

Creating the Future of Your Business

by Robert Bystrom

Let Questions Do the Heavy Lifting

The questions I am going to address in this article are How can business organizations more successfully bridge to the future? And How can an organization become more responsive and more coherent?

Four years ago, I wrote, “The businesses that survive the next ten years will need to be responsive, adaptive, inventive, intelligent and efficient. Ten years from now, these businesses will be lean, strong and ecologically attuned. Either they will be operated by teams which have learned to function very well together or they probably won’t exist. Collaboration and cooperation will be the environment of the successful workplace.” I’d say that timeline still holds true.

We are familiar with team *work*, but team *thinking* is an unfamiliar notion. For a group of people, say a project team, thinking *together* deliberately is not an option if they want more than simply getting by.

Over years of working with business, community and governmental organizations, I have observed that most of them just get by, meaning employers and employees accept frustration and marginal performance as normal. Intermixed with their success, brilliance and innovation are the dysfunctions, disconnections, silos, destructive internal competition and the wasted time and resources which plague organized efforts. We have all seen people not listening to one another, meetings that never get off the ground and momentum that goes flat. We have lived with unpleasant and unproductive working environments, from the top managers to the people on the floor.

How can an executive design team or a project team develop the ability to respond to change? How does a group of people who are committed to accomplishing a common goal develop the athleticism to stay in the game? And when their performance gets bogged down, how can they get back on their game?

Default [Stale, Stagnate] Thinking

A common question facing our clients is how to improve the collaborating ability of their existing organization. They want to inspire employees and generate fresh ideas but they lack the ability to break the habit of what I call, *default thinking*. On top of a habitual way of thinking about their operation are uncertain supply chains, breakdowns in interdepartmental communication and the disruptive effect of people's personal lives.

If, on the other hand, the members of an organization can see the entire operation and think and act as if they owned its success and as if they personally mattered, how many of the common problems would simply vanish? If they could combine their thinking and apply their pooled intelligence to the complex demands of the new market place, how much better solutions could be created? Everyone on a project team or in a department being able to think in concert with others would be a distinct improvement over what is common now.

Deliberate Thinking

Because the marketplace is more unpredictable than we have known in recent history, your organization's most valuable asset is the capacity of your people to meet the changes. Accessing this capacity lies in developing teams of people who know how to think together.

In order to create a future you have never before seen, you need all the wisdom and intelligence available. That wisdom and intelligence are in the people who work around you every day. Either you will be led by possibilities you deliberately conjure for the future or by the default way you have handled things in the past.

In any situation, the operative questions are a leader's point of highest leverage. Everything else is downstream from the questions because questions drive thinking.

For example, two different companies chose green building as a strategy for the future. Yet the choice played out quite differently in each case. This is because Company A was answering the question, "How can we serve 7 generations into the future?" And Company B was answering the question, "How can we look good to our client base?"

Breaking the Trance

How can a person or organization break the trance of stale, stagnate thinking? The answer we have found is strikingly simple. It is to ask questions. Become a student of questions. Practice using questions in conversations. Practice question-focused meetings.

Why are questions fundamentally important? Since questions are the foundation of thinking, skillful individual thinking begins with a person deliberately choosing the questions he or she engages in. Similarly, skillful *team* thinking begins with team members deliberately choosing the questions they will engage in *together*. Their every-day choices and activities become answers to the questions foremost in their minds. Deliberate thinking is less fragmented and more about performing as a skilled team. When the members of a team are trained in skillful thinking, distractions, tangents and personal agendas lose their pull because the group has developed a way of performing as a team which is much more satisfying and real.

In this question-driven model, a critical role of effective leadership is to ask and promote the development of fresh, germane questions. Fresh questions can keep a team moving forward and not falling back on past solutions. A well crafted question lingers in people's minds and continues to generate thoughts, conversations and actions related to accomplishing the team's objectives. Articulating deliberate questions and keeping them in the fore is the foundation of coordinated, coherent teamwork.

Creating a future requires questions developed and shared by the entire team and which reflect what the team and the leadership together understand is important.

A Community of Ranchers and Farmers, a Case Study

A large development company in Northwest Washington had been quietly seeking deals with the individual land owners and ranchers in a picturesque valley in order to acquire prime land cheaply. Seeing they were poised to lose not only a lot of money but stewardship of the land they loved, the owners came together for the purpose of protecting their investments. Leery of cooperating with one another with so much at stake, and with long histories of squabbles over water rights and land use, our first piece of business was to help them come up with a question which spoke to everyone's interests. The owners chose to focus their new organization on answering the question, "How can we organize ourselves to take care of all of us and the land in our care?" From their first meeting, everyone sharing the same, personally relevant question allowed them to relax old fears and set aside their narrower perspectives. They began to plan together for the future in a way they had never imagined was possible in the past, a way that ensured everyone was included.

That's what they did at the very beginning, a step which determined how the future has played out.

They appreciated the opportunity to step outside their personal concerns and join a cooperative effort to which they all made a difference and which benefited everyone.

What is Question Driven Leadership™?

Question-Driven Leadership™ (QDL) is a set of skills designed to provide an organization access to a more natural, more efficient level of performance. The Question Driven Leadership™ skills are uniquely effective because they combine understanding the way people think, i.e. with questions, with what is important, both to them personally and to the organization. QDL applies that enhanced collaborative ability to solving the practical, difficult problems immediately facing the organization.

Once a group has experienced working with QDL, no one wants to go back, because it is thrilling to participate with effective teamwork and accomplishment, especially on critical issues. For teams trained in QDL, problems are no longer avoided, but become opportunities to demonstrate prowess.

Your Situation

The purpose of our work is to help people realize how they can contribute to the future. The mission of Question Driven Leadership™ is helping members of organizations think together more skillfully.

If you are facing problems of fragmented effort, diluted drive or white knuckle planning, then contact us or find out about our programs.

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