

“Unleashing the Power of Beautiful Questions”

by Warren Berger

In Silicon Valley and other centers of innovation, there’s a saying these days: “Questions are the new answers.” And no wonder, given that so many of the today’s biggest breakthroughs and billion-dollar paydays—Instagram, Nest, Square, Dropbox, Netflix, and many others—can be traced back to a founding question: *Why isn’t someone doing (X)? Or, What if we tried (Y)?*

But how do innovators, entrepreneurs, and top business leaders come up with game-changing questions? Is this kind of “innovative inquiry” a skill that can be developed and mastered? Can it be fostered and encouraged throughout an organization?

To answer those questions, I conducted my own years-long investigation—“an inquiry into inquiry.” I studied some of the world’s leading innovators—well-known entrepreneurs, business mavericks, tech disruptors—who also happened to be masters of the art of asking questions. I looked deep inside companies, such as Google and IDEO, that have questioning embedded in their DNA.

To understand the science of questioning, I talked to top neurologists and linguists, and partnered with The Right Question Institute, which is developing groundbreaking new techniques to help people become better questioners. To get a different, offbeat perspective, I even examined the way comedians, from the late George Carlin to Louis C.K., use questioning to challenge assumptions and “see” the world around them differently.

What did I learn from all this?

- That questioning is a skill we all have when we’re young—one that many of us neglect as we mature.
- That we can rekindle that inquiry flame, by learning basic techniques that are key to formulating insightful, powerful questions.
- That even those of us who already think of ourselves as good questioners can fine-tune our abilities and get better at it.

Why is it so important to do this? Because questioning enables us to solve problems. Adapt to dynamic change. Seize new opportunities. New research shows that those who question well are the most successful CEOs and business leaders. Questioning also makes people feel more engaged in their jobs—and an engaged, curious workforce has been correlated with higher corporate performance.

As I’ve begun to share this message—in my ongoing columns for *Fast Company* and *Harvard Business Review*, in my book *A More Beautiful Question*, and in my visits to companies like **Microsoft**, **General Electric**, and others—I’ve found that the subject of questioning energizes people and unlocks their creativity, inspiring them to ask their own beautiful questions.

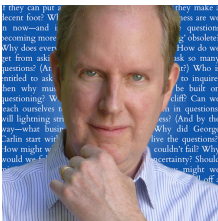
Some key takeaways from my sessions include:

- The importance of “stepping back” to question our everyday routines and assumptions.
- How basic question-forming tricks and tools, as used by Google and IDEO, can enable any individual or organization to get better at asking powerful questions.
- Why companies should consider having “Mission Questions” in addition to (or instead of) mission statements.
- The 5 questions every company should be asking in times of rapid change.
- How asking the right questions can help clarify focus and overcome fear of failure.
- Why it’s so important not just to raise questions but to **act** on them—by steadily progressing from “*Why*” to “*What if*” to “*How*,” the 3 critical stages of inquiry.

By way of lively presentations featuring surprising stories of breakthroughs that began with a question (from the cell phone to Gatorade), as well as practical tips and group exercises that inspire people to form their own beautiful questions, my goal is to help businesses and nonprofit organizations to develop their own “cultures of inquiry”—where curiosity, critical thinking, and innovative ideas are encouraged and fostered.

At the same time, I also believe it’s important to encourage more and better questioning in our schools, and to that end I continue to collaborate with the nonprofit Right Question Institute. A portion of my speaking fees goes toward helping RQI to bring its innovative question-formulation techniques into more and more classrooms—where today’s students are learning to become the “beautiful questioners” and future innovators of tomorrow.

Warren Berger



Innovation expert Warren Berger is a longtime journalist of the New York Times, Wired, and Fast Company and the best-selling author of six books, including *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas*. He shows how innovators and dynamic companies harness the power of inquiry – one of the most effective forces for igniting change in business and life. He has studied hundreds of the worlds leading innovators, red-hot start ups, designers, and creative thinkers to analyze how they ask game-changing questions, solve problems, and create new possibilities.

Learn more about Warren Berger at WarrenBerger.com

