
Use Catalytic Questioning to Solve Significant Problems

By Hal Gregersen

For almost twenty years, I have refined a systematic approach to uncovering the right questions—those that start to unlock entirely different solutions and perspectives—with hundreds of teams around the world, from the C-suite to the shop floor.

The method, which I now call Catalytic Questioning, incorporates five simple, unconventional steps to help change our questions — and creatively solve significant problems both in our personal and professional lives:

Step 1: Find a white board or flip chart where your team can do its question-centric work (for what it's worth, standing up seems to jumpstart better questions than sitting down). Step back for a brief moment, take a deep breath, and try your best to check your assumptions at the door. Question-centric leaders like Pierre Omidyar, founder and chairman of eBay, consistently work at “wiping the mental slate clean,” tackling a problem with fresh eyes through fresh questions.

Step 2: Pick a problem that your team cares about intellectually and emotionally. Engaging head and heart matter—if your team doesn't care, the next steps will undoubtedly stall. Also, double check to make sure that the problem (or opportunity, for the optimists of the world) is one that you honestly don't have an answer to. It makes the quest much more intriguing.

Step 3: As disruptive innovators, from Albert Einstein to Jack Dorsey, put it, “Question everything!” Engage in pure question talk, with one team member writing down each question verbatim. This gives everyone the chance (especially introverts) to see each question, reflect a bit, and then create even better ones. Don't give preambles to the questions and don't devote any time or energy to answering them. Just ask. Ask as many questions as you can. Go for at least 50, perhaps 75. But don't give up when your mind goes blank around question 35. Savor the momentary dead space and

continue the search for even better, more provocative questions, which will come with patience and persistence. It usually takes 10 to 20 minutes to exhaust a group's questioning capacity. Push for exhaustion.

Step 4: Step back and decide which questions on your list seem most “catalytic,” or which ones hold the most potential for disrupting the status quo. Focus on a few questions that your team honestly can't answer but is ready and willing to investigate. Winnow your questions down to three or four that truly matter.

Step 5: Get to work! Find some answers. Questions alone might be clever, but as Jeff Dyer, Clayton Christensen, and I found in our research behind The Innovator's DNA, they rarely produce positive impacts. If you prefer observing the world to get answers, go out and make some systematic observations. If you love to network for new ideas, go talk to people who don't think or act like you (those from a different industry or country-of-origin are prime candidates) to get diverse responses to the questions. If you get new ideas by experimenting, go to work with a series of rapid prototypes—fast, cheap, virtual experiments to get instant feedback about which potential solutions matter most. After doing your homework as a team, regroup and use the best traditional brainstorming techniques to leverage all your new input into creating even better solutions to your problem. And if needed, engage the Catalytic Questioning process again to help deliver even deeper insight, and ultimately better solutions, to your challenge.

Becoming a Question Catalyst

At a recent World Economic Forum workshop, this five-step Catalytic Questioning process took 24 minutes. It rapidly engaged the group, turbocharged a subsequent brainstorming session (conducted right after by Tim Brown from IDEO), and helped identify several intriguing new areas of potential industry disruption. During the debrief, most participants agreed that asking nothing but questions was a surprisingly powerful tool for revealing innovative solutions. They left the session highly energized to become even better question catalysts within their everyday work.

Across the globe, I have seen the same process—and success—occur with thousands of executives and entrepreneurs, including Ahmet Bozer, president of Coca-Cola International, who realized, “if your questioning muscles have atrophied, it's time to start exercising those muscles.” Catalytic Questioning ensures this essential leadership skill improves over

time to unlock even better, more creative solutions. What you discover in this questioning quest might not only surprise you, but may also unearth an entirely new direction for your team, organization, or career.

Hal Gregersen is the Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank Chaired Professor of Innovation and Leadership at INSEAD. He is coauthor of the book ***The Innovator's DNA***, founder of the **4-24 project**, and a frequent **speaker** on leading innovation and change.

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About the author(s)

Hal Gregersen Hal Gregersen is the Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank Chaired Professor of Innovation and Leadership at INSEAD where he pursues his vocation of executive teaching, coaching, and research by exploring how leaders in business, government, and society discover provocative new ideas, develop the human and organizational capacity to realize those ideas, and ultimately deliver positive, powerful results.