



TEL EPISODE #027:

A More Beautiful Question with Warren Berger

Show Notes: <http://www.theelpodcast.com/tel-027-beautiful-question-warren-berger/>

Welcome to The Entrepreneurs Library, the only book-centric podcast that reviews all the top-selling business books and shares author's perspective, firsthand. This is your resource to finding the next great book that will enable you to grow personally and professionally. Welcome your host, Wade Danielson.

WADE: Thank you for joining us on the EL. Today we have Warren Berger, author of *A More Beautiful Question*. Welcome Warren and thank you for joining us on the Entrepreneurs Library.

WARREN: Hi Wade, it's good to be here.

WADE: Great. Will you take just a moment to introduce yourself and tell us just a little bit about you personally?

WARREN: I am a longtime journalist and author, I used to write for New York Times and for a long time wrote for Wired Magazine, and now I write for Fast Company and Harvard Business Review and some other publications like that. Along the way I've written several books and the last couple of books have had to do with innovation and design thinking, that kind of strain innovation. Then the most recent book is- I kind of moved from design thinking into questioning which is really a big part of innovation and design thinking and so my book *A More Beautiful Question* is just focused on that aspect of innovation.

WADE: Great, thank you for sharing that, now let's do just that, let's jump into your book *A More Beautiful Question* which was made available for purchase back in March 4th 2014. And Warren we're going to move pretty quickly but we're going to go through some top questions that our listeners/readers would love to get answered, and just to start off the first one is what was the inspiration behind writing this book?

WARREN: The inspiration was that I was studying a lot of entrepreneurs, innovators and business leaders, I was doing this for an earlier book which was all about design and innovation, and one of the things I noticed was... I was looking for- you know, as an author when you're studying your phenomenon you're looking for common trends, things that link everything together and I was looking at a lot of these sort of innovative creative types of people and looking at what they seem to have in common as they're going about coming up with great ideas and great businesses, that sort of thing. And one the things that really stood out to me was questioning. I found that a lot of great innovators and business thinkers start with great questions; they are asking the questions that no one else is asking and that kind of leads them towards new opportunities and they work on those questions and answers and eventually if they can answer those great questions they've got a great startup or they've got a great product or what have you. So that was kind of the inspiration was just seeing how many people that I admired were great questioners and then said well this looks like something worth exploring, what is it about questioning and why is it so powerful and why are some people better at it than others.

WADE: Great. So help us understand what makes your book different from others regarding the same topic?

WARREN: There are a number of books on questioning but I would say not too many have positioned it directly in terms of innovation. There are books on questioning and why if you ask good questions you can be a good conversationalist or why you should know how to ask good questions on a job interview or know how to ask questions about your life. So I felt like I was the first one to really position this in terms of innovation and business, to look at the relationship between asking great questions and coming up with great business ideas, and I did that in great detail in the book, there's a lot of stories in the book of innovations and startups and companies like Netflix and Square and Airbnb and older companies too like Polaroid, and just looking at the way the questioning plays such a significant role in helping the founders of the company establish the business and come up with great ideas and then come up with great products. So that was kind of what I focused on and I think I'm the first one to do it, I mean I

don't think anyone that I'm aware has traced the role of questioning in all of these business breakthroughs and innovations through the years.

WADE: How would you want to reader to engage with your book? Is this the kind of book that you want them to start from beginning and read straight through or is this more of a resource they can kind of come back to?

WARREN: I think both; I think It's good to read in its entirety in a way because it gives you a full appreciation of the significance of questioning historically and then in business, and also it gets into a lot of the techniques of questioning and how you can get better asking the kind of questions that can help you innovate. So I think looking at it holistically you kind of get a sense of how it all fits together, but I also think it's a book you can go back to for some of the more practical tips and strategies that are offered in the book. One of the things the book has is it kind of lays out a framework of how you can use questioning an sort of progress through certain types of questioning in order to get to better ideas, better products and innovations, that kind of thing. So I think there are very practical strategies in it that you may want to go back to and look at over time.

