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# THE 10 QUESTIONS EVERY CHANGE AGENT MUST ANSWER

By William C. Taylor

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As leaders, we have no control over how fast markets grow or how wisely banks lend. But we do control our own mindsets and “animal spirits”—the phrase coined by John Maynard Keynes in the depth of the Great Depression. If all you’ve got is a spreadsheet filled with red ink and dire forecasts, it’s easy to be paralyzed by fear and resistant to change. But if you can summon some leadership nerve, then hard times can be a great time to separate yourself from the pack and build advantages for years to come.

Indeed, when it comes to creating the future, the only thing more worrisome than the prospect of too much change may be *too little* change—especially in an economy where there are too many competitors chasing too few customers with products and services that look too much alike. Now is the time to rethink long-held strategic assumptions inside your company, to challenge decades of conventional wisdom in your industry, and to push yourself to learn, grow, and innovate. As Albert Einstein famously said, “Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them.” Or, in the spirit of some unknown Texas genius: “If all you ever do is all you’ve ever done, then all you’ll ever get is all you ever got.”

It's time to do—and get—something different. Here, then, are ten questions that leaders must ask of themselves and their organizations—questions that speak to the challenges of change at a moment when change is the name of the game. The leaders with the best answers win.

### **1. Do you see opportunities the competition doesn't see?**

IDEO's Tom Kelly likes to quote French novelist Marcel Proust, who famously said, "The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes." The most successful companies don't just out-compete their rivals. They *redefine the terms of competition* by embracing one-of-a-kind ideas in a world of me-too thinking.

### **2. Do you have new ideas about where to look for new ideas?**

One way to look at problems as if you're seeing them for the first time is to look at a wide array of fields for ideas that have been working for a long time. Ideas that are routine in one industry can be revolutionary when they migrate to another industry, especially when they challenge the prevailing assumptions that have come to define so many industries.

### **3. Are you the most of anything?**

You can't be "pretty good" at everything anymore. You have to be the most of something: the most affordable, the most accessible, the most elegant, the most colorful, the most transparent. Companies used to be comfortable in the middle of the road—that's where all the customers were. Today, the middle of the road is the road to ruin. What are you the most of?

**4. If your company went out of business tomorrow, who would miss you and why?** I first heard this question from advertising legend Roy Spence, who says he got it from Jim Collins of *Good to Great* fame. Whatever the original source, the question is as profound as it is simple—and worth taking seriously as a guide to what really matters.

**5. Have you figured out how your organization's history can help to shape its future?** Psychologist Jerome Bruner has a pithy way to describe what happens when the best of the old informs the search for the new. The essence of creativity, he argues, is “figuring out how to use what you already know in order to go beyond what you already think.” The most creative leaders I've met don't disavow the past. They rediscover and reinterpret what's come before as a way to develop a line of sight into what comes next.

**6. Can your customers live without you?** If they can, they probably will. The researchers at Gallup have identified a hierarchy of connections between companies and their customers—from confidence to integrity to pride to passion. To test for passion, Gallup asks a simple question: “Can you imagine a world without this product?” One of the make-or-break challenges for change is to become irreplaceable in the eyes of your customers.

**7. Do you treat different customers differently?** If your goal is to become indispensable to your customers, then almost by definition you won't appeal to all customers. In a fickle and fast-changing world, one test of how committed a company is to its most important customers is how fearless it is about ignoring customers who aren't central to its mission. Not all customers are created equal.

**8. Are you getting the best contributions from the most people?**

It may be lonely at the top, but change is not a game best played by loners. These days, the most powerful contributions come from the most unexpected places—the “hidden genius” inside your company, the “collective genius” of customers, suppliers, and other smart people who surround your company. Tapping this genius requires a new leadership mindset—enough ambition to address tough problems, enough humility to know you don’t have all the answers.

**9. Are you consistent in your commitment to change?** Pundits love to excoriate companies because they don’t have the guts to change. In fact, the problem with many organizations is that all they do is change. They lurch from one consulting firm to the next, from the most recent management fad to the newest. If, as a leader, you want to make deep-seated change, then your priorities and practices have to stay consistent in good times and bad.

**10. Are you learning as fast as the world is changing?**

I first heard this question from strategy guru Gary Hamel, and it may be the most urgent question facing leaders in every field. In a world that never stops changing, great leaders can never stop learning. How do you push yourself as an individual to keep growing and evolving—so that your company can do the same?