

## Kill Status Quo: How to Ask Better Questions

Hulu, iPhone, and Prius didn't come to market because their creators asked status quo questions. They didn't happen because somebody began a meeting with "Who has an idea for improving the industry?" or "How are we going to increase sales?" Those innovations exist because **disruptive, transformative, even uncomfortable questions without easy answers were asked.**

Through years of working with the world's leading companies, I've witnessed a **direct relationship between provocative inquiry and innovation.** Teams that ask the hard questions prevent early conclusions: the simple act of inquiry provokes new thinking and has the power to challenge long-held assumptions that create real change.

So **what do disruptive questions look and sound like?** They usually begin with "how," "which," "why" or "if" and are specific without limiting imagination. They focus on generating solutions rather than begging long-winded explanations and place blame, as often-asked 'close-ended' questions always do. They awaken the mind rather than put it to sleep. To illustrate, a provocative version of "Who has an idea for improving our product/service?" would be "If we hosted a forum called 'How Our Products & Services Suck,' what topics would be on the main stage?" An equally effective version is "Which two things could our competitors do to render our product/services irrelevant?"

I witnessed this approach in action during an annual strategic planning meeting for a global pharmaceutical corporation. A few of the company's major drugs were going off-patent, and every part of the organization was under pressure to innovate. When the corporate strategy team was invited to join the product team's brainstorm session, they brought some unexpected questions to the table:

- What are the unshakable industry beliefs about what customers want? What if the opposite was true?
- If you were CEO for one day, which three things would you change to enable growth of our brands?
- How can we make our product- and service-chain more responsive to demand fluctuations?

No one from the product division answered immediately. People were visibly uncomfortable, but slightly excited. Yet by day's end, this planning session became one of their most productive. Where previous annual planning meetings yielded 20 to 30 good ideas, this one resulted in over 100. **When teams are encouraged—or forced—to question assumptions, their ideas often exceed expectation in number and creativity.**

While it's not unusual for the product and strategy teams to collaborate, consider querying less conventional audiences. Prospective hires, vendors, former customers, and ex-employees can provide unique and valuable perspectives on your organization. **Without the constraints of groupthink and politesse, provocative inquiry can pave a short path toward innovation.**

When posing disruptive questions to employees, some leaders prefer to start a meeting immediately with one to set the tone, while others hold back until a brainstorm sputters and stalls. Milder approaches include emailing questions to participants in advance of a meeting or creating an online questionnaire where anonymity is assured. And among the hundreds of provocative questions I've heard, **the following queries have been known to suck the status quo out of any room:**

1. If you could only work on one project for a year to transform the business, what would it be and why?
  2. What is the shortest path to the customer? How could we get there in 6 months?
  3. What suffers more breakdowns: our products, our processes, or our people? How could we fix this?
  4. It's 2025 and we're the best company to work for in the world: What two things did we do to earn this award?
  5. Which parts of your job would you like to kill or eliminate?
  6. What would our dream testimonial from a customer say?
  7. What can we offer for free that no one else does?
  8. You've just written a tell-all book about this company: Which secrets does it reveal?
  9. How can our services be turned into physical products? How can our products be turned into a service?
  10. If we could hire five more people, what unconventional skills would they have and why?
- This type of questioning possesses the power to transform brands and entire industries. When you apply provocative inquiry to every corner of your business, there will be a collective ripple of unease.

**Embrace it: this is how status-quo busting happens, and what an innovation opportunity looks and sounds like.**

Read more from Lisa [here](#).