The inquiry center.

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The phrase 'inquiry center' describes the ideal state of mind, attitude, ethic, creed, or a formal entity within a business enterprise that matches the voice of the firm with the voice of the marketplace. An inquiry center is important in developing a company-wide attitude that is critical in becoming a market-based organization. The three tenets of an inquiry center are logic, energy/collaboration, and imagination/creativity. An inquiry center must have easy access to the resources that enable information users to work best within the three tenets. The key information to have before considering implementing an inquiry center into an organization includes whether top managers agree that there is a need for the change, whether the organization has designated a champion, and who is responsible for planning the proposed change. The factors to consider when implementing the inquiry center concept include the ability to accept changes within the inquiry center, the compatibility of management’s attitudes and practices with the proposed changes, and the clarity of the nature of a proposed inquiry center change and the reasons for the change.

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The term “inquiry center” describes the ideal state of mind within a company for effectively and efficiently reconciling the voice of the market with the voice of the firm. The inquiry center describes a particular way of learning about the marketplace and using the resultant knowledge. While the term “center” denotes an organizational unit, it can be as much an attitude, ethic, or creed as it is a formal entity. Of course, all firms and their divisions or departments and individual employees have ways of learning about their markets and of using the information. But few take the trouble to check how well their learning systems work and whether they can be improved. The inquiry center concept fosters the development of a corporate-wide attitude essential in becoming a market-based organization.

Exhibit 1 illustrates the relationship between data (D), information, and intelligence, and the knowledge and policy (or decisions) required for management. The exhibit reflects how the reality of the marketplace is assessed through the collection and classification of data. Next, portions of the data are analyzed to provide information needed for insight, which is then incorporated into intelligence reports that are relevant and of interest to potential users.

In today’s complex world it is no longer of value for a manager just to seek information in order to make the “right” decision. Rather, the greatest value is in managing the decision-making process in a way that increases the chances of choosing the best decision among the available alternatives—given all the circumstances at that time—and in having the decision effectively implemented. This type of decision-making process will require appropriate tools, expertise, and innovative momentum to achieve quality decisions. If the inquiry center is to help in this new decision-making process, it must be integrated into it. That is, the inquiry center must be adaptable to the environment in which it will operate and be considered an appropriate inquiring tool of the decision maker.

Exhibit 2 contains a set of definitional statements about the purpose of an inquiry center collected from a group of experts in the field of business intelligence. The definitions share a common denominator: the need to bring together various sources of information about the marketplace and to make sure they are available and used throughout a company as a condition for making more effective market-based decisions. The first step in filling this need is to understand where and how information fits into the process that leads to decision making.

Three Tenets

A successful inquiry center must be capable of integrating multiple perspectives. It must not only integrate the logic of decision making, but also draw on the energy, developed through collaboration, and the imagination of those who will affect, or be affected by, the outcomes. The inquiry center should operate with three basic tenets:

Logic. The inquiry center should foster logical discourse. Management is accustomed to decision making as an extension of an analytical process. At the heart of this approach is the separating or breaking up of a whole into its elements so as to find out their nature, proportions, functions, and relationships. Models and tested business theories provide a valuable context for the presentation of intelligence.

Energy/Collaboration. The inquiry center should promote collaboration. Decision making and implementation in virtually any organization is a collective process. The two are shaped by the factors and dynamics that underlie human behavior in social settings. Sharing information from various viewpoints is a start. However, at the highest level of performance the interaction occurs in such a
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manner that not only do better ideas come forward, but they are developed in such a way that their implementation is accomplished promptly and consistently.

Imagination/Creativity. The inquiry center should foster imagination and creativity in the decision-making process. The words "imagination" and "creativity" are meant to encompass the full range of what is truly creative within the human psyche—whether it is called intuition, fantasy, inner imagery, or inspiration. The challenge is to help decision makers use information in ways that allow them to move beyond the realm of facts and analytical thinking to improved decision quality and wiser decisions.

Data Bases, Devices, and Networks

The inquiry center can provide some of the interface device requirements. But it should be noted that an inquiry center is much different from a typical meeting, conference, or even a "war room." The fundamental difference is that a war room is set up to display information on the walls—and to inform decision makers when anything changes from the status quo or plan. In other words, it is used to gather information about a specific problem, and then assist the decision maker relative to a required action. The inquiry center approaches problems from a different perspective. In some instances it might actually define and identify a potential problem before it becomes one. The center should have easy access to the appropriate data bases, meeting-facilitating tools, processing equipment, and human resources that enable information users to function best within the three dimensions of logic, energy/collaboration, and imagination. Because information can be networked through decentralized, easy-to-use microcomputers or terminals, the "core" of the inquiry center need be no larger than a small room containing a central storage and switching facility. Important communications often happen on an informal level in an organization.

