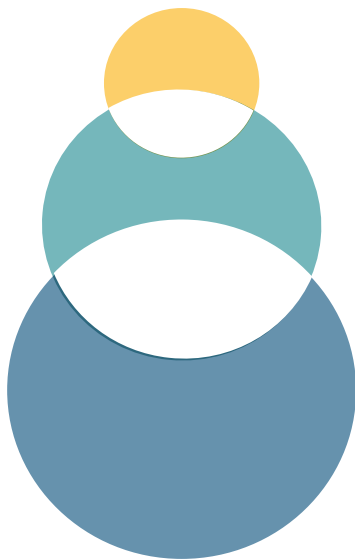


QUESTION THE STATUS QUO - PLAYBOOK

Tools and frameworks for leaders who want to challenge outdated systems and thinking to make change happen for themselves, their communities, and their organizations.

We thrive at the epicenter of innovation. We make progress by speaking our minds even when it challenges convention. We lead by championing bold ideas and taking intelligent risks.



Our collective experience, be it from books, the internet, our community, or years of observation, has shaped our expectations of the world around us. It influences our beliefs and tells us how things “should” be—or how they should be done. However, this makes it easy to fall into the trap of assuming that, because an idea is popular, it must be true. Or that, because something is done a certain way, it must be the best or only way. This is a sure way to end up doing the wrong things for the right reasons (or vice versa), repeating bad decisions, or becoming fixated on the symptoms of an issue while the underlying causes go unseen and unsolved.



The first of [Berkeley Haas’ four Defining Leadership Principles](#): **Question the Status Quo**—asks us to be wary of the tendency to fall in line with what’s popular or to remain stagnant just because it’s comfortable. This principle reflects the school’s innovation-forward culture and values but also points to an even more profound human capability—the role of thought and reflection in our ability to improve our situations and lives. Our ability to think critically and strategize gives us the power to ask questions, solve problems, and meet massive challenges with careful consideration. These skills are particularly valuable now in times of turbulence and lightning-fast change, where even what is considered the “status quo” is disputable and morphing before our very eyes. In times like these, we are at risk of simply reacting to perceived threats rather than being thoughtful about the direction we are headed and the larger impacts of our actions.

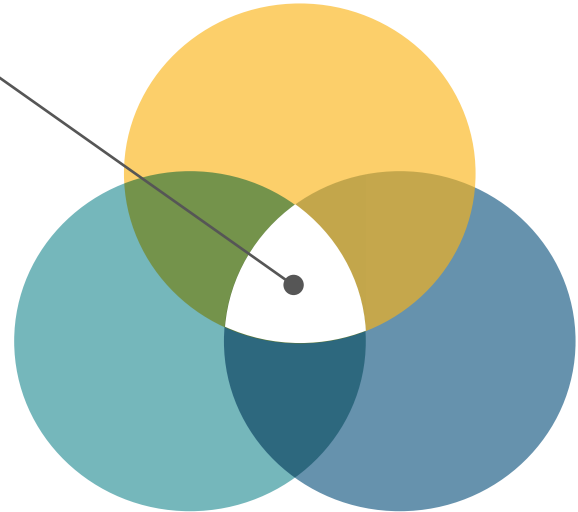
On a personal level, our ability to **Question the Status Quo** (including our own beliefs and assumptions) can increase our mind’s flexibility. This opens us to new ideas and new ways of thinking and leads to breakthrough insights we might not otherwise have, improving our influence and contributions toward the endeavors we find most meaningful.

CULTIVATING THE MINDSET

Our ability to effectively *Question the Status Quo* relies on a few essential, yet trainable, traits.

- BEING OBSERVANT
- AGILE-MINDED
- COURAGEOUS

Individuals who possess these three traits tend to excel at recognizing the vital elements of a current situation, exploring multiple perspectives, and taking the necessary actions to affect change.



OBSERVANT

Being observant doesn't come naturally to everyone. Those who are more naturally observant than others tend to spot issues and problems more easily, recognize outdated habits, and quickly identify when certain strategies are no longer working. They can also acquire helpful information they might apply in new ways—in their relationships, careers, and businesses.

When we're observant and study our environment and the people around us, we have an opportunity to ask ourselves: "Why is this? Why do people do what they do?" This line of questioning typically leads to deeper questions, such as "What would happen if I tried something different?" or "What if we did things differently?" The truth is, seeing what's in front of us and asking why it exists in its current state is the only way for us to improve our circumstances—this type of awareness plays a primary role in our ability to *Question the Status Quo*.

If you feel your powers of observation are lacking, the good news is that they can be enhanced. It takes intention, a bit of curiosity, and like anything else, continued practice. We've created a simple "Investigative Awareness Worksheet" based on the acronym "S.O.I.L." to help people increase their investigative awareness and observational skills.

SOIL: Investigative Awareness Worksheet →

AGILE-MINDED

Being agile-minded means being capable of approaching situations with a blank slate, remaining open to all possibilities, and entertaining diverse viewpoints and thinking processes. This allows us to recognize opportunities that may not be immediately apparent and is essential for creativity and bringing new solutions to old problems. It also helps our brains process information better and remain more flexible as we age.

Being agile-minded is much more than just being flexible, however. It doesn't mean that you're always open to new ideas or that you're always eager to change plans at a moment's notice. It's about shifting your mind from one perspective to another, from one idea to the next, from one way of doing something to another without losing sight of the end goal. For example: if a new technology arises that could potentially change how we do something, a person with an agile mind will not just look at the possibilities but also be more likely to question the advantages of adopting this new technology.

Cultivating agility of mind helps us become more open, flexible, perceptive, and inquisitive...an imperative for questioning the status quo and making change happen. Our 'Mindflex Mental Flexibility Worksheet' provides a helpful practice framework with a variety of prompts for shifting your perspective in almost any situation.

