

"AN EMPOWERING NEW VOICE FOR BUSINESS READERS, PHIL MCKINNEY  
WILL CHANGE YOUR MONDAY WITH HIS RULE-BREAKING APPROACH  
TO HARNESSING THE POWER OF INNOVATION."

—PETER GUBER, AUTHOR OF THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER *TELL TO WIN*

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# BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

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KILLER QUESTIONS THAT  
SPARK GAME-CHANGING  
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*KILLER QUESTIONS THAT SPARK  
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**PHIL MCKINNEY**

**H Y P E R I O N**

*New York*

## *Why Questions Matter*

*Judge a man by his questions, rather than by his answers.<sup>1</sup>*

—VOLTAIRE

One day when my kids were still little, I was sitting in the car with my daughter Tara. She was about four years old at the time, and as we drove down the street she noticed the curb along the side of the road and got curious about it. Suddenly I was fielding question after question about curbs. Why did we need them? What would happen if there weren't a curb? What were they made of? What's so good about concrete? What's concrete made of? Every parent has had a similar experience, but that afternoon sticks in my mind because it was one of the first times I turned to one of my kids and said, "You know what, I don't know the answer to that. Why don't you find out for both of us?"

When we got home, Tara ran to her room and started to try to figure out the answers to the questions. She was excited to find the answers *because* I hadn't known them, and I'd passed on the responsibility of figuring them out to her. What I realized at that moment was that

the natural curiosity of kids gets lost over time. As adults, we use our education and past experiences to solve the problems we face rather than relying on questions. It's these historical assumptions of what works that prevents organizations from generating new ideas. After all, you can't change your core beliefs about your organization or industry unless you change something in your perspective about your business, your industry, your customers, or yourself. Think of it this way: If you want to start generating new output, you first need new input. And the only way to get new input is to either find new sources of information and inspiration *or* find new ways of looking at the same existing information you've been looking at for years.

There are many ways to generate new input, but the most effective is to learn to ask the kinds of questions that can lead you to a real discovery. This is true both of the kinds of questions you ask other people, and the ones you pose to yourself. It's also true both in the straightforward semantic sense (*you need to be able to use words in order to phrase an effective question*) and in the larger philosophical sense (*you need to know how, why, and when to ask the right kinds of questions*).

In that moment with Tara, I realized there was a difference that questions can make in the discovery process. Learning how to effectively phrase, ask, and use questions became one of the pillars of my innovation philosophy.

## ***THE POWER OF QUESTIONS***

I've been fascinated by the power of questions, either good or bad, for my entire professional life. The more I thought about them, the more I began to notice how people used them. I started to see how some people had the innate ability to formulate and pose questions that propelled others to make investigations and discoveries of their own, and some people had the less-desirable ability to shut their listeners down with bad questions, poorly asked. I believe that a good question is one

that causes people to really think before they answer it, and one that reveals answers that had previously eluded them. I began to think more about how an individual could learn to ask good questions and avoid the pitfalls of asking bad questions. I also wondered whether a poor questioning technique could become a crutch, something that allows you to believe you are accomplishing something positive, when in fact you are doing the opposite.

As I listened to my children ask challenging questions of each other, I realized I had taught them a profound skill. By passing on a love of questions, I'd shared my belief in the importance of getting out there and proactively making our own discoveries about the world. My children weren't afraid or ashamed of not knowing an answer; instead they were invigorated by the process of finding it. I compared this attitude to the converse one that I'd seen throughout my career, namely employees who felt compelled to agree with their superiors or believed that saying "I don't know" would adversely affect their career. These men and women would have benefitted greatly from simply being empowered to admit that they didn't know how to ask good questions, and to seek out the relevant answers.

## ***HOW QUESTIONS WORK***

If you are going to start thinking about questions, it is helpful to understand what a fundamental shift it was for humans to learn how to ask them. According to primatologists, the great apes can understand and answer simple questions.<sup>2</sup> However, unlike humans, a great ape has never proven that it can *ask* questions. Nor has any other creature, at least in any way that's recognizable to us. Your dog can make his desires known to you, but he can't actually ask you to take him for a walk. All he can do is wag his tail and hope you figure out for yourself what he needs and wants. As a result, the ability to form a question might be the key cognitive transition that separates apes, and all other beings, from mankind. The desire to ask a question shows a higher

level of thought, one that accepts that your own knowledge of a situation isn't complete or perfect.

