

What Blind Spot?

In our work with senior leaders, we most always are engaged to help organizations accelerate profitable growth or mitigate serious issues that can threaten the organization's future.

In attempting to shine a spotlight on areas of the company where it can improve and move toward its full potential, we've learned from some of history's greatest thinkers that asking a series of questions will eventually reveal the true nature of the problem or opportunity while illuminating possible solutions.

Cynics may believe that those who ask questions – doctors, lawyers, consultants and sales people at the top of their game are among the best at this – are simply borrowing your watch to tell you the time. There's some truth to this notion. But the reality is that asking questions of another person while listening intently to what they say (and what they *don't* say) while suspending judgment and – even harder – refraining from jumping to conclusions prematurely is an approach that can prove beneficial for those on the receiving end of the questions.

The Greek philosopher Socrates is regarded as the father of using questions to illuminate core truths. Today, the Socratic Method is recognized as one of the most effective forms of getting to the truth – whether it be for a person, a work team or an entire organization. Socrates believed that deep within everything concrete is the idea of the thing itself, or its essence. "Know thyself," Socrates said, noting that self-knowledge is the starting point of discovery because the greatest source of confusion is the failure to realize how little we know about anything, including ourselves.

Another way to think about how decisions are made is by considering your "blind spots." We all have them – we are simply oblivious to certain people, situations or even our own actions that others see all too clearly or in a completely different light.

Whether you're leading an organization, parenting a child, or attempting to sell your products or services to another person, asking smart questions is one of the most effective ways for uncovering a person's or organization's true wants, needs, hopes and fears. Asking questions is an effective way of revealing blind spots to those you seek to help.

Critical questions to ask

Voltaire, the 17th century writer, philosopher and lawyer, said that we should, "Judge a man by his questions rather than by his answers."

Over the years, we've developed five general categories of questions, and we almost always start an engagement or a strategic

planning process with this one: "*What do you want to celebrate one year from today?*" The difference between talking about "objectives" and making plans for a "celebration" changes the mindset of those answering the question.

A second group of questions begins by asking, "*How would you describe the company today?*" A follow-up question, "*How would your customers describe the company today?*" often reveals gaps between what leaders consider the company's current situation and where it needs to be to meet customer expectations. Based on answers we've gotten from some leadership teams, we wondered if these co-workers were describing the same company. We've also found that there are often many things a company does that its employees (including its senior leaders) take for granted – indications of hidden value that can be leveraged for the company's benefit. Other times, there's an inflated view of a process, product or service. Still other times, no one knows why things are done a certain way – they've just always been done that way and no one ever stopped to question why.

A third set of questions explores the ways in which a business interacts with its customers and prospects. *How does each step of your operation bring value to your customers?* Market leadership, after all, is defined by your customers and stakeholders.

And since value, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, research must be gathered to help shape objectives, strategies and to determine the value of your company's products or services. *What do customers and prospects like most and least about your company? What are the barriers customers and prospects must overcome to take the action we desire? What reward can we provide them for taking the action we desire?* While market research can be expensive, the most expensive research is none.

A cartoon showing two children playing in a sandbox underscores the importance of asking questions: "I still don't have all the answers," says one of the kids, "but I'm beginning to ask the right questions."

Ultimately, the question that only you as a leader can answer is this one: "*What changes are we committed to making?*"

Knowing yourself means understanding how you'll respond in the pressure-cooker environment that's often created by change. You'll find that your mettle as a leader is not truly tested until your principles are put to the test. This means principles aren't principles until they have the potential to cost you something. Money. Power. Position. Lives. Reputation.

Where are your blind spots?