

The Four Questions

What is?

Because our goal in addressing a challenge is to envision and implement an improved future state, it is always tempting to jump right to the future and get started solving. Many managers have been taught that creative thinking starts with brainstorming solutions. But the design process is human-centered and starts with the present, not the future—it begins with what is happening now. Innovative ideas are generated from insights about the current reality for real users, and without those insights, the imagination starves. That is why the **What is** stage is so important.

What is starts with the identification of the right kind of problem for design thinking to solve. Then it creates a design brief to move us into action. This stage ends with the identification of design criteria that point the way toward opportunities that were always there but were hidden. We call this the reframe. The reframe feeds the imagination for the next stage: **What if**. By taking the time to develop deep insight into your problem or opportunity and its context before you start trying to generate solutions, you are also establishing the reference point for change, the constraints that shape it, and the criteria for what success looks like.

What if?

Once you have thoroughly explored and documented **What is**, you can look toward the future and one of our favorite questions: **What if?** The **What if** stage looks like the kind of creative and generative process that we expected design thinking to be all along, but it's surprisingly disciplined in its approach. This is because we want to push beyond simplistic expressions of new possibilities (the kind of output that an initial brainstorming session might produce) and arrive at robust concepts that can be evaluated, prototyped, and (if promising enough) developed.

Initially, the idea of activities like brainstorming makes most managers nervous. It is not the kind of thinking that we are trained in either at school or at work. Instead, we are trained to think critically, to debate and poke holes. This kind of critical thinking is important—but not yet!

A lot of research tells us that if we allow that kind of judging into our process too early it will drive creative ideas right out the door. An important part of asking **What if?** involves putting those hole-poking skills on hold and exploring a wide range of possibilities. Successful design thinkers use clever mental tools and tricks to get out of the habit of breaking things down and criticizing them.

What is?

What if?

What wows?

By the time we ask **What wows**, we have covered a lot of territory. Through the exploration of **What is**, we learned about the stakeholders we hope to serve. Through brainstorming and concept development in **What if**, we have homed in on some concepts that we believe have real potential to create value for our stakeholders and meet organizational objectives at the same time. Now it is time to make hard choices, identifying the best concepts—those that wow—in order to guide our next steps.

Typically, the “wow zone” for a business concept occurs at the intersection of three criteria: your targeted stakeholders want it, you are able to produce and deliver it, and doing allows your organization to achieve its objectives.

To assess whether your new ideas have the potential to wow, you start by identifying the key assumptions that must hold true for your concepts to be successful and the data you’d need to test them. You’ll look at the data you’ve already got to work with. Then, you create a prototype of your ideas that will allow you to engage your stakeholders and get some high-quality feedback. This will set the stage for our final question, **What works?**, when you take these concepts into the field and actually test your assumptions with stakeholders.

What works?

This is the final stage of the design process—when your exciting high-potential concepts come face-to-face with your actual stakeholders in the real world. It represents the key difference between invention and innovation: Invention is doing something in a novel way; innovation requires that the invention be implemented and create value. Invention doesn’t necessarily produce better outcomes for real people; only innovation does that.

We are all tempted to fall in love with the new concepts we have nurtured so carefully in the first three stages of the process. And we have stressed the idea of keeping many options open—but in real life we know it is too expensive to keep all our options open and try everything. Yet when you develop just one concept, you are apt to come up empty-handed if your key stakeholders are not interested in your masterpiece. The choice of which concepts to move forward is best *not* left to the same person who created them (you!). The right person is the same one who inspired you in the first place: the customer.

Instead of observing targeted stakeholders as they navigate the world of **What is**, you now need them to take a walk with you into several possible futures—and to engage them in co-creating a solution with you. This means putting your prototypes in their hands and refining them on the basis of their input until you arrive at a version that is ready for proof-of-concept testing in the marketplace, using the learning launch tool. This final step of the journey will give you enough information to make more solid data-based investment decisions.

What wows?

What works?

The Steps