

THE
**SURPRISING
POWER**



**OF NOT
KNOWING
WHAT TO DO**

Discovering Creativity and
Compassion in a Time of Chaos

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The Downside of Expertise

In August of 2019, I developed a rash that defied various over-the-counter treatments and web-sourced home remedies. The first dermatologist I saw ordered a skin biopsy and then fixated on something called a drug eruption, based on the lab report. As the name suggests, a drug eruption is caused by a reaction to medication. I was advised to eliminate my daily cholesterol medicine and any other over-the-counter drugs I might take for aches and pains.

Months went by, during which I would experience intermittent relief followed by a return of the symptoms. After complaining to my family physician, he referred me to a different specialist. The new dermatologist took one look at me, put some scrapings under a microscope, and told me I had scabies. After two treatments spaced a week apart, I was cured.

Scabies is a revolting condition; I'll spare you a description. Ask Siri or Alexa if you must, but don't say I didn't warn you. The second dermatologist, to whom I will be forever grateful,

explained that I don't look like someone you would expect to have scabies, and my profession and routines were very unlikely to have exposed me to scabies. He wasn't surprised that the first dermatologist missed it. It's worth noting that the second dermatologist had one important advantage over the first dermatologist. The second dermatologist was not attached to the drug eruption hypothesis.

The more you know about a subject, the more difficult it is for you to ask questions that illicit new insights. When experts frame questions, their questions become infested (so to speak) by their experiences and worldviews. Most experts can't help forming quick hypotheses about a situation when they encounter information connected to their previous experience. When experience is upended by new realities or new possibilities, expertise can become a liability. The tricky part is recognizing when your expertise is getting in the way (as in the case of the first dermatologist) and when your expertise should be trusted (as in the case of the second dermatologist).

One of my favorite passages from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, is his description of the Queen of Heart's croquet match:

Alice thought she had never seen such a curious croquet-ground in her life; it was all ridges and furrows; the croquet-balls were live hedgehogs, and the mallets live flamingoes, and the soldiers had to double themselves up and stand on their hands and feet, to make the arches. The players all played at once without waiting for turns, quarrelling all the while, and fighting for the hedgehogs; and

in a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting, “Off with his head!” or “Off with her head!” about once in a minute.¹

Carroll captures the disorienting feeling of engaging in a familiar activity only to discover that the rules of play keep changing. As conditions change, we need to reevaluate our typical responses. When conditions become unpredictable, the capacity to learn, improvise, and adapt become more important than making choices based on our previous experience.

There is an acronym for such perplexing and fickle conditions: VUCA. The term has been used by the U.S. Army War College since the early 1990s to describe dynamic battlefield conditions characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

In a VUCA environment we experience the volatility of constant change, the uncertainty of finding ourselves in unfamiliar situations, the complexity associated with having to consider a large number of variables, and a state of ambiguity in which conditions can be interpreted in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways.

As I write this chapter, it's the spring of 2020 and I'm sheltering in my home in compliance with Dallas County guidelines implemented the week before in an effort to slow the spread of the Covid-19 virus. I can't think of a better example of VUCA conditions than the pandemic currently challenging local and national leaders around the globe—not to mention the rest of us.

The pandemic has turned the conversation about expertise from a philosophical exploration into an urgent debate about

what advice to trust. Two types of expertise are on display as we grapple with real-world dilemmas such as how to contain the spread of the virus or what to do about reopening schools. The first type of expert has a beginner's mind and might be called a *learner*. We'll refer to the second type of expert who has a fixed mind as a *know-it-all*. Since I consider myself a reformed know-it-all, let me offer a defense of listening to learners in times of uncertainty.

Before we reach high school, we learn about the scientific method. In its simplest form, the scientific method starts when a question about an observation leads us to form a testable hypothesis. We run experiments based on what our hypothesis predicts and then learn from the results. If you accept the idea that we should learn from the results, you must also accept the idea that your hypothesis might be mistaken. The know-it-all prizes being right over learning something new, so we shouldn't be shocked when a know-it-all disregards the scientific method.

Under VUCA conditions, we should be skeptical of anyone claiming to be an expert, especially if their expertise is based on conditions that no longer exist. Unfortunately, when chaos ensues, we lack the thinking stamina to break free of the Inquiry Loop, and we may be inclined to put our trust in simplistic answers from people we identify with.

Under VUCA conditions, I choose to put my trust in an expert who is a learner, not a know-it-all. In the early days of the Covid-19 outbreak, Dr. Anthony Fauci, a physician, immunologist, and head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, advised the public not to wear face coverings. Dr. Fauci wasn't the only expert discouraging face

masks in March of 2020. The U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Jerome Adams, as well as the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization, all concluded that face coverings were unnecessary for the general public and that their use might inadvertently limit supplies for emergency workers and hospital staff.²

By April, however, researchers had learned that the new coronavirus spread more easily than previously believed. They discovered that asymptomatic people can spread the virus. They conducted experiments to test how long droplets remain in the air when someone who is infected is talking and breathing. In light of what the scientists learned, Dr. Fauci, Dr. Adams, the CDC, and the WHO, reversed their guidance on wearing masks.

