

Prologue

Building Capacity Through Asking Questions

Organizations study things all the time. It seems there are always challenges and opportunities that demand a task force, a team of consultants, or an ad hoc group to diagnose some problem or conduct some study. These studies are, in part, occasions for learning. Sometimes it is simply a matter of taking a snapshot of a situation. Other times it's a matter of systematically digging down to understand the root causes behind a troubling trend. Why is turnover so high over the last three years? Why is employee morale so low? How has organizational climate changed since the last restructuring? What do we need to do to get higher returns? How do we improve quality and customer satisfaction? But the problems to be solved and the crises to be managed all begin with the questions that managers ask. *This may strike you as trivial, but the questions we ask determine whether we eventually diminish our capacity to grow and develop, or increase it.*

Consider this example. In one organization executives were alarmed by the high rate of employee turnover. Fifteen percent of the workforce was leaving after two years. Management launched a discussion of the high turnover rate and decided to commission a study. When they met to discuss the findings, they discovered a long list of complaints and concerns: salary was too low; bonuses were unpredictable; the work environment was stressful; task demands were excessive; managers were more concerned with punishing failure than rewarding success; employees felt their input was not valued; and so on. The discussion soon revealed disagreements about the roots of these problems, followed by finger pointing and some sharp exchanges. Some defended their roles and insisted that the fault was elsewhere. Finally, an external consultant asked a different question: what is it about this company that makes

the other 85 percent of employees want to stay? After a momentary silence, one manager said that there was no reason to ask that question because it was not the 85% that was causing them to be concerned. Then another suggested that they at least try to identify the reasons that people stayed at the firm. They decided to ask a sample of employees about their attraction to the firm—for example, what was it they liked about working there and what were some of their positive work experiences? The study uncovered hundreds of surprisingly positive stories, many of which revealed factors that most executives had forgotten or hadn't even considered. They began to see moments of inter-departmental collaboration, times when employees were empowered to come up with creative solutions and examples of bold and inclusive decision making.

At the next meeting of the Executive Board, participants held an entirely different conversation. They talked about the strengths of the firm, the unique identity of the culture, and the ways that they could expand opportunities for employees to collaborate and experiment with participative decision making. They began to consider new strategies that could lead to previously unimagined breakthroughs. They learned to pay closer attention to what they were doing well, to the practices that drew people to the firm and compelled them to stay. Their entire approach shifted from fixing what they saw as problems to enhancing what they now realized were their core strengths.

This example demonstrates a critical aspect of questions, that is, they can be so pervasive that we rarely think about them. Managers are always asking questions, ranging from simple wonderings to full-scale inquiries. This is as it should be, since questions are at the root of all learning and therefore the key in the development of any team, organization or system. In this book we argue that it is worth paying attention to how we ask questions because *the asking of questions already begins to transform and change the capacity of the human system we seek to understand.*

Now of course, it's not enough to just ask good questions. It's also important to pay attention to the data that questions generate.

Consider the example that Jim Collins recounts.¹ He compared the development of two competing organizations in the same industry—A&P and Kroger supermarkets. Both organizations asked, what is it that customers want from their local grocery store? How can we provide products and services that will keep customers returning to our grocery stores? The difference was that when Kroger asked what drew customers to certain stores over others, they paid attention to what they heard and made sure that they grew in that direction. This was a case where two organizations asked good questions—what is it that delights the customer? One acted on the data and the other didn't. As Collins contends, one of the characteristics of great organizations is that they ask the right questions *and* they pay attention to the results even if the answers imply the need for simple or radical changes. We agree.

Learning always begins with a question; a moment of inquiry. These questions represent attempts to learn that often result in efforts to improve performance, or to better a situation in some way. It is worth reflecting upon the way that managers form the questions that create openings for new understandings of situations. *This is a book about framing questions with a positive stance and focusing on topics that enhance organizational learning which results in increased cooperative capacity.*

Two Different Approaches to Improving Performance.

