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The Questions We No Longer Ask

Why are organisations that most consistently succeed the first to stop asking why.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Organisations rarely lose the ability to answer questions. What erodes is the willingness to keep asking them. As governance matures and success accumulates, curiosity is gradually replaced by confirmation — not through any deliberate decision, but through habit. This isn't a decline in capability; it's a shift in posture, and it happens more often to capable organisations than incapable ones. The organisations that stay resilient aren't the ones holding the most answers. They're the ones that never stopped asking whether their answers still hold to today's conditions.

1. Introduction

There's a sentence I hear often enough that I've stopped being surprised by it and started being curious instead. It usually surfaces after a setback — a project that drifted off course, an operational failure, occasionally something larger that looked entirely reasonable at the time and, in hindsight, seems almost impossible to understand.

Someone, eventually, says it. "Looking back, the signs were there."

I've heard that line across different organisations, different industries, entirely different circumstances. And every time, I silently find myself asking the same follow-up question: If the signs were there, what stopped us from seeing them?

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For a long time, I assumed the answer was information — that we simply did not know enough, that the data wasn't granular enough, that visibility was the missing ingredient. I'm less convinced of that now. I have become more convinced organisations rarely lose their ability to answer. What they gradually lose is their willingness to question. That's a smaller distinction than it sounds, and I suspect it explains more than we give it credit for.

2. From Curiosity to Confidence

Young organisations tend to ask extraordinary questions, mostly because nothing has been proven yet and everything is still open to challenge. Why do we do it this way? Could there be a better approach? What have others missed? Nothing feels fixed, so nothing is spared the question.

Then, quite rightly, something changes. The organisation succeeds, and it begins introducing structure. Processes become repeatable. Governance matures. Standards improve, and consistency starts to matter because consistency is what makes success repeatable rather than accidental. None of this is a problem — in fact, quite the opposite. Strong governance is usually one of the reasons an organisation succeeded in the first place.

What interests me is what is beneath all of that. As organisations become better at producing answers, they tend to become a little less interested in asking questions. Not deliberately. Almost imperceptibly. Which is exactly why needs to be called out rather than assuming it isn't happening.

2.1 What Experience Reinforces

Experience truly is a genuine gift a long career has to offer. It builds judgement, sharpens instinct, and lets us recognise situations others haven't yet encountered. I certainly wouldn't want to talk anyone out of trusting it.

But experience has a second, quieter effect that gets far less attention: it reinforces whatever has worked before. That of course is entirely reasonable. If something has served us well for years, why wouldn't we lean on it? The challenge however is that markets, technology, customers and communities carry no particular obligation to keep rewarding yesterday's assumptions, and organisations change too, often so gradually that nobody inside them notices.

Key Point: Experience is most valuable not when it defends yesterday's answers, but when it prompts leaders to revisit them. The strongest use of experience isn't providing a better answer — it's recognising when an old answer has earned another question.

Asking questions does not disappear all at once, and that is what makes it hard to notice. It tends to fade into small, reasonable-looking steps. A few signs are worth watching for in any organisation, including a well-governed one:

- Meetings that exist to confirm a conclusion rather than to test one.
- Reports that repeat last month's story instead of revealing this today's stories.
- Questions that only get asked once something has already gone wrong.

3. The Habits Organisations Keep

Organisations don't just develop a culture. They develop habits of thinking, and those habits tend to fall into one of two families: some encourage exploration, others encourage confirmation. Some will instinctively ask, "What are we missing?" Others prefer to ask, "Can someone confirm we're right?" The two questions sound similar in a meeting. They lead to entirely different conversations.

I have sat in rooms where every report suggested things were progressing well. Yet the discussions felt incomplete — not because anyone was withholding information, but because nobody in the room asked a question that would have challenged some assumptions. A single, well-placed question can redirect an entire conversation. Only the question changed. Sometimes that's all it takes.

None of this requires a new process or a platform to install. It's a habit, and habits are built through small, repeatable prompts rather than grand initiatives. A few worth trying, particularly in governance and risk forums where routine can harden into ritual:

1. If we were building this organisation today, would we design it this way?

2. What are we seeing together, in this room, that none of us could see alone?
3. Which of our current assumptions have never actually been tested?

4. Leadership and the Discipline of Not Knowing

Leadership is usually described in terms of vision, decisiveness and confidence, and those qualities matter — I've relied on them myself and admire them in others. But when I think about the individuals who have shaped my own thinking the most, a different quality comes to mind first. They were curious, and not in a superficial way. They genuinely wanted to understand. They welcomed perspectives that challenged their own, rarely mistook disagreement for disloyalty, and were comfortable saying "I don't know."

I've come to think those three words are among the most useful a leader can offer a room — not because they signal uncertainty, but because they create space for someone to say something. A governance culture that has no room for "I don't know" tends, to lose its appetite for finding out.

None of this argues against structure, standards or discipline — an organisation without them doesn't become more curious, it becomes chaotic. The point is narrower than that: the healthiest governance cultures I've encountered treat their frameworks as living instruments to be regularly questioned, not as conclusions to needing to be defended. That's not a doctrine so much as a discipline — one that has to be renewed, deliberately, again and again.

Conclusion

I began with a sentence I've heard many times: "Looking back, the signs were there." I suspect we'll keep hearing it, and I no longer think that's because organisations lack capable people, or because governance has failed, or because information is unavailable. More often, I think, it is because somewhere along the way, an organisation that once challenged everything has stopped asking one more question.

That's not a failure of intelligence. If anything, it is a side effect of getting good at things — success breeds structure, structure breeds confidence, and confidence, left unexamined, breeds silence. Recognising that pattern doesn't require a new framework or another audit. It requires a willingness, deliberately renewed, to keep asking the questions that success makes easy to stop asking.

The organisations I would back over the next decade will not be the ones with the most polished answers. It will be the ones that never let their answers go unquestioned for too long, the ones that treat curiosity as a discipline they chose to keep.

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