

WANT A BIG IDEA? ASK BETTER QUESTIONS

When so much information is readily available to anyone online, the key to innovation is not gathering more data but rather asking more questions—the ambitious, frame-changing sort that send companies down unexpected paths of inquiry. So argues business journalist **Warren Berger**, author of the new book *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas*. Berger supplied the answers, for a change, in a recent conversation with *Inc.* editor-at-large Leigh Buchanan. Photograph by **ADAM KRAUSE**

Q

What makes a question “beautiful”?

A beautiful question reframes an issue and forces you to look at it in a different way. It challenges assumptions and is really ambitious. Often, these questions begin with the phrase “How might we...” They have a magnetic quality that makes people want to answer them, to talk about them, to work on them. They make the imagination race. The Polaroid camera came out of a 3-year-old girl’s asking, “Why do we have to wait for the picture?” That’s a beautiful question.

What questions don’t get asked early or often enough in innovation projects?

There are two kinds. First, the fundamental ones. Why are we doing this? What do people really care about? Second are the crazy questions. What if we did this backward? What if we were to subvert all the assumptions in the

field and do something that sounds ridiculous? Interesting ideas can come out of exploring impossible things. There’s a place for asking those out-there questions early on, when you are in the most open stage of thinking.

In *A More Beautiful Question*, Warren Berger cites the revelatory questions that inspired a number of successful innovations. These are a few:

What if we could map the DNA of music?

INNOVATION: Pandora

Why can’t everyone accept credit cards?

INNOVATION: Square

Why aren’t football players urinating more?

INNOVATION: Gatorade

Companies generally reward people for coming up with answers. How do you motivate employees to ask questions?

It has to start with leaders asking questions themselves. That’s a difficult adjustment, because a lot of leaders are trained to think, *People look to me for answers. If I start asking questions, it*

will shake their confidence. But great leaders do ask questions, and as long as they are interesting and ambitious, people don’t get freaked out. So it starts with the leader and flows downward to create a culture of inquiry, where people feel they can ask questions without necessarily knowing the answer. It drives me crazy when bosses say, “If you are going to bring a problem to me, you’d better have solutions.” Great questions don’t get answered in 10 minutes. They may take six months. You want people to bring you those great questions, and maybe the whole company ends up working on them.

You talk about replacing mission statements with questions. Why?

I think people can rally around a question more than a statement. A question tells you we are on a journey together: “How might we use robotics to make the world a better place?” A statement says we’ve done it already: “We use robotics to make the world a better place.” The statement is a little arrogant and maybe a little bit of a false claim. The question declares the great thing you want to do with your company. It’s much more empowering.