



Are you asking the right Question?

By Roger La Salle

Innovation is about finding better ways of doing – Whatever it is you do!

As we know, a good definition of Innovation is “Change that adds Value” and embracing this term opens the way to make innovation a relatively straight forward exercise, *providing you are asking the right question.*

How many times do we solve a problem and even implement a solution, only to then realise had we asked a better question we may have come up with a much better solution. How many times do we convene a meeting without having a specific one sentence idea of exactly what we wish to achieve in that meeting?

Being able to crystallise an issue in to a single sentence question is so important, but few people implement that valuable practice.

Have you found the best question?

To put this into context, let me pose the question, and have you think of the answer, *before reading on:*

- *What is the specific purpose of a written job application?*

The obvious answer is to get the job, but this incorrect.

The sole purpose of the written job application is to get an interview, to get in front of the people making the selection.

With that clear purpose in mind, a written job application takes on a different form. Indeed, what you leave out of your application is just as important as what you include. Your application should be a hook to catch the reader. It should lead the readers to a point where they wish to speak with you to learn more. This is quite a different approach from writing everything you can think of in the hope that you will win the job. *The written application never wins you the job, it's just the starting point in the process.*

Yet another incorrectly asked question occurs in real estate sales where too much money is wasted on useless advertising, possibly to the benefit of the real estate agent who may receive a commission, but of little value to the vendor.

The question to ask is:

“What are you trying to achieve by advertising a house for sale?”

The obvious answer is to sell the property, but this is incorrect.

Nobody purchases a property based on the pictures or just an advertisement.

The real purpose of the advertisement is to create an inquiry, to make the real estate agents phone ring. With this question in mind, perhaps the best advertisement is one that simply refers to a stunning residence and shows only a single picture to capture the imagination of the reader.

For example a house with stunning ocean views need only show the view. That will make the phone ring as an inquiry from an inquisitive party.

The above are just two examples of where the wrong question has been asked, and consequently the wrong answer found. It is essential to properly define the objective, the real issue before you search for an answer.

Too close to the problem

To cite another example, recently a workshop was undertaken in a large multinational trading bank, the team came to the session wanting to resolve the question – *“How can we reduce the cost to businesses wishing to raise a Letter of Credit (LC)?”* This seemed like a sensible question and was workshopped by the group for a time until they came to the “Re -Question Catalyst in the Innovation Matrix.

So challenged to “Re-question” the group dug deep searching to find the real reason they wished to lower the cost? The answer that crystallised was, *so that people would be more willing to use their LC facility.*

In fact, the real and best question to ask was:

“How can we inspire businesses to raise more LC’s?”

On investigating this different issue it was soon realised that the cost of raising and LC, maybe \$20.00 was irrelevant. Why would that be a “show stopper” for somebody wishing to raise an LC for perhaps \$500k or more?

The real reason people were averse to raising LC’s was the time and effort involved. The process was just too complex and time consuming. Yet the bank in its daily work transfers multi-millions of dollars around the world with little more than the click of a mouse. So why are LC’s so complex?

The better question, the real question was:

“How can we make it easier for clients to raise LC’s?”

With this question in mind the workshop was continued based on a Process Innovation Matrix and an answer was soon found.

There are countless examples of this, usually resulting from people being too close to the problem.

So what’s the solution?

The classic method of questioning with the “why” “why” “why” challenge is one way of trying to “drill down” to the best question.

Another way is to have somebody quite remote from the issue present in any meeting that addresses a problem. You can be sure that a person NOT skilled in the area may well ask some very interesting and challenging questions. This always helps in drilling down to the real issue and the best question.

Most often when a group of people comes together to investigate a burning issue, a solution will be found, just make sure the best question has been asked, one that leads to the best solution.