



# Asking Big Questions

## A Catalyst for Strategy Evolution

Juanita Brown, David Isaacs and Nancy Margulies

“Stop asking so many questions,” many children hear at home. “Don’t give me the question, give me the answer”, many students hear at school, “I’m not interested in hearing what you don’t know, I want to hear what you do know”, many employees hear at work.

The injunction against discovering and asking questions is wide-spread in today’s family, educational, and corporate cultures. That’s unfortunate, because asking questions that matter is one of the primary ways that people have, starting in childhood, to engage their natural, self-organizing capacities for collaborative conversation, exploration, inquiry, and learning. Asking questions is essential for co-evolving the “futures we want” rather than being forced to live with the “futures we get.”

Our experience confirms that strategic learning can occur through webs of informal conversations and networks of relationships, both within the organization and among key external stakeholders. We are also discovering that choosing to ask and explore “big questions”—questions that matter to the future of the organization—is a powerful force. When people frame their strategic exploration as questions rather than as concerns or problems, a conversation begins where everyone can learn something new together, rather than having the normal stale debates over issues. In effect, people begin looking at “the map of the territory” together. The questions encourage them to wonder “What is the map telling us?” rather than to push preconceived ideas,

“A vital question, a creative question, rivets our attention . . . the creative power of our minds is focused on the question. Knowledge emerges in response to these compelling questions. They open as new worlds . . .”—Verna Allee. *The Knowledge Evolution: Expanding Organizational Intelligence*

## “WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO BE THE WORLD’S BEST INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH LAB?”

One of the best corporate examples of the way a “big question”—a truly strategic question—can galvanize collective conversation, engagement and action, has occurred at Hewlett-Packard (HP). The director of Hewlett-Packard Laboratories wondered why HP Labs was not considered the best industrial research lab in the world. As he thought about it, he realized that he did not know what being the “World’s Best Industrial Research Lab” (WBIRL) really meant.

One key staff member was charged with coordinating the effort. Instead of looking for “answers” outside the company, she encouraged the director to share his “big question” with all lab employees around the world. Instead of going on a senior executive retreat to create a “vision” and then “rolling it out,” she encouraged organization wide webs of inquiry and conversation, asking people what WBIRL meant to them, what it would mean personally for their own jobs, and what it might take to get there. She invited the entire organization to join in exploring the question, through informal, ongoing conversations; and she took advantage of the more formal internal survey and communication infrastructures. When the lab director acknowledged his “not knowing”—an uncommon stance for a senior executive—an open field was created for multiple constituencies and perspectives to be heard.

The conversation continued for several months. The WBIRL leader developed a creative “reader’s theater” piece which reflected eight hundred survey responses, detailing employee frustrations, dreams, insights and hopes. Players spoke the key themes as voices of the organization. with senior management listening. That made a difference to everyone’s thinking by literally patting a variety of points of view on stage together. But it wasn’t the only venue in which the “big question” was explored. Senior management met in strategic sessions, using approaches such as interactive

“Because questions are intrinsically related to action and spark direct attention, energy, and effort, and so are at the heart of the evolving forms that our lives assume”—Marilee Goldberg, *The Art of Asking Questions*

graphics and “storytelling about the future” to see new opportunities that crossed functional boundaries. In these strategic conversations they considered core technologies that might be needed for multiple future scenarios at HP Labs to unfold.

People throughout the labs, meanwhile were initiating projects at all levels, resulting in significant improvement in key areas of the lab’s work. Weekly Chalk Talks for engineers, “coffee talks,” for an Administrative Assistant Forum—and a Community Forum created opportunities for ongoing dialogue listening and learning. A WBIRL Grants Program provided small stipends for innovative ideas, enabling people to act at the corporate grassroots level, taking personal responsibility for work they believed in.

In all of these efforts the leader of the WBIRL project spent most of her time “helping the parts see the whole” and linking people with complementary ideas together. The rich web of connections that these informal efforts fostered were critical. They enabled the collective knowledge and competence HP Labs to become increasingly visible to itself, the rest of HP, and to the outer world.

And yet while productivity was improving rapidly, something was missing. During an informal conversation while planning for a “Celebration of Creativity” to acknowledge what had already been accomplished one of the lab engineers spoke up. She wondered what was really different about HP that distinguished it from any other company which wanted to be the best in the world. She said, “What would get me out of bed in the morning would be to become the best *for* the world.”

Suddenly a really “big question” had emerged. What would it mean for HP Labs to be the best both *in* and *for* the world?

A senior engineer created an image of what “for the world” meant to him. It was a well known picture of the founders of HP looking into the backyard garage where the company began. He added a beautiful photo of planet earth placed inside. This picture became the symbol of “HP for the World”.

