

Warren Berger

Why starting your innovation journey with a question is better than an idea

Speakers:

Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit

Warren Berger

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello, everyone and welcome to another expert interview at the Innovation & Creativity Summit 2017. I'm very happy to have Warren Berger with me today. Warren is a journalist and bestselling author of the book, *A More Beautiful Question*.

Warren, it's wonderful having you here.

Warren Berger: Well, it's good to be here, Nick. Thanks for having me.

Nick Skillicorn: No problem. So for people who aren't aware of you or the work that you've done, can you give us a brief background as to how you got so interested in creativity and innovation?

Warren Berger: Just as a journalist, I was writing lots of things. I was writing about business and tended to gravitate more toward the creative side of business and innovation. So I just was interested in my writing. I wrote for magazines like *Wired* and *Fast Company*. And I was just really interested in the – I guess because I'm kind of a creative person myself, I was interested in where creativity really fits in the business world and how it leads to innovation and sort of some of the ways of thinking and behaving that you find in really creative thinkers and innovators.

Nick Skillicorn: And that's what led you to the book that you've written on specifically the traits that you saw in these people.

Warren Berger: Yeah, that led me to questioning the whole idea of why is questioning so important. And that led to the book which I titled, *A More Beautiful Question*. The idea of being that a lot of times as we're trying to get to an innovation or a breakthrough or a big idea, sometimes it's about finding that beautiful question or that better question that we can work on.

And I noticed that a lot of the creative people and the innovators that I was interviewing, they were great questioners themselves. I mean they ask great questions. And oftentimes,

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the projects they were working on started as a question. It started as them asking, what if you could do this or why hasn't someone come up with a better way to do that?

And so, that question was often the starting point that led them to something bigger. So I thought, "Well, that's interesting." I mean I hadn't really – like a lot of people, I guess I thought it was all about the answers and every innovation or every great idea just kind of is a brilliant answer that comes into your head one day.

And this started to shift my thinking a little bit to the idea that maybe it's important to think about questions because the questions can be the starting point. When you embrace a question and you make it your own and you work on it over time, that maybe the thing that leads you to the answer. So that just became kind of the driving philosophy of the book.

Nick Skillicorn: And what is it that you actually found from looking at the way that these really innovative people worked? What made them different to the everyday person?

Warren Berger: I think it was a couple of things. If you talk about why – like I said, they're good questioners. And so if you ask them why are they good questioners? What makes them good questioners? I think part of it is questioning in some ways, it's an attitude and it's a way that you look at the world. If you look at the world with your eyes sort of half shut and you're kind of on automatic pilot every day and you're just accepting things, "Oh, that's just the way I did things yesterday and that's the way I'll do things today," which a lot of us tend to do. It's natural to sort of go through life that way.

I found that innovators are more open to new ideas and new things going on around them and they notice things. They notice, for instance, maybe they'll notice the behavior that people are doing that doesn't quite make sense or isn't ideal. So they've got this radar out there and that's the first thing about a good questioner. I think a good questioner like a child, a child is looking at the world with fresh eye and seeing things new. And so, that children are really good questioners.

And in the same way I think an adult creative person has to get that beginner's mind, that way of seeing things. And that leads to questioning. You notice things. You notice interesting patterns. You notice things that are missing. You notice a gap, opportunities, and that causes you to then question, "OK, why does this gap exist and how would you fill this gap?"

And so, I think that's the – it starts with being open-minded, seeing, noticing. Then the second part of it is being willing to question what's going on. And then the third part is being willing to own the question to sort of decide, "I'm going to work on that. I'm going to do something about that."

Because a lot of us will ask questions like, "Gee, why hasn't someone solve the problem of X?" And then we just move on. We wonder about it for about 30 seconds and then we get on with our lives.

And what I found innovators and creative people do is they embrace that question. Once it's come into their head, if it's a good question, if it's a really interesting question and seems to have a lot of potential, they will then take ownership of it and they will go to work on it. And that's the beginning of a project.

