Developing a Culture of Questioning

or Don't Tell, Do Ask

by Ted Thomas and James Thomas

A couple of decades ago, a young basic trainee at Fort Dix, NJ, was carrying a bucket of white paint and accidentally dropped it, causing a sizable splotch in the middle of a road. Fearful of the reaction of his drill sergeants and in a panic about his future, he quickly thought about what he could do to keep from getting in trouble. There was nothing at hand to clean up the spill, and it would be next to impossible to clean all of the paint off the road. He suddenly hit upon the idea of taking the random splotch of paint and forming it into a perfect circle so that it looked like someone had purposely painted it there. He took his brush and added a little more paint to get a good circle. He hurriedly went back to his barracks and told a few of his fellow trainees what he had done. No one in authority was the wiser for his accident. Twelve years later and now a noncommissioned officer (NCO), this Soldier had an opportunity to return to Fort Dix. Over the years he often wondered what had happened to the white paint on the road. Surely by now the weather had erased his blunder, or the road had been resurfaced and covered his handiwork. While at Fort Dix, he could not resist the temptation to go where he had spilled the paint to see what remained. When he arrived, to his amazement, he not only found the dot, but he discovered that it had been freshly painted.[1]

People may think that only in the military could someone accidentally spill paint, turn the spill into a white dot, and then return years later to discover that the dot was repainted over and over again, without anyone asking why the dot was there in the first place. Behavior like this may be more common in organizations than one would think. Figuratively speaking, there are "white dots" in most organizations. "White dots" are the things we do because we have always, done them

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that way and never questioned why. They may have been done to cover up a mistake or perhaps there was once a valid reason. Organizations that continue to do things the way they have always been done become irrelevant and less effective. Without periodically questioning the status quo, an organization can decline to the point of extinction. Periodically examining how things operate and asking why "white dots" exist in our systems is essential to staying competitive in a changing and uncertain environment.

Corporate America often finds itself wrestling with "white dots." When faced with a changing and uncertain future, some companies make decisions allowing them to survive, others do not and face obsolescence. The typewriter industry provides an example of how one company approached a changing market. Smith Corona, a company that made typewriters before it went out of business during the personal computer revolution, killed a partnering effort with Acer computers because the board of directors believed the Acer product line "wasn't growing fast enough." Mike Chernago, a former Vice President of Operations for Smith Corona, commented on this decision saying, "... at the time, the executives thought that Smith Corona was never going to be put out of business. It was hard to imagine that the typewriter would be annihilated in just 10 years."[2] When faced with the changing dynamics in the marketplace, Smith Corona executives did not challenge their beliefs. Instead of asking how to build a better typewriter, they should have asked, "what is the nature of our business," and "how do we best position ourselves for the future?" When they had an opportunity to partner with a computer company, the leadership of Smith Corona was busy painting white dots on a road that was getting ready to shut down.

The correct answer to the wrong question will not produce the correct solution. Questioning takes time, practice, and perseverance. In a world of fast computers, fast food, and fast cars, organizations often do not take the time required to create a climate where people feel free to ask the right questions. Politicians, government leaders, and chief executive officers all need to learn how to create a questioning culture.

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Importance of Questioning

A culture that encourages questioning does many great things for an organization:

- It helps the organization define its mission and vision.

- It keeps the organization focused.

- It allows creativity to flow, innovative ideas to be presented as opportunities, and routines to be questioned and improved.

- It creates a climate that encourages adaptability, flexibility, and creativity.

- It helps identify and solve problems, question assumptions, look for interdependencies, and examine different points of view.

These are organizational behaviors necessary to survive in uncertainty. Questioning can help organizations look inward at its own biases, methods, and culture, thus enabling it to not only survive, but to thrive in a volatile and quickly changing environment.[3]

A questioning culture critically examines the logic behind the status quo to find the right questions to ask. If President George W. Bush had had an effective questioning culture established among his advisors, he may not have expanded our national goals to include "spreading democracy in the Middle East," and

touting it as an essential element to winning the war on terrorism.[4] One of the first questions the President and his advisors may have asked before establishing this goal was, "What are the conditions necessary for democracy to work in a country?"[5] This question challenges the assumption that democracy will work in Middle Eastern nations and cultures. This assumption may or may not be valid. Perhaps a more appropriate question to ask was, "What is the best form of government for that particular country or region to succeed?" The answer to this question may have necessitated a significantly different approach to the region and vastly change the execution of U.S. foreign policy for that area. At the very least, the answer may have prompted President Bush not to make such a socio-centric and, possibly, culturally-insensitive statement. Presidents surround themselves with advisors who have strong opinions based on their ideological beliefs and cultural patterns. Presidents may be better suited by surrounding themselves with people who can ask the questions through the lens of a different culture and perspective.