WADE: Ok great. Now that we know the background behind the book and a little bit about what it's about let's take a deep dive. And this is an opportunity for you to give us a great summary of what your book is all about and really just give the future reader a great summary of what they can expect.

WARREN: The title is *A More Beautiful Question*; the sub title of the book is the power of inquiry to spark breakthrough ideas. So I kind of put that out there at the beginning of the book and the book starts with the first section of just making the case to the reader of why questioning is so important and why it's such a critical part of innovation and change. And I kind of I lay out a lot of evidence and stories and anecdotes and just sort giving people the rationale behind this book; why is questioning so important, why should someone care, why should someone pay attention to that. And lot of people say well I know how to ask questions why would I need a book.

So I kind of lay that out in the first section of the book and tell you this is why it's important, this is why even though you may think of yourself as a god questioner you're probably not as good as you could be at asking great questions and you can get better at it and the people who are really innovating in the business world today are great questioners. So I kind of lay all that out in the beginning in that first section which is called the power of inquiry. And once I kind of make the case about why questioning is so important.

Then the second section of the book I do something interesting, I kind of step back and kind of say what is about questioning in terms of human beings, why is it that we start out asking so many questions when we are kids, everyone knows that the typical 4 or 5 year old just asks a lot of questions, and then we tend to ask less questions as we get older. So that became the second section of the book, to just explore that whole idea, there is a great questioner inside all of us but overtime we may have gotten out of the habit of asking questions, and there's all different kinds of reasons for that and it's very interesting, I mean that all gets laid out in the second session of the book, I talk a little bit about our education system which really doesn't teach or encourage questioning by students.

We have an education system that's very answers based, it's about memorizing the answers and so we really get out of the habit of asking questions especially original questions and imaginative questions, the kind of questions which are really valuable. So I think that sections kind of lays it all out there and that second section has been very popular in the education world, it's been surprising even though it's primarily a business book, that second section because it talks about education and it talks about what happens to our questioning skills as we go through school and get older, it has really resonated with teachers and educators and a lot of them are contacting me and saying this is a big issue in our schools, we know we have to do a better job of encouraging questioning in kids, and so it's been a very interesting thing, the reaction to that section of the book.

But anyway you get through that section, so the point of that is we've lost some of our questioning skills along the way, so what do we do, what can we do to kind of get better at questioning and that's where I go into the third section of the

book which lays out my own kind of system of questioning which is the why, what if and how way of thinking about questioning. It goes pretty deep in terms of showing you the power of each of those kinds of questions; the why questions, what if questions and how questions. They're different, they have a different power and do different things and they have an interesting relationship with each other. So I explain why it's so important to get good at asking why questions, when you look at the world around you, you look at your business, you look at the way you've been doing things for the last 10 years, you look at processes, policies, products, whatever.

You need to be able to look at things and ask why in an intelligent way, why is this business not performing as well as it might, why do people out there have a need for this particular thing and yet no one has delivered it yet? So those kinds of why questions are really important, and then I talk about what if questions in terms of those are the kind of questions that can help you begin to come up with ideas. What if questions really open up your imagination.

When you say what if we tried X or what if we combined the way we're doing this over here with this other approach that seems totally unrelated, what if we put them together. So what if is a really great way to just ideate and to create and to brainstorm. And then the last kind of question I talk about is how, and how questions are very practical action oriented questions. So you kind of go from why which is exploring possibilities to what if which is really starting to come up with ideas and somewhere along the line you want to get to how, you want to get to how are we going to start to do this, how do we take the first steps, how might we experiment with this idea, how might we prototype it, how might we test it and learn.