The way we begin these moments of inquiry is all-important. We wish to share two provocative examples of contrasting approaches to learning and capacity building. The first occurs during the US Presidential Campaign of 2000. After the first Gore-Bush debate, some observers remarked that Al Gore was aggressive and unrelenting; some even called him dogmatic. After this debate, a popular television show, Saturday Night Live, parodied the two politicians. In particular, they mocked Gore's aggressiveness and unrelenting repetition of the word "lockbox" in reference to protecting social security.

What is interesting, for our purposes, is how Gore set about improving his performance in preparation for the second debate

with George W. Bush. Did he think about his strengths, his areas of competence and seek ways to build on them? Apparently not. Rather, he took a more common approach—seeking to discover his mistakes and work on them to improve his performance. And he had help. Gore’s staff showed him a tape of the Saturday Night Live skit a few days before the second debate. The actor depicting Al Gore, Darrell Hammond, imitated Gore’s Tennessee twang and played Gore as a pompous, condescending, “know it all” buffoon who sounded like he was talking to kindergartners; he frequently uttered exasperated sighs while the actor depicting Bush answered questions. After aides showed him a tape of the skit, he was motivated to change his approach and was heard to pledge, “a few less sighs, absolutely.”

No doubt with this image in mind, in the second debate Gore was focused on not making the same mistakes. In fact, he was noticeably more reticent and withdrawn; more polite, less decisive, and less willing to challenge Bush. The image of Hammond’s exaggerated parody from Saturday Night Live may well have guided his presentation of himself in the second debate. He was concerned, we assume, to not be seen as pompous or arrogant. He was cautious and understated. It’s unlikely that we will ever know for sure what went through his mind, but we do know that the outcome was not positive for him. Many said later that the second debate was a turning point and gave Bush much needed momentum. President Clinton, watching Gore’s performance in the second debate, reportedly wondered aloud why Gore was so listless. Meanwhile, one of Bush’s aides told him afterward that he had just won the election.

We present this vignette because it illustrates that a problem-solving approach to learning can have debilitating effects. Al Gore did what many of us do instinctively. It seems common sense that if we want to get better, if we want to improve some capacity to perform, then we would do well to study our errors and fix them.

Contrast this with a different story of learning and capacity building. Here we cite the example from a very different era and very different context. In 1501, Michelangelo was commissioned

to create a marble statue of David for a cathedral in Florence. He carved it from a piece of marble that a previous sculptor, Agostino di Duccio, had worked with, but discarded 40 years earlier out of frustration. What is most interesting, for our purposes, was Michelangelo's mindset and how he set about to perform his formidable task. Carving a complex figure from a resistant material demands strong problem-solving skills.²

But the artist did not approach his task as solving a problem. Michelangelo said that when he looked at the discarded marble, he saw David already there in his full, pristine pose. What was needed, he said, was simply to "clear the rest of the marble away in order to bring David out." Michelangelo's primary concern, his most vital energy, was devoted to forming an image of the perfect David before he ever put chisel to stone.

Critics and observers are still in awe of Michelangelo's David. It was carved, according to Paul Johnson, "with almost atrocious skill and energy."³ We are in awe of his mindset. Looking at the same piece of stone discarded by an earlier artist—presumably out of frustration—Michelangelo could see the David waiting to be realized from within the marble. His *capacity* to imagine David in his pristine wholeness, is an approach to learning that leads to bold innovation. (Later, by the way, the statue was seen as such a radical artistic achievement that it came to symbolize the identity of the community of Florence. Rather than placing it in the cathedral, it was put in a more public display in front of the town hall, the Palazzo Vecchio).