The natural world has some great examples of why this ability to think inquisitively is a critical survival skill. Have you ever seen an army ant mill? Army ants are an aggressive and nomadic variety of ant that moves constantly, unlike the ants that your kids display between glass at a science fair.<sup>3</sup> Army ants have the innate drive to follow the ant in front of them, which makes sense if you are a member of a colony on the move. This instinct allows them to move cohesively and maintain their colony, but it is also their greatest flaw. Every so often the head of an army-ant column runs into its tail. The ant who was leading the way sees an ant in front of it and the genetic programming kicks in; he goes from leader to follower, and the column of ants turns into a circle, or mill. The ants have no ability to break free from the circle, and they keep walking until they die.<sup>4</sup> The only thing that can save them is if there is a “broken” ant in the mill, one whose programming to “follow the ant in front” is missing or flawed in some way. This ant will step out of formation, the ant behind him follows, the mill is broken, and the colony saved.

Recent research validates this idea that “brokenness” is a key element to a questioning and creative spirit. Scientists have started to prove what most people in the tech or other creative spheres already know: If you want to be innovative, it helps to be a little bit “different.” True genius seems to come when extremely intelligent people have high levels of cognitive disinhibition. In other words, they are naturally smart people who don't filter the information they absorb and have the mental agility to process and use this information in an organized way.<sup>5</sup>

Now, I want to be clear that I am using terms like “brokenness” or “different” in the most positive way; after all, the core of this book is learning how to use questions to think differently—to cause your own version of cognitive disinhibition—even if it's not your automatic instinct. I believe that anyone can develop and harness this power through the use of provocative questioning and discovery.

## ***BAD QUESTIONS, GOOD QUESTIONS***

The more I started to look at questions and how essential they are to fostering creativity and innovation, the more I realized that there are *bad* questions and there are *good* questions. And within those good questions, some just aren't relevant to the process of ideation. The key to using this book is to develop the ability to separate the good, useful questions from the bad ones. Here's a quick guide:

### **Tag Questions**

During my search, I realized that some of the most important questions to avoid are ones that don't really ask for a response at all. For example, tag questions. Tag questions are statements that appear to be questions, but don't allow for any kind of answer except agreement. A tag question is really a declarative statement turned into a question, and used to get validation for the speaker's "answer." Family members, authority figures, or executives who want to appear to care about the opinion of another person, but really want their instructions carried out without discussion, often favor tag questions. A tag question can show that the speaker is either overly confident of his or her beliefs, or so insecure that he has to bully others into agreeing with him. Either way, his phrasing of the question shows that he is not willing to consider an alternative point of view. You're not actually being asked for an opinion, simply for a confirmation that you agree with them. When lawyers use tag questions in a legal setting, they are sometimes referred to as leading the witness, the questions being posed in such a way as to guide the person in a desired direction; that is how you should think of a tag question as well.<sup>6</sup>

That presentation was fantastic, wasn't it?

The new brochure will be based on the last version, won't it?

Tag questions can be incredibly damaging both to an individual and to an organization because they shut down the creative process. Say you've been tasked to come up with a new product but your boss

asks you to verify that “the new concepts that you are coming up with aren’t going to be *too* different from the old ones, right?” By asking this question, she has taken away any power from your team to go out and do something really new. The fundamental point of asking a question is to get information, input, or ideas. Any question that restricts people from feeling free to honestly answer it is offensive; it reduces the quality of information you’re going to get and makes the person being questioned feel that they are being dismissed.

Typically, a person who uses tag questions is a manager who believes that his role is to be directive. However, by doing so he misses out on the potential power of a team. Look at the way you communicate with your coworkers; if you find yourself asking tag questions, ask yourself why. Do you doubt their ability to come up with their own answers, or do you already have an answer in mind that you would like them to validate? If you are simply looking to get validation for what you already want or believe, this runs counter to every philosophy about generating new and innovative ideas. When I’m working with a team, I’ll always use a series of questions to see what they come up with, even when I already have an idea in my mind of what the answer may be. Even if I give them that answer, it’s always presented as a challenge for them to come up with something better.