So I think that is a very logical flow that takes people from kind of speculative questioning to action oriented questioning, that's really important. Everyone says to me particularly in the business world, people always say to me if you start asking a lot of questions don't you just get paralyzed and you end up not doing anything because you end up questioning everything, and that's a big fear that business people have about questioning. But what I say is if you approach questioning the right way and you make sure your questions are always moving

forward, that they're always trying to take a step further along the path towards doing something the questioning becomes very action oriented at the end, you can end up using questions to actually lead you to get things done. So that whole structure is very important and that whole approach to questioning. That is what the third section of the book lays out, that's the why, what if and how of innovative questioning.

And then the fourth in the five sections of the book I really zero in on business which is called questioning in business. It's all about taking some of the principles I've just laid out in the second section and just saying how does this apply specifically to business and how does it apply to your business and why is questioning suddenly so important in business, what are the reasons for that? So I think this is the chapter where you really kind of zero in on the kinds of questions businesses need to be asking.

I feel that today things are changing so fast that whatever business you're in you have to always be questioning that business, and in fact you should always be asking yourself all the time what business am I really in because the business you're in yesterday might not be the business you're in today because everything may have changed all around you just overnight. So in this chapter I really lay out some of the questions that businesses need to be asking and some of the reasons they need to be asking so many questions.

Eventually I get into some areas in the section like can you use questioning as a form of brainstorming which is really interesting and some businesses are starting to do that, they're starting to realize that if you structure your brainstorming sessions around asking questions it can actually be more adoptive than having people throw out ideas, just because people are more comfortable asking questions, they don't feel as vulnerable, and questions just fire the imagination. So we're finding that it's a really good brainstorming technique.

And then one of the last thing I say in the business section and this is kind of gotten a lot of attention since the book came out in the business world, it's created some interest in discussion and I actually believe that questions are so powerful that I think companies should think about having mission questions

instead of mission statements because a mission question around a company's goals is going to be more engaging to people than a statement. it's more open and it's more inviting to your employees to participate and help you answer the question. So a company can phrase its mission question as how might we be the best XY and Z instead of declaring we are the best XYZ in the world. If you put your mission out there as a question it's less arrogant and it's more inviting to people, it says to your various collaborators and employees and partners, it says we're on a mission and it's an open ended mission and we hope to answer this question and hopefully you can help us do it. so that's pretty much the business section.

And then the last section of the book I step outside of business and tie all of this into your daily life because I think a lot these principles of questioning apply just as much in your life as they do in business. All of us are trying to achieve goals and get places in our life and deal with issues that maybe we haven't thought about enough. And so what I talk about in the book in this chapter of the book is you can use questioning to start to deal with some of those issues in your life that maybe you have been avoiding thinking about, maybe you've been sort of too busy to take the time to step back and ask fundamental questions about- I'm on the right part in my career or why am I living in the town am in and is this really where I want to be?

So in that section I really talk about how you can use deep and smart questions to deal with the issues in your life. And I wrap-up the book by making the case that all of us should have a beautiful question, one big question that we pursue in our lives. It could be some goal you want to achieve or something you've always been interested in, but you put it out there as a question, how might I do this or that thing and you pursue it over time, it's a thing that can motivate you and lead you along.

So that's pretty much where I end the book on that note of find your beautiful question and very positive kind of uplifting message at the end, and that's it. and then the last thing is the book, something interesting that I did in the back of the book is most people have an index of facts in the back of their book and I have an index that's entirely questions and it's about 400 questions that are embedded

within the book, all kinds of questions; business questions, life questions, that kind of thing.

WADE: Warren that was a great review. I appreciate you taking us through the book, and that's what makes this next question difficult I believe, and it's if the reader could only take one concept, principle or action item out of the entire book what would you want that to be?

WARREN: Well I think the most important principle has to do with the value of questions because a lot of us tend to undervalue questions, and we think the real value lies in the answers. And so if there's one idea that I would like you to take out of this is that questions may be just as important as the answers, and in fact there's an evidence to suggest that the value of questions is continuing to rise today as the value of answers is declining, the reason being when you're at the time of rapid change the answers that you have for various ways of doing things quickly become obsolete or outdates, so you're always having to update what you know and your solutions, your approaches.

