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The GENIUS of Good Questions

By MATTHEW ERICKSON



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?"¹ 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 routines², 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

Though the exact process still varies from company to company, the general steps⁵ of design thinking are as follows:

Empathize

Understand the problem you are trying to solve by gathering information.

Define

Clearly state what core problem you are trying to solve.

Ideate

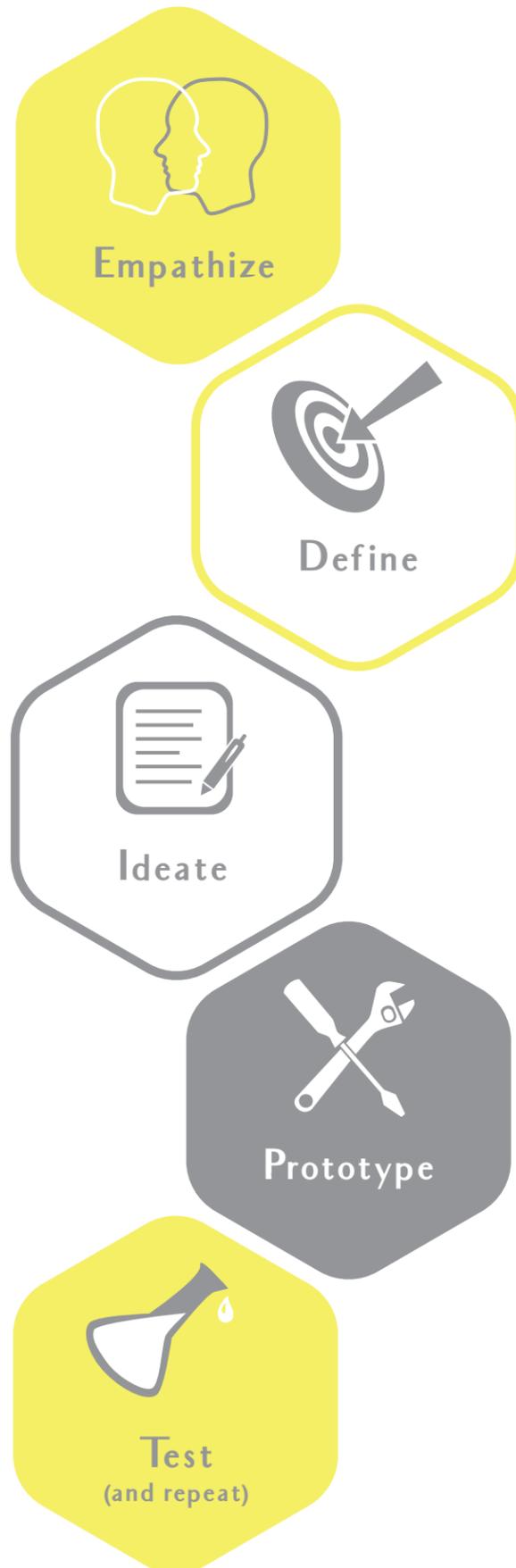
Generate as many ideas and solutions as you can.

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.



owners decided to develop a concrete methodology³ that attempted to consistently replicate a designer's thought process. The goal was to make this process more accessible to non-designers⁴. Business owners were looking for a reliable way to trigger innovation by asking the right questions as quickly as possible. The final product was dubbed "design thinking".

To put it simply, design thinking is a method that both structures and accelerates brainstorming⁶. Each step acts as a target that allows you to focus the questions being asked. Ideo, a design firm regarded by many as the paragon and champion of design thinking⁷, takes it one step further and states that the absolute essentials of design thinking are empathy and ideation⁸.

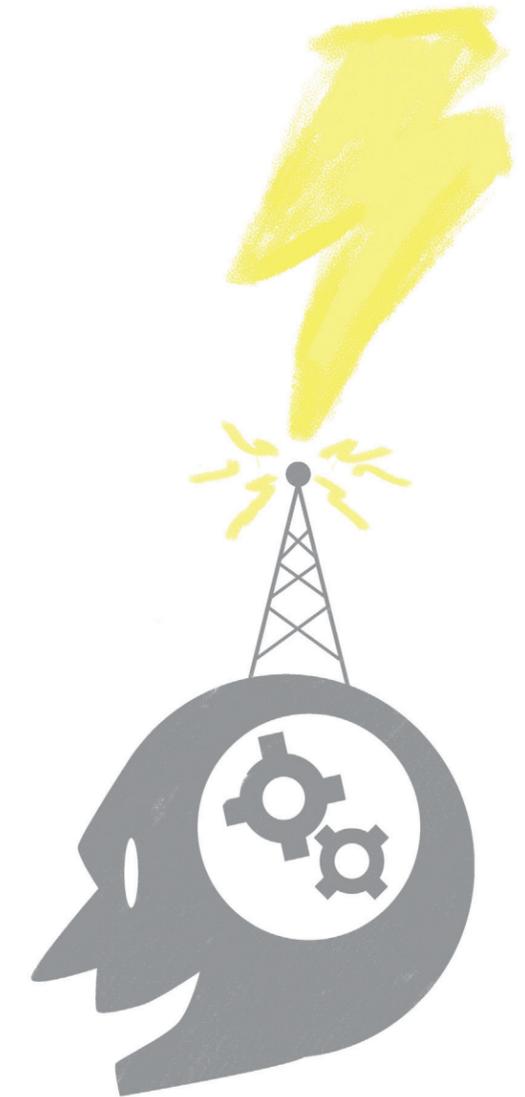
What problems am I trying to solve? How can I make my solutions better?

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 laptop⁹. 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

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in them, and the only way to get rid of them is to draw them out.¹⁰ According to recent studies, learning to ask insightful questions is a skill that can be practiced¹¹. The whole idea behind design thinking is to quickly produce as many ideas as possible¹². The faster you throw out the bad ideas, the faster you get to the quality questions¹³.

Create the right environment - Studies show that when we are comfortable with our environment, we perform better¹⁴. Research has also found that when we ask groups tough questions upfront, group members are more likely to open up and participate¹⁵. Pixar president Ed Catmull maintains that hierarchy and judgement hinder open communication, hampering the creative process along with it¹⁶. It is important to create an environment where status is of little importance¹⁷, ideas can be wild, and meaningful participation is encouraged¹⁸.

Find the right group - In addition to ridding their meetings of hierarchy, Pixar strives to create a group of peers that can be frank with one other. This so-called "Braintrust" is made up of individuals who are in similar roles, view each other as equals, and speak candidly without fear of attacking each other¹⁹. 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.

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 development²⁰. 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 road²¹. 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 spent fleshing out ideas²².

Similar to failure, deadlines can add to the iterative process. Creating deadlines ensures that ideas don't spin their wheels in development for eternity²³. No product will ever be perfect on the first try. Setting time restraints requires something to be developed, which can then be tested and revisited for a second iteration²⁴. At all stages of the design thinking process, remember that questions are not the product, but rather a method for refining our output²⁵.

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"²⁶ 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. 🚀



Notes

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¹³ Ponchoneri, director. The Deep Dive. YouTube, YouTube, 2 Dec. 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=M66ZU2PClCM.

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¹⁶⁻¹⁷ Catmull, Ed. Creativity, Inc. Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration. Random House Inc, 2015.

¹⁸ Ponchoneri, director. The Deep Dive. YouTube, YouTube, 2 Dec. 2009, www.youtube.com/watch?v=M66ZU2PClCM.

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²² Dam, Rikke, and Teo Siang. "Design Thinking: A Quick Overview." The Interaction Design Foundation, www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/design-thinking-a-quick-overview.

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