Nick Skillicorn: Something you mentioned there sparked my curiosity and that's what you talked about as far as children being curious as well. It's very common to see children having a very different attitude towards wanting to find out as much as possible. And from what you've looked at, is there any evidence that this actually does change as you get older?

Warren Berger: Some of the research I've looked at indicates that questioning actually drops off pretty steeply as we get older. And actually, it seems to peak at a very young age like age 4 or 5. That's when kids are asking hundreds of questions a day and they are just like question machines.

And it's interesting – I mean there are a lot of reasons for that. You're kind of an incredible expansive mode at that age or you're trying to absorb and learn as much as you can. You're making all these new connections in your brain. And so, that leads to a lot of questioning.

And then what seems to happen is children go to school. They start to be around a lot of other kids and they're with a teacher instead of their parents. And some of the social pressures kick in and maybe they don't feel as comfortable asking questions about everything going on around them. They also start to know more. They start to feel like they know things so maybe they don't have to – they begin to categorize things. Maybe they don't have to question everything because they're starting to categorize.

So, I think there are all these factors that cause a decline in questioning as kids get older. Whether this is a decline in just the questions they articulate to other people or whether they were actually also questioning less in their head, I'm not absolutely sure on that one. I think the research has tended to measure the questions that kids will ask in class. And that research shows a very steep decline. The kids just will not verbalize questions at a certain point. It just goes downhill.

By the time you get to teenagers, 15, 16, 17 years old, they're very reluctant to ask questions in class. They just don't do it.

So it's an interesting phenomenon. It's one I talk a lot with educators about is what could be done about that? Is there any way to kind of reverse that trend or keep kids questioning more in school? Because it's really important. I mean if you're not asking question, you kind of disengaged. And so, we see – as we see the questioning decline in kids in school, we also see their levels of engagement declining at the same time.

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So it's a big, big issue. But there's no easy answer on it and why it might be happening. I think it has to do with social pressures. I think some of it is the way we develop as human beings. I think some of it is our education system, which rewards answers. It doesn't really reward you for asking a question. And a lot of times, there's no time for questions.

So I think that you have all these factors coming together and just kind of squeezing questions out of the mix. And then you get into the business world and the same thing. I mean it's really the same pressures that are happening in the business world as in the classroom, which is that you don't want to look foolish in front of your co-workers so you maybe will not ask a question because it might reveal you don't know something. There may be pressures just to get things done at the job. And if a person starts asking questions, it's like, well, that person is slowing things down. We don't have time for that. We just have to move forward.

So the same pressures that I see happening in school, I think are also happening in the workplace in terms of the pressures that kind of push questioning out and say, "There's no time for this. It's not that important. Let's get rid of it."

And then – so what I'm saying is, if there is this connection between questioning and innovation and yet at the same time we're trying to squeeze it out. That really doesn't make sense. And somehow both in the school room and in the workplace, we really should be thinking about how do we make time and space and how do we encourage curiosity and questioning? Because it's really going to pay off for us if we can find a way to do that.

Nick Skillicorn: I mean yeah. There's so much evidence now that framing the challenge you're facing in the right way and basically figuring out what are the core questions that need to be asked. It really helps individuals and groups develop the right answers. I'm sure I'm pushing a quote by Einstein but I'm paraphrasing when he apparently said, "If I got an hour to solve a challenge, I'll spend the first either 55 or 59 minutes trying to figure out what the right question is."

Warren Berger: Right, exactly. And I think what Einstein was saying there is so true and you see it – nowadays, you see it reflected in some of the newer business models such design thinking and the world of design thinking as well. We've got getting the question right at the beginning so that we're working on the right thing.

And I think that's such a big issue in the business world. I find so many businesses that are focused on the question they might be obsessed with is how do we this thing more efficiently? We have this process we're doing. It's a 7-step process. How do we get it down to 6 steps? And that will be their entire focus.

