Using the Power of Questions

ASKING QUESTIONS WILL HELP YOU BETTER IDENTIFY YOUR LIBRARY’S ‘STORY’ AND INVITE MORE PEOPLE TO SHARE IN ITS CREATION AND UNFOLDING.

BY MICHELLE HOLLIDAY

Like the organizations they serve, many libraries and information centers have mission statements. But what if they had mission questions instead of mission statements? How much more engaging and inviting would this be than the typical bland pronouncements about “providing resources and services”?

Far more than mere statements, such mission questions could reflect underlying inquiries, such as the following:

• Why do you want to provide these resources and services to these people?
• What learning, discoveries, and milestones—in essence, what unfolding story—is to be found on that path?
• What are you wildly curious about?
• What compels you to come together in this work because you alone can’t gain enough insight into the story?

A mission question (or, more likely, a set of them) would imply that there is clear intention, but also that there is much that is unknown. Paradoxically, this is likely to be a source of strength and deep engagement. As storytelling master Michael Margolis (2014) says, “Your greatest source of untapped power is the part of your story that is unreconciled.”

This aligns with my own experience. For the past 15 years, my work has often involved helping organizations craft a manifesto—a concise expression of who they are, what they want, and what has to be true if they are to get what they want. The highly participatory and inquisitive process of getting there is always vital and engaging.

Looking back, however, I’ve realized that the subsequent process of creating a definitive statement always feels noticeably less alive. Instead of excited co-creation, there is debate. People wonder whether the document truly describes everyone involved, whether they can really claim to be all that, or whether they should be so pretentious as to publicly announce their loftiest aspirations.

Libraries as Living Ecosystems

In contrast, creating a set of mission questions seems more likely to be able to encompass diverse views even as it builds unity, to demonstrate humility alongside audacity, and to invite a broad community to see themselves in the mission—to recognize that those are also their questions. What makes people feel really alive and connected is sharing in the inquiry together. When that process comes to a close, so does the life in their interactions.

All of this makes perfect sense within the context of what I call “thrivability,” the emerging view of organizations as living ecosystems, with the accompanying intention and practice of cultivating the fertile conditions for life to thrive within and around them. When we see a library or information center as a liv-
ing system, then we acknowledge that it is more than its collections, equipment, and infrastructure—it is also (perhaps most of all) its staff and users. The library’s services and value are brought to life and continually co-created through the living interactions and conversations of the people involved. And, like any good conversation, this process is most potent when it is a genuinely curious, collective exploration of an unanswered question—when it is the emergent process of crafting a story together and being in shared service of its unfolding.

A friend and I recently played with the idea of mission questions during a walk through the woods. His company, Compost Montreal, has the stated aim of “eliminating the concept of waste.” Each week, they pick up food scraps from houses and offices, diverting the material from landfills and converting it into useful compost. The deeper potential he senses for his company, though, is the exploration of how composting can serve as a metaphor for the transformation that people are capable of effecting, especially by coming together.

“What if we embraced the concept of rot and death … and also renewal?” my friend wondered, with growing excitement. “What if every aspect of our business were in service of that exploration? For example, how could our hiring practices and our ways of working together serve that question? And what kinds of conversations could we engage our customers and community in?”

When I think about the most powerful companies in the world, I struggle to imagine what their questions might be, beyond those of self-interested domination and profit for its own sake. A wise acquaintance had an astute take on this. The presence of clear uncertainty about outcomes, he suggested, might possibly be a way of discerning whether a company is up to some good or not.

“If it is truly trying to solve a problem and do something that hasn’t been done, great,” he mused. “If not, it is highly suspect, and probably just a cover for somebody’s money machine. That we don’t know how it will end means that we’re alive. So we should embrace the unknown and the discovery process, as that’s the real interesting part, not something we should try to hide away.”

**Your Larger Story**

For libraries, which are so often viewed from the outside as staid and static—as decidedly non-living—what could be more revolutionary than explicitly embracing their vitality? After all, to be alive is to be learning.

In the quest for your library’s or learning center’s mission questions, one starting point might be to explore together the scope of your unfolding story. According to the famous account of President John F. Kennedy’s first visit to NASA headquarters in 1961, he introduced himself to a janitor who was mopping the floor and asked him what he did at NASA. “I’m helping put a man on the moon,” the janitor replied.

What is your equivalent of that response? In other words, what is the larger story of what you are helping to do within your library or information center, within your host or partner institution, within your community, and/or on Earth? What niggling curiosity do you have about where your work could take you and what it could contribute? What is ripe with possibility in the emerging story of your work, and what would you love to know about how that story unfolds? What is the greatest need that your alter egos would take on, with bold ambition, if given the chance?

Against the backdrop of an expanded and inspired scope, what are the questions that matter? My favorite resource for the practice of crafting such guiding questions is an article, “The Art of Powerful Questions,” by Eric E. Vogt, Juanita Brown, and David Isaacs (2003). In their article, the authors offer prompts like these:

- What question, if answered, could make the most difference to the future of your library or information center?
- What assumptions do you need to test or challenge in thinking about the role of libraries and information centers?
- What conversation, if begun today, could ripple out in a way that created new possibilities for the future of your host institution and beyond?

And I would add this one: What new learning is needed in these times?

Although all of this is likely to be unfamiliar territory, the potential reward is the growing capacity to co-create a future that is more compelling and more “thrivable” than anything you ever imagined possible.

**REFERENCES**
