

# Asking the questions

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Recently, I came across an interesting chapter from a book that unpacked different scenarios and their failings around participants' fear of asking questions. While reading, I began to reflect on the nature of different organisations (within which I've worked and facilitated), questioning whether they have a visible culture of trust and an openness to having leadership decisions questioned.



The book in question is aptly named, *Developing More Curious Minds*, by John Barell. Chapter one shares several scenarios where disaster has struck but could have been avoided if questions had been asked or, in some cases, listened to. From analysing failings at Texas A&M through to the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy by Nato planes in the Former Yugoslavia, they all had the overlapping feature of someone being afraid to challenge a decision, or not making their case heard due to the nature of hierarchy within the organisations. Another dominant feature was the commonality of government-run administrations. Perhaps coincidence, but it alluded to the fact that being a government-run organisation, the hierarchical structure did not allow for leadership or larger decisions to be questioned. Of course, the parallel was eventually drawn to higher educational establishments. The question is around whether we should all embrace the model displayed by scientists, whereby new information and data is questioned widely across the scientific community, in order to challenge, prove, or disprove.

When analysing a bonfire collapse at Texas A&M in 1999, a commission found:

“Most importantly, the commission noted, “The university has a culture that instills bias and tunnel vision in decision making. No credible source ever suspected or thought to inquire about structural safety” (p. 37, emphasis added).” (Barell 2003)

I found it interesting that the word credible was dominant in the passage. What makes a source credible? Would a student questioning the safety of an event steeped in history and university culture be a credible source? By their very nature, educational institutions cannot exist without students, so surely they are the most credible source of all? At times they need nurturing, enlightening, or guidance, but students questioning their learning, the traditions, and history of events is a step towards ownership and development of genuine learner agency.

After the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in the Former Yugoslavia, a young officer came forward to share his concerns with a wider enquiry.

“No one picked up on this officer's questions, perhaps because it was not his job. Maybe he did not sound serious enough. It is also possible that once the CIA delivered a target, it came with such an aura of authority that no one thought to question it.” (Barell 2003)



The lingering phrase, ‘perhaps it was not his job’ sends chills down my spine as I recall many situations over the years where former colleagues have announced that certain things they were being asked to do were ‘not their job’, or, ‘were not in their job description’ without proactively identifying who could provide a potential solution. In addition, the quote reinforces that we are often faced with the dilemma of wanting to question a decision, but hesitant when we analyse the power and standing of the individual or organisation that has made it. Of course, this scenario comes from a military establishment, a concept and organisation based on structure and hierarchy that has functioned for many centuries. I am not questioning the efficiency of the military in general; I question how the structure stifles curiosity on so many levels.

The chapter goes on to ask whether there are any overlaps in the areas of society that are mentioned within the specific scenarios, and you cannot help but make links across them all as governmental organisations.

“In these incidents, we have specific examples of what is occurring in society and in schools: Not enough people are asking questions or voicing their suspicions or apprehensions about policy, practice, and performance.” (Barell 2003)

As governance within the education sector develops, and more individuals begin to gain and further their understanding of distributed leadership, curiosity has grown. But it made me begin to wonder, what of those in cultures of school leadership that is top-down led? If educators and learners question current practice and the reasoning behind decisions that are made, are they deemed troublemakers, or worse, non-conformists? I have written at length about lone nuts, disruptors, and first-followers, struggling against established closed mindsets that live by the ‘That’s-What-We’ve-Always-Done’ self imposed rules. Is it fair to be labelled by leadership as a disruptor (and the often negative connotations) because you have the tenacity and drive to question the practice you are being asked to use? This can lead to those ‘car park conversations’, the conversations that people have when they are made to feel they cannot question the status quo, and to derision, and the emergence of more negative disruptors — those who dare to challenge the hierarchical authority of the ‘decision makers’. Surely this shows a clear reason for developing shared understandings across all levels, roles, and within the community of learners?

Curiosity and awe and wonder are often what drive a genuine lifelong learner. Our key competencies here in New Zealand hold the concept of lifelong learning in extremely high regard. And yet there are business and educational organisations that maintain their rigidity and knowledge focus, stifling the intrinsic desire to explore. Schools have evolved tremendously in the last decade. Many focus on maintaining the learner at the centre of the learning, understanding their emotional well being, and providing opportunities to individualise their learning journeys. Although clichéd, it is these learners of today that are

set to become our leaders of the future. Perhaps it's optimistic to think, but it certainly fills me with hope, that our current students will go on to be strong leaders and build organisations around trust and openness in communication. Yes, they face many challenges in doing so; they also face many current leaders across sectors being offended by their curiosity, despite modern learning pedagogical approaches encouraging it.

“One seemingly superficial reason we don't question things is that being questioned about anything often leaves some of us feeling uncomfortable. We are threatened by questions, fearing loss of control of the decision-making process or over the entire situation. I once asked a high school teacher why he seldom posed open-ended questions where students would have to respond with their own ideas. “I'm afraid they'll get out of hand,” he said.” (Barell 2003)

[Grant Lichtman](#) enthralled teachers at uLearn 2015 by asking them to get comfortable with discomfort. And it's the discomfort felt when having our decisions questioned that I think is most important here. If a culture of trust exists, people will begin to question the validity of what they are doing. They will feel more confident in taking risks and embracing failures when trying something that breaks the status quo they have questioned.

If every teacher took some time to clarify the 'why' behind their actions and their pedagogy, I wonder how many would stop many of the habits that have formed. Sometimes we all need to stop and just ask 'why am I doing this?' or even 'why do you want me to do that?' If the answer isn't immediately clear, it might be time to pause.

I will leave you with something final to ponder. It's been said that the average four year old asks approximately 300 questions a day. After one year of schooling, that number is just thirty. Curious...

Sources

Barell, J. 2003 Developing More Curious Minds. Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

[Read Chapter One Here](#)

Images

[Curious kitten](#)

[Thinking](#)



**James Hopkins**

[James Hopkins](#)'s passion lies in Modern Learning Practice. He helped in the development and planning of N4L's Pond, being invited to participate in thinking and learning with other Pioneer Educators, as well as writing several pieces for N4L about Pond. James developed Learning Network New Zealand's app for both iOS and Android, incorporating interactivity

and communication within the app to compliment the business model used by the company. He also developed the online community associated with #primedchatnz on Twitter. As a result, he has interviewed and worked with Tony Ryan, Graham Watts, and several others, connecting them to the Twitter community, and organising an online chat directly associated to 45min interviews broadcast via YouTube/Google Plus.