

THE RIGHT QUESTION

David Norris

The headline of a recent New York Times article announced: "Amazon's Offline Game Changer". This sounds dramatic but when you read the article you discover that what actually happened was that Amazon announced that, "*Prime members could now download (some) movies and TV shows to iOS and Android devices.*" In order to watch programming offline previously, you had to have an Amazon Fire tablet, so this gives Amazon a much bigger potential customer base.

Acquiring a bigger customer base is certainly a good thing, but does it really change the game? I suppose that depends on where one draws the boundaries of the playing field.

When people speak of a *game changer*, they can mean anything on a sliding scale from a full-blown paradigm shift to a valuable optimization. The purpose of this short article isn't to establish once and for all exactly where the line between the two lies. Rather, it's to speculate a bit about the source of changes to the game in the first place.

There are only a few key elements of a game: a playing field, one or more players, a set of rules and a goal. Both a game changer and an optimization can be said to occur when one or more of these elements are altered.

When Toyota redefined its relationships with its suppliers by integrating them in a very new way into the organizational boundaries, the playing field was expanded and just-in-time delivery was born. Or when the concept of corporate social responsibility first emerged in the 1960's and 1970's and the local community was seen to be one of the players in the game rather than merely an interested spectator, we began to speak of stakeholders as well as shareholders. The perception of the playing field and the players was altered.

Likewise, when MCI filed an anti-trust lawsuit against AT&T in 1974, it initiated a chain of events that eventually changed the telecommunications industry by challenging ATT's monopoly. Even though MCI no longer exists and most people under 30 never even heard of it, the rules of the game were so dramatically altered that telephony was never the same. I can remember when receiving or making a long distance call was a major event in the family home. Today telephone communication has become so commoditized that

global connections among people cost only pennies or are even free and are commonplace.

As for the goal of the game, that's one of the more interesting elements of the game being discussed these days. Although profit is certainly necessary to assure the continued existence of the company, should that really be its goal? Or perhaps profitability is merely a necessary pre-condition for achieving its true goal. And if so, what might that goal be and how should each company determine it? The answer to these questions could certainly produce a significant change and people have even begun speaking about a post-capitalism economy.

It's not only beauty that's in the eye of the beholder; the same is also true of the dimensions of the games we humans play. And the bigger one is willing to draw the boundaries in question, the more exciting are the potential changes. But whether large or small, any significant change almost always begins with the posing of a question.

There are three kinds of questions:

- (1) Rhetorical questions, which aren't really questions at all but rather disguised statements. For example:
 - "You aren't really going to wear that shirt with this jacket, are you?"
 - "Do you think the boss doesn't know what you're doing?"
- (2) Real questions, which are looking for an answer. Such questions are actually a request for information. For example:
 - "How many people work in this factory?"
 - "Can you finish this report by the end of the week?"
- (3) Real questions, which aren't looking for an answer or for information, but rather are seeking to open a new field of inquiry or to create a new possibility. For example:
 - "What if we could eliminate this step in the production process?"
 - "Who will be our customers ten years from now?"

The kind of change that matters, whether large or small, is generated by asking the 3rd kind of question.

This morning, consciously or unconsciously, you asked yourself what you should wear today. Obviously you were influenced by what you were planning to do, who you were planning to see, etc. But the point is, you're now wearing the answer to that question. In the same way, we are constantly asking ourselves questions, whether we are aware

of it or not, and the life we have (personal as well as professional), is an expression of the answers to those questions. We are literally "wearing" the life given by those questions. Thus, learning to consciously and intentionally pose the right question is at the heart of either changing or optimizing the game.

Thomas John Watson, Sr. was the president of International Business Machines (IBM), who oversaw that company's growth into an international force from the 1920s to the 1950s. He once said:

"Man has made some machines that can answer questions, provided the facts are profusely stored in them, but we will never be able to make a machine that will ask questions. The ability to ask the right question is more than half the battle of finding the answer."

About the Author: Dr. David Norris has worked for more than 40 years as an international educator, consultant, facilitator, and coach. Working in both English and German, his focus is the design and implementation of organizational cultures that encourage innovation, and the generation of new possibilities through non-linear thinking and distinction-based learning. He can be reached at dnorris@t-online.de.