You're always having to adapt and learn new ways, and questioning is what helps you do that, questioning is what helps you to continuously bring in new knowledge, new approaches, new ways of doing things, to continuously helps you to solve problems. So the one principle I really would want people to take out of this is that questioning is much more valuable than you think it is and in some ways the questions matter just as much as the answers.

WADE: Warren do you have a favorite quote from your book and if you don't have one that you personally selected is there one that's maybe resonated with your audience so far?

WARREN: There are two that has been talked about a lot. One is a quote that is originated in Silicon Valley a couple of years ago where they have taken to saying that "Questions are the new answers." And I love that line and I think it's really true particularly in Silicon Valley where so many of the great companies, the billion dollar startups began with a question. So the idea of what they believe out there is that if you can come up with the right question you've got it made or at

least you're on your way, you're on your way to something good. So that's one line that I really love, and another line is a little more education related, it's been getting a lot of attractions since I first said it, but what is said is what I would say to students today is that "Knowing the answers will help you in school but knowing how to ask questions will help you in life." And I think that's a big part of the message of this book. So those are the two lines that I think are the most powerful coming out of the book.

WADE: Ok great. We can already tell that your book is one that's going to help create a paradigm shift for a lot of people who are focusing on the answers and maybe not the questions, and that's why I would like to ask you this next question which is if you could recommend another book that could create a paradigm shift for our listener the way it did for you what would you want that to be?

WARREN: I'd like to mention a couple of things, first of all I always like to mention Peter Drucker because I think that Peter Drucker to me laid the ground work for a lot of the ways we think about business today, and I think his ideas are relatively relevant today, even though a lot of his stuff was written over 40 years ago but it's incredibly relevant stuff, and Drucker by the way was very big on questioning, he believed that these companies used to come to Drucker, Coca-Cola and all these big companies and say tell us what to do, you're the guru of this business, give us the answer, and Drucker will always say to them my job isn't to give you the answer, my job is to help you find the answer by asking the right questions and helping you ask the right questions.

So I'm a big believe in Drucker and I think you can't go wrong with any of his books or you could get the essential Drucker which kind of boils a lot of his ideas together and that's a good one to check out. So that's one and I was very influenced by *The Art of Innovation* by Tom Kelley of IDEO. I think that book is a great book for anyone who wants to understand some of the fundamentals of innovation. Before everybody was writing innovation books IDEO was at the forefront of this kind of thinking and they laid it out, some of the basics of innovation and design and design thinking and it's relevant to anyone in business, anyone doing startup, you don't have to be a designer, you don't have to be any

of those things, it's relevant to anyone who is trying to be an innovator in business, so I like that a lot.

And most recently the book that has influenced me a lot is *Give and Take* by Adam Grant, and I just think that's a fantastic book and I think it has a very important message for people in the business world and in their careers. Basically if you help people it actually helps you become more successful, and if you give of yourself in business and you do small favors and maybe not so small favors for others in the world around you and in the business world around you it will actually help you to be more successful yourself. And it's a radical notion but I think it's absolutely true and so I'm a big believer in that and I just think it's a great concept and a great book.

WADE: Excellent. Warren before we depart can you recommend the best way for our listeners to get more information on you, the other books you were talking about that you've written and *A More Beautiful Question*?

WARREN: Basically you can get all of that at the main website www.amorebeautifulquestion.com, and that will introduce you to basically this whole world of questioning. There is a lot of great articles and tidbits in there, some of them are from the book and some from other sources but it's a great place to get started in learning a little bit about the importance of questioning. You can even take a little inquiry test on there to see what kind of questioner you are. So it's a fun site too.

WADE: Ok excellent. Warren thank you so much for coming on today, we really appreciate your time.

WARREN: It was great to be here and thanks for having me.

WADE: Absolutely. Thanks again for listening in today. If you'd like to get your hands on *A More Beautiful Question* or any of the resources mentioned by Warren just look at the show notes at theelpodcast.com.



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