For more detail and perspective, see the article by the initiator or coordinator of this effort, Barbara Waugh, the worldwide personnel manager of HP Labs. The article is: ‘The Self-Organizing Transformation of Hewlett-Packard Laboratories,’ by Kristin Cobble and Barbara Waugh, available at: <http://www.cobbleandcompany.com>

A “town meeting” of 800 Palo Alto employees with live satellite hook-ups enabling a global conversation focused on the question, “What does ‘HP for the World’ mean to you?”

The “HP For the World” image has now spread throughout the company— appearing in lobbies, featured in recruiting brochures, and offered as executive gifts, More than fifty thousand posters have been purchased by HP employees around the world, stimulating a growing network of conversations about the meaning of the big question for the future of the company.

In the course of this exploration, people rediscovered that the company founders, Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard, had always maintained a commitment, as Packard put it, that “the Hewlett-Packard company should be managed first and foremost to make a commitment to society” Now growing numbers of people throughout HP are reconnecting to that founding governing idea—stimulating investigations into breakthrough technologies for education, remote medical care for third world nations, and a sensor net for global environmental issues.

As part of this effort, the same senior engineer who had created the “for the world” poster image was persuaded to pursue a twenty-five-year-old dream: To create a mile-long educational diorama, placing o human life in the context of evolutionary history, In 1997, this work—*A Walk Through Time: From Stardust to Us*—was featured at the annual State of the World Forum, There, the question of what it means to be for the world was posed to global leaders gathered from every continent. Public and private partnerships are now evolving from these conversations.” Clearly, this is a powerful question that “travels well.”

#### BIG QUESTIONS AND STRATEGIC THINKING

This approach to discovering and asking the “big questions”—strategic questions for which we truly do not have answers—is grounded in the assumption that stakeholders in “any system already have within them the wisdom and creativity to confront even the most difficult challenges. Given the appropriate context and support, members of an organizational community can often sense where powerful strategic possibilities and opportunities for action may lie.

Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald’s, launched his company to its preeminent market position by posing a simple but powerful Strategic question—a “big question” to his colleagues: ‘How can we assure a consistent hamburger for people who are traveling on the road?’

Is it simply “luck” that enables us to stumble onto questions that really matter for strategic thinking? Or can we actually design processes that make it more likely for those questions to emerge?

“Discovering strategic questions,” says one colleague, a senior executive at a major multinational corporation, “is like panning for gold. You have to care about finding it, you have to be curious, and you have to create an anticipation of discovering gold, even though none of us may know ahead of time where we’ll find it. You head toward the general territory where you think the gold may be located, with your best tools, your experience, and your instincts.”

To evoke strategic thinking based on discovering powerful questions, several activities may be useful. They may not apply to all situations and they may not always follow the same sequence—but they suggest ways that formal and informal processes can co-evolve to support individuals as well as teams in discovering “gold” for themselves.

- **Assessing the landscape:** Get a feel for the larger context in which you are operating. Scan the horizon as well as the contours of the current business and organizational landscape, at whatever level of systems or project you are working with. Like trackers in the mountains, look for obvious and subtle signals. Notice indicators that point to storms as well as to sunny skies. Allow your curiosity and imagination to take the lead as you begin to identify the many questions that the business landscape reveals, it will be tough, but important, to frame your findings as questions, rather than as concerns or problems. To help in framing those questions, ask yourself: “How does A relate to C and what questions does that suggest? if X were at play here . . . what would we be asking? What is the real question underneath all this data?”
- **Discovering core questions:** Once you think you’ve posed most of the relevant questions (and there may be many of them), look for patterns. This is not a mechanical process, even though it can be disciplined and systematic. You are on a treasure hunt, seeking the core questions—usually three to five—which, if answered, would make the most difference to the future of your work.

- Cluster the questions and consider the relationships that appear among them. Notice what “pops up” in order to discover the deeper themes that the initial questions reveal.
- Creating images of possibility: Imagine what your situation would look like or be like if these “big questions” were answered. Creating vivid images of possibility is different from pie-in-the-sky visioning, especially if people with a variety of perspectives have participated in the earlier stages of the conversation. This part of the conversation can also provide clues for evolving creative strategies in response to the “big questions.” It often reveals new territory and opportunities for action while remaining grounded in real life.
- Evolving workable strategies Workable strategies begin to emerge in response to compelling questions and to the images of possibility that these questions evoke. Of course, the cycle is never complete. Relevant business data, ongoing conversations with internal and external stakeholders, informal conversations among employees, and feedback from the environment enable you to continually assess the business landscape—revealing new questions.

• Many organizations are stuck in a “problem-solving orientation,” when it comes to strategy. They can’t seem to shake the focus on fixing short-term problems, or seeking immediate (but ineffective) solutions. Simply by moving their attention to a deliberate focus on essential questions, they can develop an inquiry-oriented approach to evolving organizational strategy. In a knowledge economy, this approach provides an opportunity for developing the capability of strategic thinking in everyone, and for fostering sustainable business and social value.

## A Powerful Question :

- Is thought provoking
- Challenges assumptions
- Generates energy
- Focuses inquiry and reflection
- Touches a deeper meaning
- Evokes related questions

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