April 2019

The Genius of Good Questions

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Recommended Citation
Erickson, Matthew (2019) "The Genius of Good Questions," Marriott Student Review: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 11. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/marriottstudentreview/vol3/iss1/11

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If you were to analyze every breakthrough and innovation in the history of man, you would most likely find a question at the heart of each one.

Albert Einstein once offered the world a gift arguably greater than all of his scientific contributions combined: a rare insight into the mind of a genius. “It is not that I’m so smart” he said, “but that I stay with the questions much longer.”

Einstein once asked himself, “What would happen if I were to travel alongside a beam of light?” Though it may seem a silly thought, this simple question led to the development of what we now know as the General Theory of Relativity. No wonder then that much of Einstein’s advice is summarized by his statement, “The important thing is to not stop questioning.”

When told to “not stop questioning”, we may conjure up in our minds an image of reticent children, impishly parroting “why” to exhausted parents who are trying to stem a flow of never-ending questions. Or maybe we are taken back down memory lane to the one class we had, where a fellow student incessantly fired half-baked queries at the teacher (much to the chagrin of everyone else in the room).

Einstein was clearly not encouraging us to infuriate others with pointless interrogations. Rather, he was warning us to avoid the human tendency of adhering to routine.

As humans we enjoy our routines, and in the right circumstances routines are extremely effective. Athletes and artists alike spend hours repeating exercises to train their bodies to react faster than thought. Engineers and doctors drill themselves on basic concepts to avoid potential disaster lest they forget something simple. Routine is not inherently repulsive, but the complacency that can come with routine is detrimental to innovation and progress.

If you were to analyze every breakthrough and innovation in the history of mankind, you would most likely find a question at the heart of each one. These questions challenged the status quo and dared to ask how things could be different.

If the catalyst for change is a simple, unassuming question, then shouldn’t innovation and change be easy? In theory, yes. But we are immediately confronted with a problem. How do we know which questions lead to breakthroughs? How do we find the right questions?

If you were to ask designers these questions, they would probably tell you that they have no clue which questions are correct, so better try them all.

Inside a Designer’s Mind

Design is a discipline that finds success by trying all approaches to a problem, in as many ways as possible until something works. Fascinated with this process, business
Empathize
Understand the problem you are trying to solve by gathering information.

Define
Clearly state what core problem you are trying to solve.

Ideate
Generate as many ideas and solutions as you can.

Prototype
Choose the best ideas that you want to develop more fully.

Test
Try out the developed ideas and evaluate your findings. Take what you learned and repeat the process.

Though the exact process still varies from company to company, the general steps of design thinking are as follows:

What problems am I trying to solve? How can I make my solutions better?

In other words, the process of design thinking becomes two overarching questions: “What problems am I trying to solve?” and “How can I make my solutions better?”

These two questions have guided the Ideo firm over the years as they developed products like the computer mouse and the laptop. We can see that this method, when applied correctly, generates astounding results. But what does it mean to apply the design thinking methodology correctly, and how is it done?

Asking the Right Questions

The design thinking model is only as good as the questions being asked. Products always reflect the process by which they were developed. Therefore, in order to create the best possible product using design thinking, we must learn how to repeatedly ask good, insightful, incisive questions. This seems akin to asking “How can we make lightning strike the same spot twice?” Fortunately, research and practice has shown us that, though we can’t always predict the next lightning bolt of inspiration, we can set up effectual “lightning rods” by creating environments conducive to generating good questions. Some of the most crucial aspects include:

Practice asking questions - Chuck Jones, the animator behind many beloved Looney Tunes characters, would often tell his students: “Every artist has thousands of bad drawings
Far From a Panacea

Questions alone won’t save a mismanaged or dying business. Thinking like a designer can’t cure everything, nor is it always the solution. Common design watchwords such as “fail often and early” can’t apply to operating theaters or air traffic control towers. Questions are tools, not solutions. Design thinking does not replace a business model, but enhances it. When used correctly, design thinking can be a powerful force for positive change in business, and perhaps even in our lives.

No matter the discipline, all innovation is framed by asking questions. If we can learn to harness the power of good questions, who knows what might come next? We might just find ourselves joining Einstein on a beam of light, headed off into the scary but promising unknown.

From Asking to Action

These ideas sound great in a vacuum, but how can we apply these principles in the real world where failure and deadlines exist?

When confronting failure, remember that no effort is wasted. When we ask questions that may not seem to lead anywhere, we have, at the very least, discovered which paths may or may not solve the problem at hand. View all iterations and questions as research and development. Every endeavor is, as Ed Catmull puts it, a fact-finding mission that will both help you determine a correct course, and provide you with possible tools down the road. The stigma associated with failure can deter us from asking further questions. Through design thinking, we can learn to embrace these failures and determine outcomes before too many resources are wasted. When we ask questions that may not seem to lead to the right environment - Studies show that when we are comfortable with our environment, we perform better. Research has also found that when we ask groups tough questions upfront, group members are more likely to open up and participate. Pixar president Ed Catmull maintains that hierarchy and judgement hinder open communication, hampering the creative process along with it. It is important to create an environment where status is of little importance, ideas can be wild, and meaningful participation is encouraged. Find the right group - In addition to ridding their meetings of hierarchy, Pixar strives to create a group of peers that can be comfortable. Though we should strive to cooperate in all groups, we will find that we work well with specific group compositions. Strive to find people you can speak plainly and openly with.

In order to create the best possible product, we must learn how to repeatedly ask good, insightful, incisive questions.

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