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Our strategy in Iraq floundered for years. It was not until senior leaders put together a guiding coalition—one that began asking questions that challenged existing perceptions, did the situation begin to turn toward an acceptable solution. Because of our mental models, we sometimes make assumptions causing us to pursue answers to the wrong questions.[6] Answering the wrong question will not achieve long-term success.

An open and questioning culture allowed the coalition to realize and capitalize on the Sunni awakening. However, yesterday's solution has morphed into today's problem of threats and challenges from the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL). Other new and developing issues in the South China Sea, Ukraine, and many other places present complex and uncertain situations requiring the U.S. government to ask the right questions and make hard choices based on finding the answers. Reinforcing failure usually does not work.

Characteristics of a Questioning Culture

How do you know if you are part of an organization that has a questioning culture? Professor Michael Marquardt of George Washington University gives six hallmarks of an organization with a questioning culture. The leaders and people in the organization:

1. Are willing to admit when they don't know.

2. Encourage questioning.

3. Develop the skills to ask questions in a positive manner.

4. Focus on empowering questions and avoid disempowering ones.

5. Emphasize the process of questioning and not just finding the "right answer."

6. Accept risk taking and reward it, even when it doesn't work.[7]

Questioning causes us as individuals to revisit the cognitive frameworks that help us to organize and process new information. The same is true of an organization. Sometimes the organization needs to admit it does not know what it does not know. Questioning what information is used to arrive at decisions can help refine how the organization gathers and processes information, which can improve overall organizational effectiveness.

A questioning organization is one that

fosters learning. Its members are encouraged to ask questions and to develop their skills in questioning. A questioning culture is determined by the types of questions the leaders ask and by the freedom with which their subordinates ask questions of their leaders. When the lowest ranking person in an organization can freely ask a question, it allows anyone and everyone in that organization to be part of solving problems and allows the organization to take ownership of fixing itself. However, questions in and of themselves are not always positive. Sometimes they can cause damage.

Questions can be used as a hammer to bludgeon people. They can be used in a judgmental manner to place blame, such as, "Why did you do something that stupid?" or "What's wrong with you?" or to fix responsibility, such as "This is your fault, isn't it?" Judging questions are asked when the questioner thinks he or she knows the answer. They are based on past events and are often used in an attacking mode. Disempowering questions such as, "Why didn't you do this task?" are used to manipulate, mislead, or detour, or they or carry baggage with them, such as "Why are you always behind schedule?" They often give the responder the feeling of being interrogated, for example, "Don't you know better than that?" or "Why can't you just do your job?"[8] Some people become very skilled at this type of questioning, but it does not elicit any type of productive reflection, only defensive efforts to cover up mistakes and prevent another onslaught.

On the other hand, questions can empower others to action. Empowering questions give the receiver of the question the feeling of being valued and that his or her opinion is worthwhile and respected. The questioner empowers others by asking such questions as, "How do you feel about…?" or "What do you think about…?" or "Help me understand why you proposed that option?" Subordinates can tell when the leader is asking questions to genuinely learn. Even using the same question with different body language and tone of voice can change the intent of a question. For instance, "What were you thinking?" is a question that could be a genuine question looking for information or it could be yelled in an accusatory manner to disempower the receiver of the question.

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Questions may have a time- and space-related aspect. The process of questioning is necessary to identify problems and to think through the answers, but the passage of time may change the conditions. The right answer today may not be the correct answer tomorrow. The right answer for a particular situation in one country or area may not work in another country or culture. In a complex, changing environment, right is fleeting, but the process of questioning to find answers is invaluable. As General Dwight D. Eisenhower so aptly put it, "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything."[9]

There is risk involved in both asking and not asking questions. If there is no right answer or the right answer changes frequently, then the organization needs to take risks to find solutions. When subordinates are punished for taking risks, the culture will eventually eliminate the risk takers who ask the hard questions to drive change. An organization that does not learn how to evaluate and take prudent risks will not adjust fast enough to remain relevant in a quickly moving and changing environment. In business or war, stagnation means death, since there is always a competitor eager to take advantage of weakness. Leaders set the tone for adapting and changing their organizations, and questioning can be a vital part of the process.

