



The Missing Question

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It's common knowledge: ask better questions, and you will get a better answers. And for leaders, better answers inform tough choices, especially in times like these. But what about questions that are missing altogether? When it comes to organizational growth and development, this could be deadly.

Of course, we don't know to ask what we don't know to ask. Even so, next generation leaders have to learn the habit of identifying and asking those “missing questions” which are critical to the health of their organization. The following story illustrates the point.

I was recently invited to a meeting of the leaders of a large, prominent non-profit organization. As we sat in their boardroom, it was disclosed that they had just invested heavily in a lengthy strategic planning process. The end result was an impressive looking document on the table before us.

The leaders further explained that they were recently offered an additional \$20 million in funding to super-charge a very successful, nationally renowned program. It should have been a moment to celebrate. Instead, the leaders seemed stuck, dumbfounded, and frankly, tired.

They went on to confess that they were unable to execute the newly minted strategic plan, and that business meetings were bogged down in games of hide and seek, leaders unwilling to take ownership of certain hot-potato issues. In addition, there seemed to be breakdown of trust between two divisions within the organization, the cause of which was as yet unclear.

Moreover, they shared, the offer of extra funding was useless to them: there was nowhere in the organization to place the work. Existing programs had used up resources and capabilities. In their minds, they had they become proverbial “victims of their own success”.

Then came the question, music to my consultant ears, “If you see something that we don't see today, please let us know ... what are we missing?”

Ahhh ... this is the most important missing question! Leaders who are willing to ask “what are we missing” understand that every organization has cultural and work process blind spots. Inviting a fresh perspective is the first step out of organizational myopia and towards uncovering a suite of missing questions essential to the success of any organization—especially questions about growth.

By speaking further to this client, we learned something we have come to expect from many successful, talented non-profit leaders: they are uncomfortable talking about and taking ownership of their own organizational growth. “Don't we exist to serve societal needs, not the other way around” goes the thinking? For many, it seems self-serving, unbecoming, and well ... too corporate to understand, plan for, and expect organizational growth and success. Yet in this mindset critical questions related to organizational health and vitality are missed or ignored. Issues such as scalability, sustainability and return are left unattended, which can later cause fatal breakdowns.



Meanwhile, there is plenty to occupy leaders' time and energy distracting them from missing conversations. It's the tyranny of the urgent: executing against overwhelming societal need, staying "on mission", meeting ever more stringent requirements for acquiring and retaining funding, and managing human resources subject to various forms of burn-out.

Regardless of the reasons, avoidance comes at a price. For example, the missing growth conversation often is the source of a dysfunctional relationship between the leadership of the non-profit and its key stakeholders, such as board members and corporate funders. Without a shared language for growth, all of which is put into use while answering the right questions about growth, alignment of the board, leadership team and employees becomes impossible.

Granted, the growth conversation is difficult to have because the meaning and implication of growth is a matter of perspective. For instance, ask the director of volunteer services to address growth and they will get busy measuring the increase in numbers of volunteers, year to date. Ask the director of development, and they will naturally report the increase in donor funding year over year. Ask the Director of Programming the same question and you can imagine the answer. How about the Executive Director?

Each player naturally brings their unique perspective and related questions to the table. Parochial issues, opportunities and fears can also captivate them. What is meant to produce creative tension on a team that results in innovation and good business decisions instead produces avoidance and fear of conflict. Once again, missing questions can go unanswered and the toughest issues (often people and role issues) go unaddressed.

"OK, so what specifically are the other missing questions related to growth?" our client asked. We went on to explain the critical role that the organization's leader has in designing and articulating a system of roles and accountabilities, which is the infrastructure needed to support a growing, evolving, mission driven organization. Some classic missing questions include:

1. Who has final call on the system of roles and accountabilities within the organization?
2. What is this system of roles and what are the clear accountabilities, responsibilities, and classic hand-offs between these roles?
3. What structures—protocols, processes, roles—are missing from the organization that would make the greatest difference in workflow and productivity?

By asking questions such as these, our client became clear on why a new strategy could not be executed, and why new work could not be taken on. Without a clear system of roles and accountabilities, and without someone who had final call over that system, the added complexity and stress threatened the organization's viability. By redefining their system of roles, putting new protocols and processes into place to address workflow issues, and cascading a common language for growth down into the organization, a new culture of accountability was able to take hold.

Two years later, this organization is flourishing, taking on new growth opportunities and challenges. Remaining curious about missing questions at every stage of development will allow new doors to open for this client and all who take on this mindset. Are you ready to master the growth conversation by being willing to ask yourself the missing question?