Be not afraid
Having the courage to ask the hard questions can help improve your business

In my January 2005 column titled “Redefine The Playing Field,” I wrote about one of the services my firm offers in our consulting practice, referred to as Scenario Planning. For those who missed it, scenario planning is the process of projecting into the future what market changes or global events might take place and then developing strategies of how best to respond to the changes. My point in the column was that most scenario planning is reactionary in nature and to break through in today’s highly competitive and overcrowded marketplace you need to change the rules and tip the playing field in your favor. While scenario planning is a valuable exercise to go through with your management team, it has led to another service we call Critical Analysis.

ASKING HARD QUESTIONS
Critical Analysis is the process of taking a long, hard and honest look in the mirror at your organization by asking tough questions and deeply pondering the answers. In many instances, there are no definitive answers to some of these thought-provoking questions. On one level this is disturbing, but the true value is exposing the truth and moving forward with a strategy to find answers in a thoughtful way.

Here are the guidelines for the Critical Analysis process:
1. Check your title and ego at the door.
2. Ask and answer questions like you don’t already know the answer.
3. Don’t be defensive.
4. Don’t go through the motions.
5. Don’t shoot the messenger.
6. Don’t view the process as a personal attack; the focus is what is in the best interest of the company.
7. Freely challenge the status quo.
8. Take the time to analyze your assumptions.
9. Debate and dialogue is encouraged.

Answers to the following questions must be supported by hard data and evidence, otherwise, the correct answer should be, “I don’t know.” Here is a sampling of questions to consider:
1. What business are you in? How you answer this question can fundamentally change your business model. Think very hard about this question before you answer.
2. What is the lifetime value of your customer?
3. Who are your customers: segmentation, generational mix, target, needs, wants and expectations?
4. Would you do business with your company? Is it easy or hard doing business with you? What do your customers think? Is the buying experience positive and memorable, enough to motivate you to return?
5. What is the lifetime value of an employee?
6. What is the cost of employee turnover?
7. Are your employees performing to their full potential? If not, why not?
8. What motivates your employees?
9. Do you believe that your employees are finding meaning in their work? Pay doesn’t equal meaning.
10. Do your employees behave like an employee or an owner?
11. Are your employees’ personal goals in alignment with the organization’s goals?
12. Is there a clear line of sight between your employees: job, organizational goals and compensation?
13. Do you have deadwood (under-performers) in the company? Were these employees deadwood when you interviewed them and decided to hire them, or did they become deadwood?
14. Do your employees create and innovate? If the answer to this is “no,” you may be able to uncover procedures, policies and mindsets that inhibit creativity and innovation.
15. Do you believe that people are trustworthy?
16. Do you believe that people naturally want to learn and grow?
17. Do you believe that people seek responsibility and accountability?
18. Do you believe that people seek meaning in their work?
19. Do you believe people want to be stretched and challenged?
20. Do you believe that people don’t resist change but they resist being changed?
21. Do you believe that people prefer work to being idle?

Over my 26-year career, I’ve learned that a good question is more important than any answer.