And it may be that that is the wrong question. The question maybe, why are we doing that process in the first place? And that we really do see companies that are trying to –

desperately trying to do this thing more efficiently and the thing is something they shouldn't be doing in the first place.

So, they need to step back and ask a different question like, why do we have this 6-step process? Where did it come from? Is it possible that it made sense five years ago but it doesn't make sense now?

And so, a lot of times companies maybe focused on the wrong question. And it's because they are just rushing to get things done. It's because they haven't really stepped back and thought about the various questions they should be asking about what that purpose is and who their customer really is now and how has the market changed in the last few years that maybe made certain things we used to do obsolete.

So, it's a big, big issue. And I'm having lots of companies now since the book came out are getting in touch and they're saying, "We know we need to ask more questions. We don't really know why or how but we know we definitely have the sense that there's something going on in the world right now, in the business world that has changed everything.

And so, we know that we can't just keep doing things maybe the way we did them the last 15, 20, 50 years. We have to start asking really fundamental questions about our whole way of doing business."

So I think in a sense, this idea of questioning is becoming more important as the world around is changing so quickly.

Nick Skillicorn: And I think that leads on nicely to what I'm hoping to get some value of for the listeners and watchers today which is, how do we address these things? And specifically I think that the two main things that will be interesting to talk about are how do we remove this reluctance to ask questions?

Warren Berger: Yeah.

Nick Skillicorn: And then the second thing would be how do we become better at finding the right questions to ask in the first place?

Warren Berger: OK. So in terms of removing the reluctance, I think one thing to do is you have to sort of recognize the value of questioning because unless you recognize the value of something, you're not going to take the time to do it or take the effort to do it. So I think it starts with just understanding that this idea of asking question is really important.

It will help you as Einstein was saying in that quote, it will help you get on to the right path. It will help you make sure the path you're on is the right path. The thing you're working on is the right thing to be working on. Maybe – whether you're doing it the right way, it will help you sort of think about all these things that maybe you're not giving it a thought too.

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Another thing to keep in mind about questioning, if you're going to ask yourself sort of big meaningful questions, and that's what I'm talking about, I'm not talking about what am I going to have for breakfast? Those are the everyday questions. Obviously, we ask those all the time. Nobody needs to tell us to ask those kinds of questions.

The questions we're reluctant to ask are the big ones. Am I on the right path? Am I – does this project that I'm in the middle of, am I doing it the right way? Those are the questions we're a little nervous about asking because I think the reason we're sometimes reluctant to ask bigger questions of ourselves is we're afraid we might not have an answer. We're afraid if I ask, "Gee, what path should I be on?" And I'm like, "Oh, I don't really know." And we're kind of afraid of that situation where we might ask a big question and not have the answer.

And one of the things – one of the points I try to make to people is that's perfectly OK. I mean you don't have to have – I mean you can ask big questions and meaningful questions without having an answer right away. And you're probably not going to have an answer right away.

The whole idea of asking the question, the whole purpose of asking it was to get your brain started thinking about it, to get you kind of moving in the direction of trying to figure this problem out. And it will never happen unless you start with the question. The question will get you going and it will give you something to think about or work on.

I always say that the question can lead you. The question can be a thing that you follow. But you got to ask the question first and you got to sort of articulate it in your head and maybe write it down and get it out there. So I think that if you think of it that way, it will probably make you a little more open to it and comfortable with it.

And then as far as how you word questions or how you know if it's a good question or bad question, they're all different. I mean every beautiful question I look at, there's no formula for how it gets constructed. Some of them are short, beautiful questions. They are five words long. Some of them are very elaborate questions.

But one thing – one trick that I have come across and I find pretty interesting is just the trick of using "how might we" or "how might I". Just using those three words, how might – if you're trying to tackle an issue as a group, it's how might we. Just phrase – try to come up with a great question that starts with the phrase "how might we." It's extremely powerful. It's being used now by Google and a bunch of other companies whenever they're trying to figure out a big problem.