If we are not careful, we can all become

prisoners of our past models of behavior. Asking questions that challenge the status quo and how we see the world can be unsettling. For example, examining operations for obsolete tasks, positions, or functions may correctly lead some employees to believe that their job security is threatened. This fear can result in resistance to eliminating even outmoded and useless procedures. So how does an organization overcome this resistance? One method is to establish a questioning culture.

> **If people are always told what to do, they become reluctant to ask questions.**

Obstacles to Fostering a Questioning Organizational Culture

There seems to be three major obstacles to fostering a questioning organizational culture. One is a culture of telling instead of asking. If people are always told what to do, they become reluctant to ask questions. Militaries and other hierarchical organizations often rely on directing people with little consideration for allowing questions. The second obstacle is expertise. The more experienced people become in a field, the less they ask questions and the more they feel they have the right answer. The third is a person's status or role. The higher in rank or position, especially in a hierarchical organization, the more they feel expected to direct people and have the right answers.

Culture of tell

Edgar Schein, notable management professor from Massachusetts Institute for Technology, states that we "all live in a culture of Tell and find it difficult to ask, especially to ask in a humble way."[10] Government organizations often rely on directing people with little consideration for allowing questions. However, there are many times when questioning can improve the

organization. In a questioning culture there has to be psychological safety that allows subordinates to question their leaders without fear of reprisal and threat of losing their jobs.

Schein poses a very important question leaders can ask as a measure to determine the level of psychological safety in an organization: "If I am about to make a mistake, will you tell me?" If there is not enough candor and safety built into an organization's culture to honestly answer yes, then the next question becomes what do we need to do differently to develop and create that kind of culture?[11]

While prevalent throughout government, the culture of "tell" is especially evident in the military. General Stanley McChrystal echoed the sentiment of telling and directing that is prevalent in the military. In his book *Team of Teams*, he states: "I expected myself to have the right answers and deliver them to my force with assurance. Failure to do that would reflect weakness and invite doubts about my relevance. I felt intense pressure to fulfill the role of chess master for which I had spent a lifetime preparing." However, McChrystal also reflected that he had to become more of a gardener as a leader. He needed to be able to create the seedbed for ideas to grow. He had to learn the art of asking the right questions in order to be successful.[12]

Developing a questioning culture requires unlearning old behaviors and learning new ones. A questioning culture allows people to question long-standing organizational policies and processes. People should feel that there is sufficient trust in the organization so that asking questions is not only acceptable, but desired. The freedom to challenge the status quo helps people to see the need to change. When people discover the need to change in collaboration with others, they may also discover how change will allow them to become more valuable to the company. As the members of an organization come to believe they are part of finding the problem and

contributing to providing solutions, they are well down the road to committing to the success of the organization.

Expertise

Every organization needs people who are experts in their field. However, sometimes experts who know a whole lot about something disadvantages an organization. The more people study something, the more convinced they become of the correctness of their opinion and the less able they are to think objectively. As Colin Powell, former Secretary of State and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated in his "18 Points of Leadership," "Experts often possess more data than judgment." He goes on to say "that even the pros may have leveled out in terms of their learning and skills. Sometimes even the pros can become complacent and lazy."[13] The more people are considered experts, the less likely they want to appear as if they are not, and the harder it becomes for them to assume the role of learners again. If the experts do not know the answer, then they are obviously not experts. Experts can become subject to the disease of certainty, which leads to a hardening of attitudes. These attitudes can translate into not asking questions other than to gather data in order to fit the information into a preconceived notion of their truth.

