

Five 'annoying' questions we ignore because we are too busy with day-to-day survival

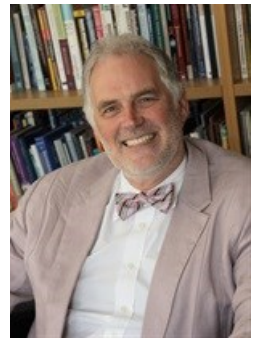
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Business leaders need to be open to being challenged if they want to succeed in an era of low growth, says UCT GSB Professor Walter Baets.

Surviving in business is a daily challenge and in difficult economic environments these challenges multiply.

But tough economic times should not be a reason not to succeed, says Professor Walter Baets, Director of the UCT Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB) and Allan Gray Chair in Values Based Leadership. Business leaders who are prepared to ask the "annoying" questions may in fact find that these times can act as a spur for growth.



Professor Walter Baets

"You need to be open to being challenged and interested in being challenged," he says.

This starts with being prepared to look inwards and ask the difficult questions that are fundamentally important, but often neglected because the business is too busy with its day-to-day survival.

Baets, who runs a masterclass on this topic at the UCT GSB called The Excellence Leap, lists five key questions business leaders should ask of themselves and their organisations to sharpen their focus and hone their strategic advantage.

1. What would the world miss if we ceased to exist tomorrow?

Businesses that want to retain their competitive edge in an environment where slow growth has been projected need to have a very clear sense of purpose, argues Baets. This starts and ends with adding value. If you are not adding value to your customers, then why would you exist? This question is becoming more pertinent in a world of limited resources and growing inequality. Companies and societies are in great need of leaders able to refocus organisations on the task of creating and contributing wealth while adding value to society with meaningful, purposeful and inclusive business.

"When 80% of products are designed for 80% of the people, only then will companies have achieved inclusive business that contributes to the development of the economy whether rich or poor, mature or emerging," Baets says.

2. What are our values and does everybody in the organisation know and share these?

An organisation can have the loftiest of purposes and be adding tremendous value to its customers, but if its vision is not properly communicated to its team, it will flounder. Common values can play a key role in building a cohesive organisation, where everyone is pulling in the same direction. Baets says the values orientation of a company should be the shared goal. As in a game of football, people should interact with each other, work together and serve customers based on a very limited set of simple rules (respect for each other, weekly reporting etc.). Each employee is an autonomous agent, taking responsibility for her behaviour but understanding the common goal. The manager is the coach, sharing their experience and motivating employees to reach their best potential.

In addition to ensuring that values are shared and understood, leaders can take this one step further and, as John Demartini suggests, ensure that you recruit people that share your organisational values, so that there is added impetus to moving in the same direction.

3. Do we know what our limitations are?

If you don't know what your limits are - how can you move beyond them? Excellent organisations, says Baets, have spent time identifying their limits - be they environmental, personal or structural. They know which ones they can control and which they can't so that leaders can, with clear vision, build resilient organisations and teams that know where they are going and why they are going there.

"It's like when you play the piano, it is not about the piano, it is about the music," says Erna Oldenboom, who co-convenes The Excellence Leap Masterclass with Baets.

"The moment you touch the piano, you can hear the difference between somebody who knows how to go beyond the structure, the white and black, to amaze everybody - let them be touched by the music. If we can do that in music, we can do that in many different professions. But we need to go beyond our own structure, our own mental models," she says.

4. Are we a learning organisation?

Managing and working in challenging times requires an adapted set of competencies for people. Some of the elements to consider, says Baets are how to manage in complexity (not of complexity), how to manage diversity, in respect of multiple solutions and multiple truths, and how to be comfortable with paradoxes. In addition to formal learning opportunities, successful organisations need to find ways to use daily experiences as learning experiences, to "use reality as a large field of experimentation".

A learning environment is a vital tool for building resilient and positive teams as well. Barbara L Frederickson writes of the need for a presence of positive emotions (such as passion, joy, enjoyment of certain tasks) as opposed to stress, trauma or fear. An organisation in which employees take pride and joy in their tasks, or feel praised for their work, will be more resilient.

5. Are we really invested in change?

An organisation can do and say all the right things, but if it is not really invested in change, it won't move forward. Change is of course intimidating - but it is essential. A longitudinal study by Karol L Kumpfer, has demonstrated that more ability to adapt equals greater resilience. This is echoed in a study by Norris, Stevens et al., who writes of the importance of flexibility, as well as access to reliable information and sound decision-making, specifically for groups and communities.

"The reality is that there will be challenges in the environment for some time. We can't control many of the external factors, but there is much that we can control - including how we approach the situation. We need to ask ourselves the difficult questions with curiosity, and be open to change. Then we can build resilient and successful businesses no matter what the growth forecast," Baets says.

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