

# ARE YOU ASSUMING TOO MUCH?

TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED BUSINESS ASSUMPTIONS NEED TO BE QUESTIONED IN TODAY'S CHANGING WORLD, ASSERTS DEBBIE NICOL, PRINCIPAL CONSULTANT AND OWNER OF BUSINESS EN MOTION.

so, this can ensure our energy is placed into proactively creating and driving our business desires rather than reactively managing any change we may now face.

All it takes is the desire to ask the first question, and a willingness to "hear" the response. Business as it was may never be again, so what are you doing to ensure your place on the future business stage? Let's look at a few examples.

## A wake up moment!

Here's a little fable to get you started. As the story goes, when a family's three generations of wives individually ask the question "why do we chop the head off the fish, before placing it in the frying pan", they finally discover the great grandmother's reason was an under-sized frying pan. That legacy has now been passed on for no gain or connection to the world of kitchens today.

So the question is, How can you do the same thing in the same way and expect different results?

That's why most businesses get stuck in a rut. Think about it.

### Success story

Diane, a team leader of an international logistics company chose to look at her customer databank



How many of your business decisions are made out of habit, because that's how things have always been done and you are comfortable with it, or maybe due to notions you never thought to question? Let's start with some soul searching. Ask yourself these tough questions:

- Why is it that we design our job structures and roles in a traditional way when our values and priorities may be completely different?
- Why is it that we are choosing to ignore our intuition in business?
- Why is it that we choose to use the same suppliers which we know, without going out to discover others? What could happen if we did change?
- Why are our business hours set as they are?
- What will be the outcome if we

choose to subject a customer to this process?

- Why do we choose to keep our office where it is? How does this office serve business needs?

What might happen if we chose to question these practices? Perhaps we may discover more cultural alignment, convenience, customer delight or efficiency. Perhaps we would feel the fear of stepping beyond the known. Perhaps we would reconnect to a level of curiosity necessary to stimulate a new way of being in business.

Just as a rough diamond needs friction before it sparkles, so too an organisation needs stimulus to emerge in a changing world. The very process of questioning assumptions takes us to the realm of alternative, providing us an opportunity to open our minds and challenge the way we think and act. Ultimately, by doing

in ways never applied before. She classified and displayed customers in numerous and differing ways, discovering new and relevant relational information. For example, when she viewed her customer base according to revenues, and compared it to the analysis of ratios of profits and volumes, efficiencies entered the business development matrix.

The analysis impacted activities of the business development, sales and operations teams. The yield was less “busy-ness” and much more “business” activity. The profits soared and the customer database became a strategic business enabler, all because one simple question was asked – what is it that I may learn if I choose to change the way I consider my databank.

## Case in point

The government of a developing country has established a staff programme based on length of service. Every three years, a promotion would be applied for most individuals.

Wise leaders would recognise a symptom of a deeper cause when overhearing statements in the workplace such as “you are not paid to think”, facilitating time-based work practices and a culture of attendance to duties. What might happen if the way of work was challenged with some simple questions:

- What options exist to time-based systems?
- What would be the consequence of these options to a project’s completion?

With just two basic questions, productivity, accountability and results-orientation could start eroding the issues of entitlement mindsets, whilst opening possibilities for competency and productivity. Sound familiar?

## Inception

When questioning assumptions, we are really looking to change the way we think and act both individually and collectively. Yet if we don’t know how to change the way we think and

**Just as a rough diamond needs friction before it sparkles, so too an organisation needs stimulus to emerge in a changing world. The very process of questioning assumptions takes us to the realm of alternative, providing us an opportunity to open our minds and challenge the way we think and act**

act, the result may not be worth the investment of effort. Start with this.

### a. Consider the senior stakeholders

What limitations are your leadership team surrounded with? For leaders to work this way, they need to be led this way themselves, be that by the senior stakeholder or their own self-leadership.

People become what they are surrounded with and are the mirror image of you. Do your leaders have the entrepreneurial spirit to explore options and ask targeted questions, the social skills to engage in open and transparent discussions and a competency and interest to seek out change, to encourage journeys into previously uncharted frontiers? Are they able and willing to look out and bring in, recognising that external influences can balance an otherwise unbalanced inside-out approach. Effective senior stakeholders accept that the expertise of today no longer rests with just one individual.

### b. Consider introducing elements of a learning organisation

A learning organisation is generally one which is stimulated by thought, diversity, risk, clear vision and by change.

It will prioritise relationships and the sharing of tacit knowledge. It will forge relationships with competition as collaborators. It will partner with industry organisations and network regularly. It will ask before it tells. It will allow the building of meaning together, demonstrating that not only can the leaders offer guidance but so too those who face the customers every day. It will generally display a sense of fun and adventure, with a high curiosity level and a priority to a coaching leadership style. Questioning assumptions will be a core activity driving deep systemic change and transformation.

### c. Consider an external provocation

Changing the way we think and act may require external influence from people and resources that are outside the realm of the norm.

Brownbag lunch gatherings that pose provocations, resources that provide alternatives, professional development techniques that stimulate discussion or networking with leaders from other industries can all provide stimulus for assumptions to be questioned.

## Ask yourself

- To what degree are questions welcomed in your organisation?
- With whom and what mindsets do you surround yourself to enable and open a questioning environment?
- How do you personally respond when your leaders question you?
- How do you encourage more curiosity in your organisation?

## Write in and share

In no more than 100 words, showcase how the practice of questioning assumptions has reaped benefit to your organisation. The chosen response will be published in the magazine, and shall receive a copy of Debbie’s recently-released book *Corporate Embers: business-promoting insights for the soul of the corporation*.

E-mail [ketaki@cpidubai.com](mailto:ketaki@cpidubai.com) with the subject line “Assumption”. ■



## ABOUT:

**Debbie Nicol, aka “the enablist”,** principal consultant and owner of business en motion, assists organisations and leaders to move ahead through change. She works with organisational development, change management, corporate cultures and learning strategies. For more information, visit [www.businessenmotion.com](http://www.businessenmotion.com)