For most Americans, years of public schooling have shaped our mental models of questioning. For many years the American school model was for students to regurgitate information in response to questions posed by teachers. Clayton Christensen, Harvard business professor known for his study of innovation, said that, "Indeed, most of the academic world behaves as if we believe that the critical skill society needs of us is to know the right answers. Too often, as a result, we overlook an obvious fact: finding the right answer is impossible unless we have asked the right question."[14] The mental model, which we all have from school,

is reinforced in military organizations. A leader asks the questions, while subordinates find the answers. In hierarchical cultures such as the military or government, leaders are promoted on their ability to get answers quickly and get things done. Too often we do not reward leaders who take a moment to reflectively question why things are done. Sometimes we do not value those who question the "white dots." Reacting to a situation that is not time sensitive without pausing to ask key questions can be a recipe for disaster.

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Status

In hierarchical organizations, one's position indicates status and the flow of information that a person can control. Too many leaders look upon questions as a challenge to their authority instead of an opportunity to learn, grow, and become more aware.

Most organizations tend to become very hierarchical and bureaucratic as they become bigger and older. These aged organizations are "exemplified by conformity, groupthink, parochialism, dogmatism, intolerance, and anti-intellectualism."[15] Novel ideas tend to be treated as threats and dismissed. Instead of using judgment and experience, routines become the default. Promotions often create hubris in leaders, which causes them to have a difficult time admitting ignorance. In hierarchical and highly centralized organizations, leaders are usually reluctant to admit their failings and shortcomings openly, trying to keep an image of infallibility, even refusing to learn from their past mistakes.[16]

With higher levels of responsibility comes the need to consider alternative perspectives and to question existing paradigms. Often,

subordinates who ask questions can quickly get marginalized. As a result, they do not get promoted to positions where the need for questioning is more important. The consequence is that those who are good at finding answers get promoted while those who think reflectively and ask probing, thought-provoking questions become seen as a threat and get passed over. Our systems often flush out those who we need the most to help identify the "white dots."

The Leader's Role in Developing a Questioning Culture

A questioning culture cannot emerge or thrive without the help of leadership. The leader has to set the example by asking thought-provoking questions and encouraging the same from all within the organization. Without support from the leadership, a questioning culture is next to impossible. In a hierarchical organization, the boss is normally promoted due to length of time or because of expected knowledge. Bosses do not want to look stupid or uniformed. Their role, status, and accompanying ego may dictate that they need to know the answer. They may be embarrassed or uncomfortable when confronted with questions they do not know or understand. This attitude can easily stifle questioning.

Developing a foundation in critical thinking is a good place to start in developing skills for a questioning culture. Critical thinkers ask such questions as what is the purpose, what are the different points of view and perspectives involved; what are the implications and consequences of different decisions; what is the problem or issue at hand; what are the relevant facts and data available; what are the assumptions being made, what concepts, theories, principles, or models are involved; and what are the conclusions and possible solutions.[17] For a questioning culture to exist, the leader needs to model it, encourage it, and reward it.

Leaders need to seek out and encourage

Leading a Questioning Culture

- **Critical thinking role model**

- **Seek divergent views**

- **Curiosity**

- **Listener**

- **Humility**

- **Accept Risk**

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divergent and diverse opinions and perspectives, not punish them for being divergent and diverse. Actions speak much louder than words. Movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn Jr. said, "I don't want any yes-men around me. I want them to tell me the truth even if it costs them their job."[18] An attitude such as this of punishing those who tell the truth will not encourage candor or frankness and will result in exactly what the leader does not want, a collection of yes men. Followers provide a barometer of the atmosphere of an organization as to whether or not it allows questions to flourish. Leaders who surround themselves with like-minded subordinates are often deluded into thinking their organization is open and free to allow change and growth because there is little creative abrasion. Organizations need creative tension to flourish to allow the freedom of thought and discussion necessary for a questioning culture.

A questioning culture is founded on a desire to learn and on genuine curiosity and interest. It once again starts with a learning attitude from the top and moves on down. If people have the attitude that they know all the answers, then there is no reason to learn, to ask questions, or to look for ways to improve. Asking for opinions and understanding lines of reasoning become opportunities to learn for both the giver and the receiver of the question. To promote a culture of questioning, leaders should adopt an attitude of inquisitiveness. Engaging others with thoughtful

questions and really listening to their answers are keys to inquiry.[19]

The questioning leader needs to listen. If leaders do not listen, there is no need to ask questions. In fact, leaders need to not only listen, but to also listen for what is not being said in order to question further to get to the root of an issue. They should pay attention to the content, the emotion in the person delivering the content, and to their own emotions. Listeners should put their internal filters on hold to prevent jumping to conclusions too early and forming false perceptions that may stick. Listening means suspending judgment and often restating what has been said in order to ensure mutual understanding. Leaders who listen gain understanding because they sincerely want to learn, which may involve some reflection to process the answers received and may require returning with further questions to clarify understanding.