The inquiry center must be designated to facilitate informal communications among those wishing to ask questions, test assumptions, or share information. The networking of information could even extend to a person's home. Decentralizing the center means that users have the option of accessing information without the assistance of experts. If users are always required to get information from experts, the inquiry center may be poorly designed. Although a user may not need to use an expert, experts should still be always available. Indeed, for especially complicated inquiries, or because a user does not have the time, experts can be both effective and efficient.

What the inquiry center needs most of all, however, is a supportive environment. Explicit sponsorship by senior management, recognition and reward for use of new tools, skillful facilitation, and careful monitoring to ensure that good ideas are implemented are all needed if the inquiry center is to thrive.

In essence, then, the inquiry center is the home for the tools (physical and human) operating within a three-dimensional space. It is an area where all the functions of a support system can be bundled during the decision process. Further, the inquiry center should offer a relaxed atmosphere in a variety of geographical settings. It will be a place where it's okay for people at all levels of an organization to experiment—and to risk being wrong. It is an open space for ideas, innovation, and learning. Indeed, it could be called an idea center, a creativity center, a decision center, or even a learning center. It is a "place" where individuals can learn efficient and effective approaches to decision making. Here is where they can learn about the needed level of support information, about the risk involved in alternative decisions, about the aspects of successful implementation, and how alternatives are compatible with, or affect, current strategy.

Perhaps most important, the inquiry center should not be "owned" by any organization, such as the market research group or the information systems group. Rather, it should be owned by all the people in the organization who must develop innovative ideas and solve problems. It should be their inquiry center—and it will likely take a different shape each time people participate in a collective effort to solve a particularly complex problem.

We have thus far portrayed the inquiry center as an abstract concept for solving organization problems. But it is also a practical approach to integrating the three dimensions of logic, energy, and imagination into the decision-making process. The more fully these dimensions are explored, the more it appears that the line between what's possible and what is not lies mostly in the way we think about the center's potential.

GM Experiments with the Inquiry Center Concept

At the 1989 General Motors Market Research Conference, Lloyd E. Reuss, now GM president, commented:

And if you bring together the voice of the customer, the voice of the dealers, the voice of the public, you might look at that as the voice of the market. Another important area [is that] when we listen to the voice of the market, [we need to remember] the customers are not going to give us all the solutions to their needs and wants. That means we also have to listen to the voice of GM. You have to work at the balance between the market pull and the technology...
push. Reuss's comments and direction led to agreement within the market and product planning community at GM to use the following definitions and illustrations in developing action strategies and educational programs for the use of market research in the company's product and market development processes.

Voice of the Market is "what the market indicates it needs and wants and is willing to pay for." By market we mean where exchange takes place. In this context, Voice of the Market includes all types of customers as well as entities that can affect our product; Voice of the ... customers (external), regulators, competitive manufacturers, and so forth (Market Pull).

Voice of General Motors is "What GM is capable of and willing to provide to the Market." In this context we mean GM in the broadest business sense to include all the different functional areas within GM that are responsible for providing the product or service; Voice of the ... Design Staff, Engineering, Manufacturing, Marketing, Finance, and so forth (Company Push).

Market-based GM is a GM where decision making is based on effectively and efficiently reconciling any differences between the Voice of the Market and the Voice of GM. (GM has chosen the term "based" rather than "driven" to emphasize the point that decision making is a reconciliation between the two voices and is not being driven solely by either one-) (Balance of market pull and company push.)

To reconcile effectively and efficiently the differences between the voice of the market and the voice of GM, a process was needed that caused the appropriate interaction between the providers of information and the users of information for any given decision. There is continuous interaction between providers and users, with shifting levels of responsibility as the two groups move from data management "What do we know?"), to analysis ("What does it mean?"), to implications "What should we do?"). The implicit assumption is that no one group in GM owns or has sole use of the voice of the market. It is important that all affected parties understand that all users, not just the marketing department, own the voice of the market. The market research function, as the provider, is empowered to be a representative of the voice of the market-with the added responsibility of ensuring that the voice is relevant to the general as well as specific facing all functions of the company.

Information users and providers work together in an environment conducive to the effective interplay of logical analysis, consensus building, and creativity and innovation. This notion of a conducive environment is required if one is to accept the belief that the effective development and use of information depends on crossfunctional teams crossing the functional line between user and provider to ensure that there is clear understanding of the issues being addressed as well as clear communication of the findings.

