6 Diagnostic Questions for Life and Work

We were 7,000 feet up in our twin engine Beechcraft Baron, headed home from Denver. A strong tailwind was pushing us along at record speeds.

I was sitting up front in the right-hand seat, enjoying the peace and quiet. Then a light started blinking.

I looked over at our pilot—who was always a cool customer under pressure—and asked, “Should I be concerned?” He mumbled, “It’s not an emergency, but I do need to look at a few things once we get back on the ground.”

Warning lights signal that something is out of sync.

It’s unfortunate, but businesses and organizations don’t have engine lights that blink and flash when we need to pull over and look under the hood. We don’t always get a warning when something is missing, out of sync or needs attention.

How do you avoid the “blindside” surprise, the “I never saw this coming” moment? How do you pick where to delete and where to double down? How can you enter your next horizon feeling calm and confident of your targets and outcomes?

Over the last few decades, I’ve developed a series of simple diagnostic questions to help answer these questions. They aren’t particularly profound or complex, but they get to the heart of our life and work. Perhaps best of all, they’re versatile. You can use them when evaluating a strategy, a product, or even your own performance.

1. What’s right? ***Leverage it.*** Some things in your business have tailwinds and other things are fighting constant headwinds. Tailwinds are what give you surprising ease and momentum. It’s the difference in push versus pull. It might be your people or your processes. It could be your customers or your core offering. It could be your culture or your physical address. Any number of things could be going right during this season.

When I am leading an executive through strategic conversations, I always look for what’s right. I guess I have Peter Drucker looking over my shoulder and talking about the inherent value of building on islands of strength.

2. What’s wrong? ***Change it.*** This is the natural companion to our first question, only the opposite side. *Fast Company* did a quick profile of the top 20 corporate turnarounds in the past 20 years, and company after company discovered good answers to this question.

What is broken, wobbly or grinding in your organization? Some things just need to be changed or stopped. Having the courage to say, “This is not working, and we are going to stop it” is often a hard step for leaders. A leader declares, “We gave it the time and money needed to get momentum and there isn’t any. We are going to stop it.”

Sure, there is an immediate delete button and there is a “phase it out and down” button. Figure out which one is best … but hit the button. Don’t stall. Precious resources are being consumed.

Don’t just repair it, patch it or do a workaround—make a material change. Whether it’s a sputtering strategy, a misguided initiative or a failing employee, make the change.

3. What’s confusing? ***Clarify it.*** Jimmy Fallon jokes about confusing lyrics in songs (#misheardlyrics). Somewhat like music lyrics, in business there is inevitable uncertainty and there is unnecessary uncertainty. The former is an obvious result of our human limitations. There are simply things we don’t and can’t know. Unnecessary uncertainty, though, is entirely different. These are the areas of our life and work that cause unrest and anxiety not because we can't know, but because we haven't taken the time or made the effort to seek clarity. In order to move forward, to grow, and to improve, we must first establish clarity. Few things are more central to sound leadership as clarity.

This may mean simply taking the time to honestly evaluate an issue, but it may also mean asking and seeking answers to questions we've been avoiding. Sometimes we must "Walk toward the barking dog," as one of my mentors used to say. If you're really struggling to a clear line of sight, consider inviting an outside perspective. Bring in an industry expert. Hire a consultant. Take a wise friend out for coffee.

4. What's missing? ***Add it.*** In our overscheduled, overwhelmed, overcommitted lives, we usually think our greatest need is to remove and to simplify. While this is certainly often the case, we may just as often need to add something. Maybe you're coming out of a rapid growth season and need to throttle back and add resources to sustain new business. Perhaps your leaders are stretched thin and you need to ramp up your people development to close the gaps. Or maybe it's silence and rest that you're missing. Maybe you need to take your team on a retreat or out for a nice dinner to relax. Whatever it is, it won't happen unless you make it a priority. You won't stumble into the thing you're missing.

5. What are the threats? ***Navigate them.*** Threats can be internal or external. They can be huge and monumental or small like a tiny piece of kryptonite. They can be obvious or somewhat hidden. *Harvard Business Review* gets you started thinking about it HERE.

Ask the question: If we fail, why might we fail? What could/would be the reasons our strategy doesn't work? Changing market conditions? New competition? A disruptive technological shift? A deteriorating relationship with a supplier or customer? Too much risk with one customer or one key employee? These threats aren't necessarily things that can be removed or completely avoided, but they are things that must be addressed, planned for and navigated.

6. What are the opportunities? ***Exploit them.*** Is there a new market or customer you can pursue? Is there an unmet need that your organization can adapt to and meet? Perhaps there is a partnership that can expand your reach.

"Opportunities" combined with "what's right" can be your best forward-facing investment. That is where you take your risk and double down. I remember years ago launching the *Life@Work Magazine*. It was precisely that formula (opportunities + what's right [tailwinds] = good investment and risk of resources).

A new year is always a good time to pull over and look under the hood even if the warning lights are not screaming and blinking. Be systematic and disciplined in asking these six powerful diagnostic questions, and enter the new year with razor-sharp clarity, fierce confidence and incredible momentum.

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