### **Factual vs. Investigative**

After more searching and studying, I came up with two basic categories of good questions: factual and investigative. So, what are the differences between them? The objective of a factual question is to get information: “Do you want coffee or tea?” “How many units did we sell last week?” “Is there gas in the car?” You may not know the immediate answer to a factual question, but you know how to find it. There is no real discovery required beyond expressing your opinion, making a call, or looking at the gas gauge. Factual questions serve an important purpose in allowing us to communicate with one another and exchange information. They are limited in their ability to do anything more nuanced than gather information.



An investigative question, on the other hand, cannot be answered with a yes or a no and is much more useful for our purposes. By definition, it is a divergent question, meaning that there is more than one correct answer (unlike factual questions). It cannot be answered with one phone call or a quick check at some stats or figures, and it forces us to investigate all of the possibilities.

### **The Socratic Method**

So how do you generate some good investigative questions? One of my starting points is the Socratic Method. Socratic questions are, in their simplest definition, questions that challenge you to justify your beliefs about a subject, often over a series of questions, rather than responding with an answer that you've been taught is "correct." A well-phrased series of Socratic questions challenges you to think about why you believe your "answer" to be correct, and to supply some sort of evidence to back up your beliefs. At the same time, a Socratic set of questions doesn't assume you are right or wrong.

When using this method, Socrates would lead his listener to a deeper understanding of his own beliefs and how and why he justified them. When a student attempted to fall back on a belief prefaced by "I've heard it said that such and such is true," Socrates would gently push further, asking the student what he himself actually thought, until the student finally got to the heart of what he thought and believed. Socrates would also find contradictions in a student's expressed belief, and ask him questions that forced him to consider these contradictions. Ultimately, Socrates's goal was to help the student unveil his own thoughts and his own beliefs, and see them clearly for the first time. It was only by finally articulating one's own thoughts and bringing them into "open air," he felt, that the student could fully understand the depths of his own knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

Socrates believed that knowledge was possible, but believed that the first step toward knowledge was a recognition of one's ignorance. It's the same in the idea-generation process; the first step to freeing yourself to find innovations is to recognize that the knowledge you

currently have is insufficient, and that you need to go out and discover new information that will lead to new products or concepts.

My interest in the Socratic Method, and the glaring gap I found between Socrates's method of teaching with questions and the way innovation and ideation is "taught" today, started me down the path of searching for specific questions that would challenge others to find opportunities for new ideas—questions I now call Killer Questions. It took me a while to determine them, but in the end I hit upon the old engineering standby: Find something that works, and figure out why.

### ***THE KILLER QUESTIONS***

I started writing the Killer Questions when I was in my short-lived "retirement" early in 2001. As I relaxed in the Virginia countryside, my mind started to flash back to various experiences I'd had during my working life. Over the course of the preceding twenty years, I'd seen dozens of highly innovative products and ideas come to market. I started to ask myself a broad range of investigative questions about how and why successful products work. The most important issue seemed to be that of understanding the thought process that led to these discoveries.

One memory from my old career jumped into my head. In late 1994, I was sitting in a limo in a traffic jam in Bangkok. We'd been in traffic for half an hour, and I had only twenty-eight minutes until a critical meeting started. The limo was cooled to American standards, and the German steel and glass kept the chaotic noise and rush of people outside the doors. At twenty-three minutes, I started to feel a little anxious; the car wasn't moving, but the clock was. I tapped the driver on the shoulder and tried to communicate my sense of urgency, but he wasn't interested. He knew we weren't going anywhere soon, and I wasn't doing myself any favors by worrying about it. At eighteen minutes to go, I jumped out of the car and hailed a motorcycle taxi.

Thai motorbike taxis are 125ccs of terror. I've ridden motorcycles before, but I can honestly say I've never felt as close to disaster as I did

then, riding pillion on a tiny Honda motorcycle, going flat-out through the sweltering heat with my briefcase clutched to my chest. As we swerved through the tuk-tuks, pedestrians, and stalled cars, I found myself thinking about the difference between the super-cheap motorcycles that swamp the streets of Southeast Asia and the ultraluxe bikes manufactured by companies like Harley-Davidson. How had something that started as cheap and efficient transportation for the American working man evolved into a big-ticket luxury item? Who was the first person who thought, *Can we take our mass-produced product and customize it? What if we stop trying to make our product cheaper, and go the other way? What happens if we double, maybe triple, the price and make this a luxury item instead?*

I thought about the contrast between a very mainstream product (the inexpensive motorcycle) and the one that had breakout success (Harley-Davidson). Could I reverse-engineer this evolution of a product, and figure out the question that could lead someone to come up with that idea? And if I could reverse the thought process that led to innovative products and find the questions that might have generated these ideas, would those same questions lead to new discoveries and new products in the future? With these questions in mind, I wrote down this first question—*Who is passionate about your product or something it relates to? Why or why not?*—on a blank white index card and resolved to keep doing so each time I came across other questions that seemed to spark especially good ideas.