Although an inquiry center, by design, does not exist as an organization or entity at General Motors, the concept has been implemented on several projects.

Implementing the Inquiry Center Concept

An "ideal" inquiry center reflects the size, internal structure, learning systems, organizational culture, product markets, and managerial competencies of a firm. It is a concept that can be achieved for any firm, but to expect to do so in a single step is unrealistic. Only newly created organizations, or ones facing severe crises, are open to such major change.

Researchers and other champions of formal inquiry centers should view themselves as the product or service managers for their function within the company. In this role, they must:

* Convey to clients the essential concept of an inquiry center.
* Demonstrate how it addresses important client needs.
* Reduce barriers between knowledge providers and knowledge users.

Six Key Questions

There are six key questions to answer before deciding whether to try to introduce the inquiry center concept in an organization. The first is the "mega question." If it is not possible to answer "yes" to both its parts, then it is probably inappropriate to institute a change in the intelligence-gathering and analysis system.

Question 1, Part 1: Have top managers agreed that there is a need for the proposed change? Part 2: Has the organization designated a champion? Has a specific person or group been given both the responsibility and the authority to make the change happen? (If the answer to both parts of the mega question is yes," proceed to the second question.)

Question 2: Who has participated in planning for the change and who has not? Little progress will be made if the parties that will be affected by the change have not been consulted or their inputs solicited.
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Question 3: What, if anything, does the change modify or replace ... and how will personnel make the transition from the old to the new? Nearly every change implies the discontinuance of some way of thinking and behaving. A simple change in the software used to analyze and present data may require changes in how managers access data and interpret them. Managers may have to lessen their reliance on data specialists and get used to doing more of their own analyses. For the change agent, it means that attention must be paid to helping clients discontinue prior ways of thought and behavior, thereby providing a bridge to new ways.

Question 4: Who will benefit immediately from the change and who will benefit in the longer term?

Question 5: Who will suffer immediately and who will suffer in the longer run?

Question 6: How will the change affect major relationships in the organization? These include individual job relationships as well as organizational, social, and other informal contacts. Many inquiry center changes are specifically intended to affect major relationships in the organization by bringing together functional groups, surfacing their different assumptions and perceptions, and using market data to broker these differences.

The A VICTORY Model

Several factors must be considered when implementing a concept like the inquiry center that cuts across functional responsibilities in a corporation. These factors, represented by the acronym "A VICTORY," describe a change process used in a variety of organizational settings (Howard R. Davis and Susan E. Salasion, 1979). The A VICTORY process highlights issues and raises questions that focus attention on what is required to implement change successfully.

A = Ability. What are the abilities and inequalities with respect to accepting changes in the inquiry center? Are the necessary resources and capabilities (such as staff training, facilities, funds, and so forth) available to implement, sustain, and evaluate, the changes? For example, managers may need training in how to surface assumptions, formulate issues, and interpret statistics in order to make effective use of new information systems. These same skills are helpful in creating a problem-sensing as well as a problem-solving orientation.

V = Values. How compatible with management's attitudes and practices are the values, cultural norms, and attitudes required by a proposed change? For many managers the idea of planning ahead for future research needs is foreign territory. Do managers prefer an inquiry center that produces better thinking, better decisions, better products or services, more satisfied customers?

I = Idea/information. How clearly understood is the nature of a proposed inquiry center change and the reasons for it? Some inquiry center changes result in managers getting more information presented in more complex ways. This raises the "more-is-less-and-less-is-more" paradox. When introducing changes, researchers and managers must provide complex information simply, through the use of special visual displays or other information packaging strategies. This is not to criticize managers' abilities to process complex information nor their willingness to try to understand it. Rather, the need for less complex presentations of complex information reflects problems of information overload, time pressures, and the need to separate the wheat from the chaff expeditiously in any set of data.

C = Circumstances. What factors or features in the organization may affect the acceptance and implementation of the inquiry center concept? Have there been significant personnel changes? Recent reorganizations? How does the structure of a company affect its response to new ideas? Organizations that are highly centralized and formal in their procedures may be slow to make a decision on some innovation but quick to embrace it once the decision is made. The reverse is true for organizations that are decentralized and less formal.

T = Timing. How ready is the organization to consider the proposed change? Is it "an idea whose time has come"? Are current circumstances advantageous for introducing the change? There is nothing as energizing as a crisis for creating readiness to change. But this readiness does not last forever.

O = Obligation. What is the perceived need for change among relevant decision makers and potentially influential "champions"? What is their level of commitment?

R = Resistance. Where are the loci of resistance to change?

