INNOVATION

Questioning Everything:
Taming Your Own Paradigms and Assumptions

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The explanations that give us comfort also limit us. Breakthrough thinking starts with dissatisfaction with the ready answer.

The human mind abhors a vacuum. If we don't have a ready rationale for why something is, we create one. In this way, we feel a sense of understanding, belonging, and comfort. True knowledge is formed through observation, experimentation, and experience, but before we earn that knowledge, we begin with assumptions about what is true. Without them, we feel lost, confused, and out of control. These assumptions, when connected, form a paradigm; an explanation for the world we live in. They create a zone of comfort, a sense of efficacy, a way to navigate life. The paradigms we create offer us confidence in our own perceptions, reduce our fears, provide a safe path through the vagaries of existence.

Unfortunately, that which explains and defines also limits. Once we have satisfactorily made sense of something, we often let that explanation become the ground on which we stand. We become less curious and more certain of our rightness. We set our own understandings against those of others and judge them to be wrong. The curiosity and learning ability we began life with fades into certainty and closed-mindedness. We become, as my first husband used to call me, "self-certified experts."

Spending time with young children or young scientists is refreshing. They don't already know what is "true" and are interested in finding out. They play with possibilities. They can hold more than one explanation in their mind without needing to narrow to the "right" one quickly. They are more comfortable with uncertainty than they ever will be again in their personal or professional lives.

Eventually, though with some remarkable exceptions, most people accept given wisdom, school solutions, or the brilliance of their own conclusions and close down the many possibilities outside of these. Too often, success, rather than leading to more searching, leads to the dead end of self-confident complacency. If you are known and praised for your work, it becomes more difficult to be the one who finds the errors in it or to improve on it. Self-satisfaction does not lead to breakthrough thinking. It is dissatisfaction that can lead you to creative solutions – dissatisfaction with the ready answer, the "obvious" conclusion, the very thinking that has brought you this far.

So, how do you create dissatisfaction in yourself and in others? Here are a few ideas:

WAYS TO CREATE PRODUCTIVE DISSATISFACTION

- Identify and then question the assumptions behind conclusions.
- Don't stop with one explanation for anything; force yourself to generate many, even if they don't all make sense to you.
- Observe and talk to people who have come to different conclusions. Question them respectfully and in a neutral way.
- Feed your curiosity by moving out of your comfort zone and learning about a topic you have no expertise in.

Our families, religious practices (or lack of them), schools, bosses, friendships, political and social groups can create a satisfying sense of being right, of being part of a team, of being better than outsiders. Being a creative thinker can get us in trouble with institutions and people we value. It takes courage to break out, to risk being wrong, even being rejected by our families, peers, teachers, mentors, and others whom we love, respect, and admire. It can feel very lonely to stand outside of our paradigms and the associated assumptions. Freedom, as the saying goes, isn't free. But naming, questioning, testing, and breaking out of them can lead to interesting work and growth-promoting relationships. Leading an adventurous intellectual life can be as thrilling as conquering physical fears.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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