



## Episode 64: An Activity to Jump-Start Innovation

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Today, let's play in the space of innovation. This is the place of creativity, of expansive thinking, of anything is possible. Our brains love to play here and, when we innovate, it also feels exciting in our body.

Unfortunately, big picture and innovating time is often a casualty of the busy-ness of life. Leaders know the importance of taking time for strategic and high-level thinking, and too often, the time they've blocked for this gets taken over by urgent matters of the day.

To be effective and productive, our brains need to be able to think in different ways. They need to toggle between thinking tactically about details and dreaming about what might be possible.

Today's topic is an activity to jump start big-picture and innovative thinking. It's a structured process that's easy to use by yourself and with others. It invites thinking from the perspective of the balcony, and the 30,000 foot view.

The activity I'll share is an opportunity for creativity and permission – both of which are necessary for innovative thinking to happen.

The activity we're talking about today is called Question-storming.

According to an internet search, this term was coined in 1985 by Jon Roland. Since then, many coaches and consultants have shared and taught this process – each putting their own flavor on it.

Here's how I explain and teach question storming to my clients. I say this:

Question storming is similar to brain storming in that it is a generative process. In brain storming, though, people generate ideas and answers. For example, if you were brain storming where to go on vacation, you might come up with ideas like: the beach, skiing, the mountains, a cruise, or camping. Then you would choose one of those.

Question storming is different in that instead of generating answers, you are generating only questions. The goal of question storming is to create a robust and creative list of questions only – no answers – that reflect the thinking about a situation, a relationship, or a problem in a more expansive way.

Because expansive thinking creates an opportunity to see things from a new perspective and try something new – and that's the definition of innovation.

There are 4 steps to question storming.

Step #1 is to choose the topic you want to think more fully and creatively about. This is best when it's a neutral topic – it can be specific or broad. Your topic could be a personal one, like your next family vacation.

It could also be a work topic, like onboarding a new hire, finding new revenue streams, or planning a faculty retreat.

It's important to make the topic big enough so that your brain can see it from different facets and angles, because that's what question storming is. It's taking time and space to turn a topic around in your mind to see it from different perspectives.

After you have your topic, step #2 is to generate questions. This is the fun part. The rules for this step are simple. You generate lots of questions, without judging the question as to whether it's good or bad. Even though your brain will want to answer the questions, it's important to hold yourself back from doing that. Tell your brain that you'll be able to answer the questions later.

When generating questions, you'll want to create open-ended questions. Open-ended questions start with one of 5 words: who, what, where, when, and how. We avoid questions that start with the word "why" because why questions make people feel defensive. If you really want to ask a why question, make it a how or what question instead.

When generating questions, you also want to pay attention to the energy and feel of the question. The goal is to keep an expansive, positive, and curious mindset. Watch out for a negative mindset, as that can keep your thinking constricted.

For example, let's take the topic of onboarding a new hire. If you are question storming that topic, and you have some worries, a question like, "What am I worried about?" might invite your inner critic and negative thinking. It would be more helpful to reframe that question to one like, "What values do I want to honor as I onboard this person?"

It's important to watch your mindset, and make sure to approach question storming from an above the line place of courage, curiosity, and creativity.

The more creative and crazy the question the better! Please give yourself full permission to ask out-of-the-box questions.

Let's stay with the topic of onboarding a new hire.

Likely, the first questions you'll think of will be ones that usually come to mind. These might be questions like:

What information will be helpful for them? What would I like to share about my communication style? How do they like to receive feedback? What are my expectations for them at the end of 30 days? Or 6 months?

After the typical questions, invite your brain into thinking outside the usual. You might question storm questions like these:

If I had an onboarding music playlist for myself, what songs would be on it? What metaphor best describes our current team? What movie best describes our company? What do I want to be saying at their first annual review a year from now?

Lightness should definitely be part of question storming, as our brain relaxes and thinks more creatively when we're having fun.

If you are question storming by yourself, say each question out loud one at a time and write it down. If you are question storming with others, go back and forth, or go around in a circle, again, writing each question down.

By the end of step 2, you should have a robust list of questions – some practical, some strategic, and hopefully some that will invite a new way of thinking.

Step 3 is for focusing the creativity and bringing more structure to the process, so that you can ultimately take action. Look at your list of questions. You'll notice that they fall into a few discrete categories. One category might be practical logistics, another might be people to be involved, a third might be longer-term thinking.

For step 3, take your list of questions, identify the broad categories they fall into, and then place the questions up into the appropriate category.

In step 4, you finally get to answer some of the questions! For this step, take a look at the categories and questions, and choose the ones that you want to answer first. These might be the most pressing questions, like, on day 1, what are the most important pieces of information to share with my new hire? They might also be questions that are fun to think about, like, if we had a team mascot, what animal would it be?

When you question storm, you are taking the time and giving yourself permission to think broadly and creatively about a topic before narrowing down your thinking.

You might end up thinking about the topic from a place you expected, and most clients – when we question storm – end up with some juicy questions they're excited to think about that they never even considered.

Innovative thinking takes time and space, and now you have a tool to jump start your creativity through harnessing the power of questions.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you want to question storm a topic with me, please reach out. Email me at [deb@debelbaum.com](mailto:deb@debelbaum.com) or go to my website [debelbaum.com](http://debelbaum.com) to schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!