Donald Trump took the reversal as a sign that Dr. Fauci is not trustworthy. I took it as a sign that even a leading expert on infectious diseases understands the importance of testing hypotheses and revising faulty assumptions under volatile conditions. The social philosopher Eric Hoffer summed it up well: “In times of drastic change, it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned will find themselves beautifully equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.”³

We feel comfortable with leaders who have experience and expertise, but it's difficult for an expert to approach a problem with a beginner's mind. It's especially difficult when the problem looks familiar to the leader. Over the last several years, I have been collecting the questions organizational leaders ask about challenging situations. I've seen how the questions people ask about the situations they want to change

reveal a lot about how they are thinking. One can learn to see thinking and feeling traps by paying attention to the form of the question.

I refer to questions prompted by our blind spots and threat responses as *quicksand questions*. With quicksand questions, the more we focus on answering the question, the more stuck we become. Think back again to the example from Chapter 1 of my reaction to my daughters' bathroom. The question of how to get Hannah to keep her bathroom clean and organized is a quicksand question prompted by what I'd chosen to focus on, plus an emotional response connected to my values. When generating solutions based on the initial framing of a quicksand question, things are likely to get worse, not better.

To make the idea of questioning our questions more practical, I have identified four categories of quicksand questions. If your initial framing of a question about a situation that has you stuck falls into one or more of the four categories, there's a good chance that you won't see new options until you change the question.

TYPES OF QUICKSAND QUESTIONS

Questions that impose conclusions

The mythology that leaders must have a point of view about any and all situations persists. Whether or not leaders have a strong point of view about a situation, they definitely have a bias for action. We shouldn't be surprised that, when feeling stuck or challenged by a complex situation, leaders quickly

form conclusions and then set about making changes consistent with their conclusions. The urge to fix things frequently shows up in the way we pose a question about a situation we want to change.

For example, when confronted with complaints that support functions (human resources, legal, IT) felt left out and underutilized, one leader I worked with described his challenge this way: “How do we improve communication between line leaders and their support functions?”

A careful look at the question reveals a point of view about how to respond to complaints about feeling left out and underutilized. The question also implies a call to action. The leader sees the solution as improved communication and seeks help implementing a fix that might include behavior change, education, or perhaps a new knowledge management tool.

As it turned out, a lack of communication was merely a symptom of a more systemic problem. Many of the line leaders felt overly regulated when they involved support functions in their planning processes. The line leaders worked around their support functions to get things done faster. The support functions pointed out that the rush to action often meant that they had to do damage control later, but the line leaders concluded that cleaning up a small mess was preferable to missing a deadline or being unable to jump on an opportunity.

Either/or questions

Either/or questions set up a false dichotomy or false choice. The question gets framed (sometimes intentionally) to limit answers to one of two opposing options.

In reality, options are rarely, if ever, mutually exclusive. False dichotomies have rhetorical impact, but almost always contain a logical fallacy. You can easily imagine a politician declaring a choice between voting in favor of a piece of legislation or condemning the country to a future of lawless anarchy.

Here's a false dichotomy question that lured a leader into posing a different kind of quicksand question: Should we bring in someone from outside the company to head up the marketing department or promote someone from within?

In fact, there are other alternatives. For example, they might hire someone from the outside as a chief of staff to support and mentor an internal hire that runs the department.

Questions about getting others to change

Sometimes, when we feel stuck and can't control all the variables influencing our dissatisfying situation, we assign blame: If only our suppliers would lower their prices. If only our employees would act with greater accountability. If only our salespeople would forecast the pipeline more accurately.

You could argue that the get-others-to-change framing is a special case of the questions-that-impose-conclusions framing. The stuck leader in this category of quicksand question has concluded that the identified group or individual must change their behavior for the organization to make progress.

In my experience, organizational leaders pose questions about getting others to change so often that the get-others-to-change framing deserves its own category.

I worked with a leader in an insurance company who had been assigned the goal of increasing sales of bundled insurance

products. (Bundling insurance simply means putting together more than one insurance product—car insurance, home insurance, life insurance—from the same company.) The leader had initiated a number of projects with the task of finding answers to the question of how to get the company's agents to cross-sell its products. The projects were unsuccessful.

When we accept a get-others-to-change framing of a dilemma, we end up thinking of people as automatons. Solving our problem becomes an exercise in figuring out the programming required to alter the behaviors we find troublesome or installing new behaviors to produce the outcomes we want (say, for example, programming a daughter to keep her bathroom tidy).