Mindflex Mental Flexibility Worksheet →

COURAGEOUS

Courage is a quality that provides us with inner strength, allowing us to perform the often-uncomfortable tasks necessary to make change happen—for ourselves or others. It empowers us to ask hard questions, have difficult conversations, and seek the truth—no matter how inconvenient.

People often assume courageous people are fearless and don't feel the same levels of anxiety that others do. However, research has shown that courageous people experience the same levels of fear as anyone else but choose to act despite experiencing uncomfortable emotions.

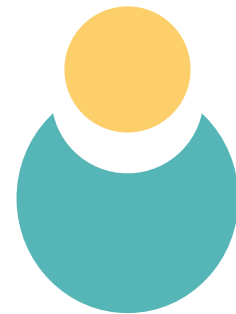
A good deal of courage is often needed to **Question the Status Quo** because, when challenging long-held ideas or processes, it's common to encounter push-back. This can feel like conflict—which, to many, equates to danger and an unnecessary risk to their reputation or livelihood. However, the weight of this risk and its resulting fear is often overestimated, as many successful changemakers can attest. Countless companies and communities have benefited from those who have the courage to ask questions and take wise, calculated risks.

If you have ever shied away from asking a 'dumb' question or hesitated taking action on an idea you held dear because of fear or other uncomfortable emotions, the "ACT for Courage Practice Guide" provides a clear path toward managing discomfort and adopting a courageous attitude.



LIVING THE PRINCIPLE

Questioning the Status Quo is not a formulaic process. It doesn't look the same for everyone nor come from the same place. So much depends on your environment, experiences, and a myriad of other factors. That said, the general framework below may help increase the effectiveness of any intention to turn your questions into an actual transformation—whether in your personal life, community, or business.



"The most dangerous ideas are not those that challenge the status quo. They are those so embedded in the status quo, so wrapped in a cloud of inevitability, that we forget they are ideas at all".

— Jacob M. Appel

"I want to reduce interruptions to give our teams more time and autonomy for deeper work." Or "I want to reduce our team's fear of failure, so we are 'leaning in' to our projects and growing more.

Identify an opportunity or need

Is something not working? Do you continually wonder why something is done a certain way? Do you perceive a potential issue emerging if something doesn't change? Is something creating friction or working against you or your team/company's goals?

Ask questions

To better understand the issue/area of change, it's crucial to do your research and ask questions like: *What is the current situation/process/structure? Why does this exist? What factors are at play? What's missing? Why is it done this way? What is this helping us to achieve? Could it be done differently or better? What assumptions and beliefs are at play here? Are these assumptions correct or useful? Has something changed that requires new thinking?*

Create a 'change statement'

Once you know more about the situation/area, it helps to get clear on your desired outcome and the change you want to make. A clear, straightforward statement will help you remain focused. Aim for a tangible intention to help you generate multiple solutions. For example: Rather than something broad like, *"I want to change our company culture to improve engagement,"* drill down to something more actionable such as... _____

Explore ideas and weigh options

Next, come up with ideas to address the issue. It might help first to ask “how might we”...(then insert the actionable part of the change statement): “How might we reduce our team’s fear of failure”? Get others involved, get their thoughts—research what others have done. Come up with as many ideas as possible, then identify the most promising to examine more closely.

Gather allies

Partner with others who might be able to contribute to and support this change. Have them play devil’s advocate (or find people who challenge your desire for change). Is this an appropriate solution? What issues might this cause? Which solution(s) make the most sense? Work with your allies to flesh out and refine the solution.

Propose change

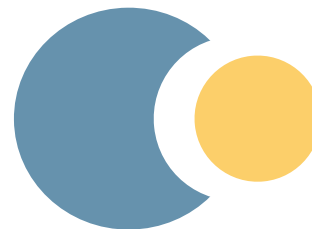
With the help of your allies—clarify your pitch, prototype your solution (if possible), and communicate it to your team and the stakeholders or gatekeepers you need buy-in from to implement. Continue to be open to feedback at this stage.

Implement change

Implementing change might be a simple feat or quite lengthy and involved, depending on the chosen solution and degree of change being made. Whether or not you are directly involved with the implementation, you will want to ensure that anyone involved understands the impetus for the change itself—the deeper why. This way, they will be more aligned with the project and may be inspired to ‘question the status quo’ in their own lives.

“...[Question the Status Quo] is Berkeley’s history and there was energy in that, but you can’t have a business school with your first principle encouraging people to challenge authority. Someone told me you can ignore that or do a judo move on it, reverse its polarity and make it something people want to hire”.

— Rich Lyons, former Dean of Berkeley Haas, on establishing ‘Question the Status Quo’ as one of Haas’ four defining principles.



THE BIG PICTURE

Change is the only real constant and though we have less control over the future than we might hope, questioning the status quo allows us to increase our influence and guide change toward directions in line with our individual and societal values. It’s important to remember, though, that change is complex. Most things that no longer serve us may have played an essential role in the past. And the ideas and methods we think are important and helpful now might become hindrances—or even viewed negatively—in the future.

Our work, society, and even our personal lives are shaped by the changing needs and values of the people that inhabit these spaces and the dynamic push and pull that occurs when attempting to create structures and systems that work for everyone. When we **Question the Status Quo** we work with an ever-variable meshwork of diverging views, shifting needs, and emerging technologies and trends. It is how we remove the weight of that which no longer serves us so we can move boldly toward a better future.

BerkeleyExecEd

Learn more about upcoming Berkeley Executive Education programs designed to provide existing and aspiring leaders with in-depth training for authentic leadership, driving meaningful change, and overall personal and career success.

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