals with a host of possible issues — internal relations within your team (both family and non-family members), customers, suppliers, neighbors, succession, hiring or development of talent. Questions involving people are tough because they often involve addressing both the head (rational) and the heart (emotional). However, lasting value in an enterprise rests solidly on people. Dealing with these questions allows leaders of organizations to unleash the power of creativity, productivity and teamwork that stimulate new levels of achievement.

What focuses attention on questions of strategy, understanding the

WHO	
WHAT	
WHERE	
WHEN	
WHY	
HOW	

impact of external influences, and emerging opportunities. “What if” and “what’s next” discussions move teams outside their comfort zones and force the deep conversations required to determine strategic direction, even if it means a dramatic shift in course.

Where centers attention on infrastructure, vital sources of inputs such as knowledge and technology, logistical considerations, supply chains, and market targets.

Considering **when** helps decision-makers determine sequences of productive activities that optimize desired outcomes for the business. Meaningful plan execution that leverages understanding about the interconnectedness of decisions and resources is a key outcome that originates from dealing with questions related to time and timing.

The central question around which curiosity is framed can be summed up in one word — **why**. Asking why centers thinking on purpose, leadership, motivation and creation of a work culture designed to generate results.

How drives operational procedures, protocols and the activity of getting work done. When measured against useful metrics, dealing with the how helps improve efficiency, creation of standard operational procedures, and facilitates alignment of inputs and resources with work activities.

The list might look something like the diagram below or it might be completely different. All that matters is that you uncover important questions that will reveal valuable insight into the business as you and your team struggle with finding the answers.

An additional caveat needs to be considered in this process — asking the right questions typically leads to two outcomes:

- Dealing with the uncertainty and discomfort of being taken out of our comfort zone.
- Answering the questions requires effort and hard work.

In the long term, the rewards that arise from having to rethink our models, assumptions and way of doing things outweigh the tough work that is required, as well as the unsettling experience that accompanies almost any change.

Be forewarned, good questions rarely take organizations to the path of least resistance or reinforce the status quo. For example, take a shot at answering the

questions proposed in the graphic. They stretch thinking, force discussions about reallocation of scarce resources, and cause us to consider abandoning our “accepted” ways of getting things done.

Nonetheless, great organizations establish a system to assure that how, why, when, where, what and who are on the table for discussion and analysis. Asking the right questions will move you

in the right direction if you have the conviction to deal with the conversations and analysis that most certainly will arise.



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- buys our calves?
- will take the reins?

- is our plan when interest rates increase?
- opportunity(ies) are we missing?

- do we get our information?
- do I get my inspiration to remain steadfast?

- should our cows give birth?
- should we expand the herd?

- isn’t that segment of the business performing?
- should we expand the herd?

- do we get more value from our forage resource?
- do we capture more return on our asset base?