As the months passed, these cards started to multiply, so I decided to put together a card deck that I kept in a big binder clip. Before each innovation workshop I'd flip quickly through the set and pull out a few questions to ask the participants. I constantly tested the questions in workshops to see which questions would generate the best ideas. I kept the ones that worked and tossed the ones that didn't. Sometimes

I realized that a question had the potential to spark a good idea, but I had worded it poorly, so I experimented with the question by adjusting the language.

After a year or so, the walls in my home office were filled with Killer Questions. They were scrawled on index cards and stuffed in shoeboxes or pinned up on the wall. The sheer volume was driving my wife crazy. That's when I realized I needed to formalize the system, strip it down to the most effective questions, and develop a way to organize and use them. You'll learn more as we go through the book, but for now know that the Questions are divided into three categories: (1) *Who your customer is*, (2) *What you sell them*, and (3) *How your organization operates*. Each category has roughly twenty questions to date, and more are constantly being tested and added to the card deck.

So, is the list static? No. The key to the value of the Killer Questions is that new ones are continuously being discovered. Sometimes I get questions sent to me by the listeners to my podcast. Other times, I come up with new ones in support of an upcoming workshop, or they come to me when I'm reading a story in the Sunday paper.

The questions that I keep are ones that trigger something for someone. Did a new question cause a listener or reader to see something differently about their product, customer, or organization? Did it spark a broader examination of how they were doing something, and why?

One of my favorite killer questions is one of the simplest: "What do my potential customers not like about the buying experience?" This is a classic Killer Question; on first glance, it seems obvious, but once people start to think about it, they realize they've never actually asked that of themselves or their business. In fact, the overwhelming majority of organizations do not measure or track what their potential customers *dislike* about their buying experience, instead choosing to focus on issues with the product or support. In reality, this question is almost impossible to measure. Think about it. How would you find a potential customer who had such a bad buying experience that they

didn't buy your product? Digging into what the potential customer actively dislikes about buying a product can be a gold mine, especially when your competitors aren't making that investigation.

The only way to capture this information is to be right there, observing your customers in action as they select or reject your product. You can't e-mail or follow up with them because you don't know who they are; they didn't buy your product. You have to catch them in the moment and ask them right then and there. The question gives you a broad area to look at: It could be a brand, sales, marketing, or merchandising issue. The point of a Killer Question is to challenge you to look at things in a new and different way. A really good Killer Question will leave you surprised by the answer.

### **Do I Really Need Killer Questions?**

You may be wondering if you really need to change the way you think about questions. What's wrong with staying on the current course and speed within your organization? Well, for one thing, the world is changing around you. Without a change in the way you see your customers, product, and organization, you will fall into the assumptions and rules that define your industry. Think of the ants, endlessly walking in a circle. They are doing what they are supposed to do, and are in perfect agreement about the correctness of doing it. However, their uniformity will destroy them, unless that different ant comes along to break the rules.

The Killer Questions I'll share later in the book will help you become the "broken ant" your organization needs you to be. However, before we get to them, we need to take a look at the forces within organizations that can either snuff out or kindle the innovative spark they're intended to create. First, we'll look at how existing assumptions about your organization and industry can get in the way of great idea generation and new products or concepts, as well as the jolts that can either disrupt or encourage innovation, depending on how and why they happen. Then we'll look at the people—I call them the corporate antibodies—who impulsively attack and destroy the new ideas your

company so desperately needs. If you can get past the assumptions, manage the jolts, and neutralize the corporate antibodies, your company will be ready to use the Killer Questions to their maximum effect.

Now's the time to grab a notebook and pen and start to jot down anything you notice that causes you to think differently. Read along, but remember this is a two-way street; it's crucial that you jot down anything that strikes a chord, or simply flashes quickly across your mind. Keep in mind that the questions in this book use the word "product," but the questions can also be used for "services," or "solutions," as well. I use "product" to mean anything that your company generates for the purpose of selling to or servicing the needs of a customer.