

Questions to Ask Yourself

By Andrew Sobel

In the 1960s, a journalist asked the great artist Pablo Picasso what he thought about mainframe computers. Picasso replied, “Computers are useless. They can only give you answers.” I am continually surprised at the power of good, provocative, unexpected questions—and by how infrequently we ask them. I experienced this just a few days ago as I was speaking to an authority in the area of e-mail newsletters. I was talking to him about some improvements I want to make to this newsletter in 2005 (more on this early next year). His first question was, “Why do you want to change it? It sounds like people really like it, and you’re doing very well professionally.” Hmmm, not what I expected—I thought he would immediately start pitching me on his newsletter-improvement consulting services. His question was quite unexpected and very helpful in that it made me really think about what I was trying to accomplish through these changes.

Sometimes the simplest questions are sufficient to make us pause and reflect.

Let me suggest some questions for YOU to think about as you reflect on 2004:

How much fun did you have in 2004? I mean real fun: Scuba diving, skiing, walks in the park, quiet time with family, gut-splitting laughter shared with one of your children or someone you love, moments when time seemed to stand still. I know I had at least one such moment (but not enough of them!), when over Thanksgiving we put on a DVD of “Will Ferrell’s Best of Saturday Night Live.” Some of the skits are absurd, but others were so funny we were literally rolling around on the floor together, laughing hysterically (actually, my teenagers told me that towards the end they were laughing at ME laughing, not at the skit).

Did you challenge any assumptions that you have about yourself and your family and friends? Did you question any sacred cows or beliefs that you hold dear? For example, I started to grapple with a very thorny one—a belief that I can personally fix everything for my children. In 2004 I reached the rather obvious conclusion that as they get older it’s OK for them to do things their way, even if it’s a less perfect product and even if...gasp...they fail at something in the short term. Sometimes these assumptions we hold seem small, but they can have a big impact as they play out in our daily relationships (for example, one assumption many professionals hold dear is, “My fees are already high...clients would balk at paying more.” Would they?)

How often did you take some risks and get outside your comfort zone as a professional? Were there times when you did something new, different, and/or difficult, when you were really stretching yourself? How much did you grow professionally in 2004? If your answer is “not much,” then you ought to think about challenging yourself in some new ways during the coming year.

Did you add more value in your client engagements? More “core value”—doing an even better job at delivering on your basic services; more “surprise value”—helping your clients in unexpected ways by identifying issues and solving problems you weren’t asked to address; and more “personal value”—helping your clients learn, coaching and counseling them about their own careers, and so on.

- **Did you grow your Relationship Capital?** We all have a handful of critical relationships (perhaps 10-20) which represent 80% of the value in our networks. These relationships should include not just clients but past clients, catalysts who can make introductions and help facilitate deals, collaborators

who may work synergistically with us to serve clients, counselors who mentor and coach us, colleagues who team with us, and companions—family and friends—who nurture our emotional and spiritual side.

Next, here are just a few questions to think about as you go into 2005:

Are you really in control? In the last few years I've come to realize that in many important respects we just do not control many of the things around us (probably a blindingly obvious insight to you, the reader, and all my friends...I'm just a slow learner in some areas...). We can be careful, study, prepare, set priorities, establish goals, be virtuous, and so on, but at a certain point we really do have to let go. Before a big, high-pressure, high-profile speech or workshop, I usually fret increasingly as it draws near. Now, the night before, I try to simply let go of it—some would describe this as turning the speech over to a higher power—and relax. Personally, I think that many successful professionals are all about control, and while “there is no substitute for genuine lack of preparation,” as my father used to tell me, there is also no substitute for the ulcerous and egotistical effect of thinking you are more in control than you really are.

Do you act as if it's all about you or all about the other person? I continue to be amazed at how obsessed we are with ourselves—with our appearance, our ideas, our emotions, and so on. Most people really don't want to hear about your nasal congestion, or how that store clerk really bummed you out by being impolite. And while clients absolutely do want to hear about your great ideas, they first want to tell you theirs—and they are most interested when your ideas directly relate to their goals and aspirations, which you won't understand unless you ask and listen.

What's one thing you have always wanted to do but have never have gotten around to? I sometimes ask this question at workshops, and the answers are fascinating and informative. Here are some recent answers: learn to scuba dive; learn to play the piano; hike the Inca trail from Cuzco to Macchu Picchu; study landscape gardening; travel around the world; hike to the Mt. Everest base camp; study French. What do these all have in common? They are entirely do-able! Think about that something you've always wanted to do. Put it on a Post-It. Maybe you won't do it in 2005, but thinking about it will definitely bring it closer.

- **What can you do in 2005 that will further differentiate you and set you apart from the pack?** I'm not talking here about growing a mullet and dying it blue, but rather distinguishing yourself professionally and personally in the marketplace. This could take the form of a new idea or framework that you develop; some research that you conduct; an unusually memorable relationship-building event that you sponsor; a new product or service that you launch; getting a loyal client to recommend you to five other clients; or something else yet again. Most markets are crowded with what clients perceive to be relatively look-alike providers. What will you do next year to be more memorable, more distinctive, and ultimately more appealing in clients' eyes?

I am extraordinarily excited about the new year. The markets for professional and financial services are vibrant and growing. Common sense and genuinely good, practical ideas are as scarce as ever, which means you can out-think your competition with only modest effort. I personally have a number of writing projects in the works, and am determined to make ideas and relationships, more than ever, my singular focus for the next year.

THE WINTER SOLSTICE

Tuesday, December 21 is the Winter Solstice—the shortest day of the year for those of us in the northern hemisphere. The Winter Solstice heralds, traditionally, the return of the Sun, since from here on out the days will slowly get longer. One of the most perfect, gem-like poems I have ever read takes place on the Winter Solstice. It is Robert Frost’s “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

How do we know the action takes place on the Winter Solstice? Frost clearly states this in the poem with the line, “Between the woods and frozen lake, the darkest evening of the year.”

An older person, perhaps contemplating suicide, takes a ride into the dark woods on a snowy December night. But his life isn’t over—he still has much to fulfill:

STOPPING BY THE WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING

By Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know.

His house is in the village though;

He will not see me stopping here

To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer

To stop without a farmhouse near

Between the woods and frozen lake

The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake

To ask if there is some mistake.

The only other sound's the sweep

Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

I wish you happy holidays and a prosperous New Year!

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