In the case of the insurance company, a few questions about its agents unlocked a new approach. The leader explained that people who make the best agents see themselves as leaders in their communities. They get involved and make a point of knowing their neighbors. Successful agents want to help community members make smart choices about protecting their families and their property.

After talking it over for a few minutes, we developed a new question. Instead of thinking about *getting* agents to cross-sell insurance products, we framed a different challenge: How might we *help* our agents become the most trusted resource in their community for information about the risks of loss, injury, and damage?

It should be clear from contrasting the questions that answering the initial question would generate very different solutions than answering the reframed question. Getting unstuck means having new and interesting options.

Improperly scoped questions

The scope of a question can be too narrow or too broad. When we experience a problem in a specific way, we may arbitrarily narrow our focus. I've worked with a number of human resources leaders who have been asked to respond to disturbing trends in their employee engagement surveys. Let's say a survey shows a decline in scores related to trust in leadership. We could be limiting ourselves by asking a too-narrow question: How do we improve the trust scores on our engagement survey? Alternatively, we could err in the other direction by asking an overly broad question: How do we improve trust around here? The first question focuses our attention on the survey rather than the purpose of the survey. The second question gives us no place to start.

THE TABLE ON the following page displays several examples from individuals and groups I have worked with over the last few years who felt stuck. In the second column, I've listed the quicksand question that started the conversation about a situation worth changing. In the third column, I've listed the reframed challenge in the form of a better question.

SAMPLE QUICKSAND QUESTIONS REFRAMED

<i>Client / Context</i>	<i>Quicksand Question</i>	<i>Reframed Question</i>
My wife and I after encountering our daughters' bathroom	How do we get Hannah to keep her bathroom clean and organized?	How do we reduce the amount of nagging at home?
Insurance company leader who wants to increase the sale of bundled insurance products	How do we get our agents to cross-sell our insurance products?	How might we help our agents become the most trusted resource in their community for information about the risks of loss, injury, and damage?
An HR business partner supporting the finance organization trying to get senior finance leaders to coach and mentor their successors	How do we get finance leaders to give and receive feedback?	How do we help emerging finance leaders get the support they need for career growth?
A business roundtable of senior talent development professionals imagining new approaches to succession planning	How do we accelerate readiness for key roles in our organization?	How might we design organizations that are less dependent on the skills and experiences of individuals?
The leader of a software development group within a global tech company frustrated by constant requirement changes	How do stop firefighting and stick to a plan?	How might we better predict customer needs and priorities?
A state medical society task force chartered by the governor to recommend regulations to reduce opioid addiction	How do we get health plans to pay for massage and acupuncture?	How might we make it easier for people suffering from chronic pain to explore and access alternative therapies?
The director of intern programs for one business unit of a Fortune 500 consumer packaged goods company	How do we standardize our intern programs?	How might we help our most promising interns develop stronger working relationships with hiring managers?
A newly promoted senior director preparing to meet with the chief marketing officer about the new job	What are my new responsibilities?	How would you describe the value I bring to our customers in this new role?

Contrast the quicksand questions in the table with the reframed questions. What feels different about the reframed questions? What do the questions in the third column have in common? Imagine that you were one of the people at the heart of each issue. How would you feel about participating in a conversation framed by the quicksand questions versus the reframed question?

The Inquiry Loop explains how our thinking gets smaller until we're stuck in a pattern of thought. Our worldview narrows our focus. Our narrowed focus constrains our openness to unexpected or conflicting information. We end up framing our challenge as a quicksand question because of a bias for closure and a bias for action. The answers we get by asking a quicksand question are the answers we already expect, which leaves us with conclusions that support and reinforce our worldviews—and around we go. The reframed questions in the table essentially shift the description of the situation we want to change by enlarging our thinking.

For example, suppose you were my daughter Hannah, and I announced to you on your way to school in the morning that over dinner we would be discussing how to get you to keep your bathroom clean and organized. Now instead, suppose I told you that over dinner we would be discussing ways to reduce the amount of nagging going on at home. I get that for most teenagers neither conversation is appealing. But at least the one about reducing nagging stands a better chance of addressing a situation we are all motivated to change.

People with expertise and experience ask useful questions. Sometimes, however, we want more from a question than use-

THE BEGINNER'S MIND

fulness. Sometimes we want a transformational insight or a novel possibility. When conditions change, a formerly helpful question can turn counterproductive. At the current moment, crowding people into airplanes during a pandemic is not safe. Airline companies have more important questions to ponder than figuring out how to cram more people onto each flight. One telltale sign that expertise has stopped being helpful is when a seemingly useful question fails to spark answers that make a positive difference.

When your expertise kicks in, you might get fixated on an ineffectual answer. If your situation isn't improved by applying your expertise, first embrace a beginner's mind by jettisoning assumptions, and then find a better question to ask about the situation you want to change.