These vignettes illustrate two different approaches to improving performance that begin with two different questions; two different topics of inquiry. One is a *deficit* orientation leading to problem solving; the other a positive, *appreciative* orientation leading to increased capacity and innovation. They hold many lessons for managers and leaders of organizational change. Al Gore was fixated on not making mistakes; Michelangelo was consumed with forming a perfect image of David and extracting it from the marble mass. Think about the questions that consumed

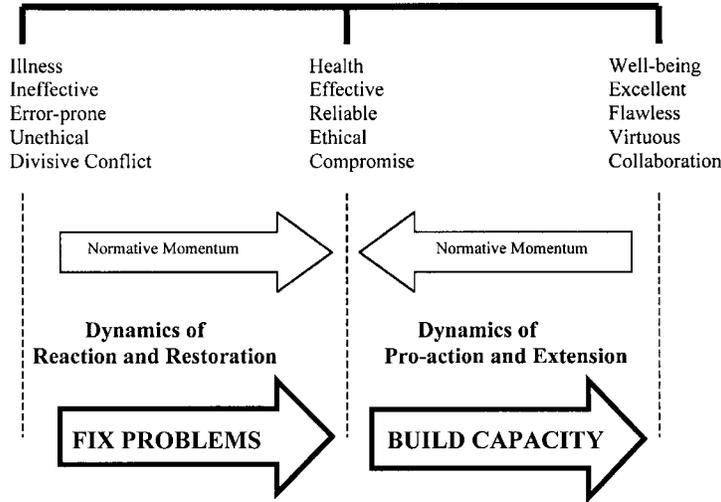
both of these figures. Gore probably asked himself several times: how can I make sure that I'm not too overbearing? Then imagine the question that guided Michelangelo: how can I craft this beautiful image for all to see from this mass of marble?

Inquiry and Capacity Building

There is another important distinction to be drawn from these two stories of performance improvement. One is a story of "getting better" and the other is a story of "capacity building" or expansion of one's ability in the pursuit of excellence. All improvement is not capacity building. As we will see, the dynamics of expanding one's capacity to act are different from those associated with fixing, repairing, or healing. The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to capacity building described in this book is unique from other change philosophies in that it focuses on developing organizations from a strength-based perspective.

The significance of this emphasis is illustrated by the continuum in Figure 1 below which is adapted from the work of Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn in the emerging field of Positive Organization Scholarship.⁴ The left end of the continuum represents human systems that are in a poor state of health, where organizations act irresponsibly, perform poorly, or produce low quality. The center point represents an average, normative state, where social systems enact a minimum standard of ethics, have average performance, or produce at least a minimal level of quality. The right end of the continuum represents a state of high ethics and social responsibility, exceptional and enduring performance, or flawless quality. The social forces in most human systems have a normative momentum that tends to move behaviors, attitudes, and actions toward the center. "Fixing things" are the dynamics of a shift from low to average performance and are qualitatively different from those that "build capacity to excel and flourish" by shifting an organization from, as Jim Collins calls it, "good to great."

Figure 1. The Dynamics of Capacity Building



Traditional Organization Development techniques, with a focus on diagnosis and problem-solving, are centrally concerned with fixing poor performance—with healing. Problem-centric techniques typically unfold through discovering a symptom, performing an analysis of causes and problems, analyzing the problems, developing possible solutions, and then creating a treatment. The underlying metaphor is that the organization is ill and that the manager or consultant is a physician whose purpose is to generate a healing prescription. In contrast, AI squarely focuses on generating dynamics that will shift organizations from the average to the exceptional. It is assumed that a basic level of normal function exists in any organization, and that the potential— or capacity—for exceptional performance is already embedded within the organization. *Thus capacity building, for us, is the process of elaborating and expanding on a system’s strengths—usually closely tied to cooperative acts—in order to move that system from good to great, from*

doing well to always winning, from constantly correcting to forever innovating, and so on.

We are calling attention here to the contrast between a deficit approach to learning (that is, I intend to avoid doing what I did before), and an appreciative approach (I intend to create this wonderful image of David from raw material). Our point is this: There is little capacity for creativity and innovation when one is overly concerned with avoiding mistakes or repairing something. Michelangelo was able to create a positive image of what he desired; Gore focused on what he wanted to avoid. That difference is everything.