But you can also it in the singular. You can use it for yourself. You can say, "How might I?" So you can take any problem that you're working on. Say your New Year's resolution is to drink more water. Your question becomes, how might I get myself to drink more water?

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And it's amazing what happens when you change – when you word something as a question like that. There's a power in it. In fact, I say that questions like that are much more powerful than let's say, a resolution, a New Year's resolution or a statement. The resolution would be, "This year, I'm going to drink more water." And you write down that resolution and you write down that statement.

It's a lot more powerful to ask yourself, "How might I drink more water?" There's something about a question that engages your brain in a different way from a statement. You will begin to think about that as a puzzle or a problem. And even in your subconscious, your mind will be working on, "How might I do that? Well, I might do this. I might do that."

So, I find it to be very empowering and very motivating. So what I would say to people is try that out. I mean if you're at work or you're in a group and you want to tackle a problem, try using, "how might we" and if you've got something you're working on for yourself, try articulating it as a question that begins with the words, "how might I."

Nick Skillicorn: What about something you and I were talking about before we started the interview which is, questions as a form of communicating with a wider group. You said that there's some evidence that changing the way that you phrase things when you're talking to other people can be quite motivating.

Warren Berger: Yeah. Well, as I was just saying, that idea of "how might we" for instance, I have said to companies that, it would be interesting to think if companies would get rid of their mission statements and replace them with a mission questions. And the reason I say that is because there's something about questioning that is very inviting to people. It invites people to be part of the discussion.

And so, the example I use is, let's say that you had a company that was a robotics company. And the robotics company's statement it put out to the world, and the state is, "We make the world a better place through robotics."

Now, that sounds like – it sort of sounds like a typical corporate slogan. Now, think about if they change that to, "How might we make the world a better place through robotics?" Just by putting those three words in front of that statement, it changes the tone completely. It doesn't arrogant anymore. It sounds sort of hopeful. It sounds aspirational. And it also invites people to be part of it.

The previous statement, "We make the world a better place through robotics," it sounds like they've done it already like, "We've already done this."

"How might we", it sounds like it's a mission. It's a journey. It's a goal we're on. And it invites people to be part of it.

So I think this is what questioning can do. If you're trying to – and I think this is true in politics. It's true in anything. I mean if you go out to the world and say, "How can we together work on this challenge?" It's just a lot more empowering than saying, "We have to do something about this challenge." It's sort of invites people to think about it in a new way. It's more – it's just sort of more motivational.

So I do think that leaders should think in whatever capacity they're in, whether it's leading a small group at a company or in their community or political leaders or whatever, they should think about using questions to rally people around an idea, "How might we find a better way to do this?" Or, "How might we embrace this ideal we're going after?"

And I just think it's a great way to sort of get people to come together around a challenge or an idea.

Nick Skillicorn: Have you got any other techniques which people can try out specifically around using questions to get better quality ideas?

Warren Berger: Well, one of the things I talk a lot about in the book is the asking questions that are very open-ended. And particularly, there are three types of questions I like and I like them in a certain sequence. And the questions are why questions, what if questions, and how questions. OK?

And it's really interesting to use those three types of questions in that order starting with why then asking what if, and then asking how.

What I found when I studied creative people and innovators is oftentimes, they are trying to solve a problem. So they would often start with a lot of why questions because they're trying to understand the problem. Why is this happening? Why hasn't someone come up with a better way to do this already? Why should I care? Why is it important to me? Why would I be a good person to tackle this challenge?

So they're trying to get their arms around the problem. They're trying to understand it. And asking why helps you do that.

Then once you kind of have a sense of why, you have a sense of what the problem is and what the challenge is, what if questions are really good for firing your imagination. "OK. We understand what the problem is, what if we try this? We understand there's an issue about X. OK. What if we did X but we also combine it with Y?"