Questioning requires some humility. People should accept that they may need to learn from others, regardless of their position. A volatile and constantly changing environment requires leaders to face situations for which they are unprepared. In such situations, an effective leader must exercise some humility by either admitting they do not know how to solve a particular problem or by asking their subordinates for help. This can be difficult in organizations where people are promoted because of their experience and expertise. It may be quite a change in organizational culture for the leader to genuinely ask and solicit the opinions of others on matters of importance and to openly admit they do not know everything.

The leader also has to be willing to give up a bit of control, which involves taking risk by allowing others to take risk and to underwrite their failure, if necessary. Questions that allow the questioner to maintain control of the conversation will never lead to a questioning culture and will not identify the "white dots" in organizations. Questions that maintain control are ones that ask for data or information; are close-ended and have a specific answer; are confrontational, rhetorical, or leading; are judging in nature or make statements; or are involved in coaching or evaluating others. If questioners already know the answer to the question, they are maintaining control as well. Questions that give control over to the person questioned involve turning the questioner into a student who wants to learn. They are questions with learning as the objective, are open ended, and empower the persons answering the question to really think and try to come up with answers or their own questions. For instance, instead of asking what are the three steps to do something, ask if there is a fourth step or if something is missing.

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Leaders who are able to relinquish control and show a desire to learn from others encourage creativity, flexibility, and adaptability. People can actually increase their self-confidence when they believe they do not have to give the appearance of knowing everything. In effect, the organization can begin to access its collective brain power. The rewards can be great, as General George Patton indicated when he said, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."[20]

Conclusion

The "white dots" are out there in every organization. Questioning is essential to the health and well-being of any organization, but especially one in which the conditions for

success change rapidly. It takes a shift in attitude for leaders to create an organization where people ask questions with genuine curiosity and with a desire to learn. The role of questioning is to find the right problem to solve by creating dialogue, showing respect for other's opinions, and involving more people in the process. Three major ways questioning is hindered are through culture, expertise, and status. It is easy to maintain the attitude of a "tell" culture. It takes leaders to encourage subordinates to ask questions instead of just finding answers. As leaders progress higher up organizational ladders, the more important it becomes for them to foster a climate of questioning. Without the differing perspectives such a culture offers, the organization will not thrive.

As General Eric Shinseki said, "If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less." Questioning cultures allow changes to be made by empowering and creating initiative. They foster a culture of asking the right questions and not repainting random "white dots." A leader needs to understand where the organization is now. Does it have the characteristics of a questioning culture? Leaders then need to recognize the importance of their role in creating a questioning culture. A questioning culture needs leaders who think critically, who are curious and seek divergent views, who work to listen to others with humility, and who accept risk. Giving up some control is essential to creating an organization with a questioning culture that can find and deal with "white dots."

John Kotter characterized the main difference between leaders and managers as the difference between one who asks the questions and one who finds answers.[21] To build future strategic leaders, an organization has to teach and foster the ability to ask the right questions. If it does not, managers will be promoted into positions of leadership without experience in the critical questioning necessary to keep the organization viable and effective in a changing situation. They will be waiting for someone to ask them questions to answer, or they will continue to do what they know and what they have always done in the past. They will continue to repaint the "white dot." *IAJ*

NOTES

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4   Joel Roberts, "Bush: Democracy is on the March," CBS News, Washington, March 8, 2005, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/03/08/politics/main678778.shtml>, accessed on October 4, 2016.

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8   Ibid, pp. 64 and 78.

9   Dwight D. Eisenhower, speech given to the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference,

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10 Schein, p. 8.

11 Schein, p. 108.

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19 Schein, p. 5.

20 Brainy Quote, <http://www.brainyquote.com/search_results.html ?q=Never+tell+people+how+to+do+things>, accessed on March 25, 2015.

21 Marquardt, p. 171.