So when you're asking what if questions, you're really ideating. You're formulating possibilities. It's a hypothetical type question, very blue sky, very open-ended. And so, it's great for coming up with ideas.

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And then the last type of valuable question I found is the how question, which I think of how questions as being a lot more practical. OK? So why, you're trying to understand. What if, using your imagination. How, starts the view about, well, how are we going to actually do something? So we have all these great what if ideas that we came up. But how are we going to make something happen? How do we start? How do we take the first step? If we have an idea, how do we test it?

So I found when I studied innovators that they tended to cycle through this process. First, understanding then coming up with great ideas and then getting it done, getting something done, getting something out there.

And so my advice to people is whatever problem you're working on, whatever challenge you're working on, think about cycling through those three types of questions, why, what if, and how so that you can understand the problem, use your imagination on it, and then start to get things done. Start to actually be practical and get things out there into the world.

Nick Skillicorn: It's very interesting that you talked about the sequence there because as you were talking, I was thinking through all of the work that I do with clients and quite often, if you set them a challenge and they are stuck in their ways, shall we say, the first question that they will say is – they'll try and answer is how. And they'll essentially jump to a solution.

And if you get the sequence the opposite way around, how, what if, and why, if you start with the how question, they come up with the answer straight away. The why question at the end becomes justifying the first idea that they thought.

Warren Berger: Right. Exactly. Yeah. I think that's how definitely true. And I find that so often in business, that people want to go straight to how. And it's just – I think it's just human nature. We're very impatient. We want to get to a solution as quickly as we can. And so, we get practical right away. How much is it going to cost? How are we going to get enough people to do it? How are we going to do this? How are we going to do that?

And all of those questions are really important and they're all going to have to be dealt with at some point. But my argument would be, those are the later questions. That the practical questions come at the end. And the beginning stages, you really want to understand and you want to be open-minded and you want to be creative. And if you get rid of those beginning stages, yeah, you will end up with a how. You will end up with some kind of a solution.

But again, going back to Einstein, it might not be the right solution because you might not be solving the right problem and you might not understand why you're even doing this in the first place. You didn't ask those why questions.

So, it's really a challenge to get people to focus on why and what if because they feel like they don't have time for that. They have to get straight to how. And the only thing I can say to people is, you may think you're saving time by jumping straight to the practical questions,

but in the end, you may be wasting a lot of time. You may be losing time because you're getting very efficient at doing something you shouldn't be doing in the first place.

Nick Skillicorn: Absolutely. I'm sure we could keep speaking at length about this but we're coming up to the end of the interview. And one thing I'd like ask all of the experts who are on is if you've got one tip or actionable insight that people can try out this afternoon or this week to get some value and become more creative and innovate, what would you recommend they try?

Warren Berger: I'd recommend they try what I was talking about earlier. Try coming up with your own "how might I" or "how might we" question. Think about something you're working on. Think about a big project that you're taking on yourself or something in your community or something at your company that's a challenge you've been trying to solve.

And just the first easy step to do is to formulate it as a "how might we" question or a "how might I" question and write that down. Then you've got something to think about, something to work on. It can be very, very powerful.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect. Warren, it has been wonderful speaking with you. We're going to have links to all of your resources down below the video. Can you quickly just describe where those resources are going to take people?

Warren Berger: Yeah. The main source for all of my stuff is amorebeautifulquestion.com, which is – my book is called A More Beautiful Question and I created a site off of that, amorebeautifulquestion.com which really is a kind of pulling together a lot of stuff that's in the book, a lot of articles, a lot of interviews, and just a lot of resources for anyone who wants to know more about questioning or who wants to know more about this whole phenomenon of questioning. So definitely check that out.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect. It has been wonderful speaking with you. And I look forward to speaking again with you soon.

Warren Berger: Great. Thanks, Nick. It was great to talk to you.