Y = Yield. What are the benefits of the change for those who are asked to approve it or implement it or who are otherwise affected by it? Can these benefits be measured? For managers, the benefits may be tied to the kind of "products" the inquiry center would produce. For example, some companies emphasize state-of-the-art reports on key issues such as productivity, motivating personnel, and market segmentation techniques. Other companies emphasize developing questions and answers based on current knowledge about particular issues. More often
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emphasis is on providing basic statistics on current operations and serving a library function.

The A VICTORY model in various forms has been applied successfully in a number of traditional business organizations of various sizes operating in industrial and consumer markets: Papercraft, Shell Oil, Tender Care, Eastman Kodak, and Air Tool Products.

Conclusion

The concept of an inquiry center refers to a set of attitudes that can improve thinking and action. These attitudes can create a stronger foundation for operational decisions as well as a better way of addressing strategic issues. While a formal market research function provides a sound basis for establishing an inquiry center, it is neither necessary nor sufficient. As with many important changes, establishing new attitudes and behaviors is best done by top management. That is, top management must demonstrate, during its reviews of proposals to allocate company resources, that it expects the kinds of market-based thinking that require the presence of an inquiry center.

Senior Management Commitment: Eastman Kodak's Policy on the Use of Information

"It is imperative that the information be kept in a manner which ties it to business objectives and issues. This is important because, in my mind, it will facilitate the timeliness of your ability to respond and enhance the relevancy of response... .

"We need to review how well we are doing compared to the objectives, opportunities, and threats. I would appreciate it if your plans included ways for us to have signals that would show, sometimes upon demand and sometimes in a proactive way, where we are and how the "gap" between what we are and should be doing seems to be progressing.... I also believe that the assumptions that underlie possible strategic options would be identified, tested, and included as part of the analysis as options are considered for future strategy. The Market Intelligence concept should consider these critical assumptions and appropriate information necessary for determining final business strategy....

"If we have done our job well ... we probably have paved the way toward evolving a preliminary business strategy that has high credibility and is much more fact-based.'

"The final business strategy can be tested with the help of the Market Intelligence system by looking at the business objectives and making comparisons of anticipated performance. Again, the final test of any business strategy will be its success in the marketplace. The Market Intelligence system's role of anticipating information needs and having information readily available will be very important....

"I have a few general comments to make about my expectations for the Market Intelligence system. It's important that we remember to manage information within and between the many elements of our planning process in a systematic way. The same is true within and between organizations. We must be able to move appropriate information through organizations, through geographic locations, and through changing world or regional conditions.

"An appropriate degree of discipline should be implanted in the planning process so that effective information can be gained by those users when they need it. The design of the Market Intelligence system should complement the discipline built into the planning process." J. Philip Samper, then vice chairman of Eastman Kodak, speaking at a 1989 workshop to develop a market intelligence system.

GM's Commitment to

Hearing the Voice of the Market "Understanding the voice of the customer or the Voice of the Market is absolutely essential in today's marketplace. The product development process all grows from the voice of the customer.

"We have to keep working to get a better focus on the customer. As we get closer to that, we have to stay focused....

"We talk about a commitment. It's easy to say, and it's hard to do. We all have opinions. Some are very strong about GM and what we need to do to make great cars and trucks. We even have different opinions on what great cars and trucks are. But we have an obligation to discuss the ideas and come up with some shared ideas of what GM is and what its vehicles should be. It's not enough to say, 'It's my opinion, do it my way.' You have to work together, there has to be a plan, a process, one voice, and that can only happen when we talk to each other and listen to each other and find a common language and commitment....

"A lot of people think they listen, but they don't. They're the types who seem to listen and say, 'I hear you, but I know better. I know how to build a great car or truck. And you've never really built one, so let me do it my way.' Well, you can't really work that way. We do have to listen to what the customer is telling us. When he talks about ride/ handling, we really have to understand what he means. He might be talking about bumps in the road, and he calls that
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ride/handling. When he talks about acceleration, does he mean flat-out acceleration, or does he mean getting onto expressway ramps. There are hundreds and hundreds of differences between what the customer says and what he really means.

"For a long time we were a manufacturing company. Everything we made, we could sell. GM cars were durable and affordable. We had the best designs. We met many of the customer’s criteria. Now the environment that we operate in has changed. The demands on us are much different. The winner today is going to hear the voice of the customer, hear it clearly, and offer the products sooner than any of the competition....

"If we’re going to satisfy customers, we’ve got to hear the Voice of the Market. So it’s the job of the market research function to make sure the Voice of the Market is heard. It’s the job of marketing, technical, and design communities to make sure the Voice of the Market is used along with their own ideas to give us the very competitive advantage we need to win in the marketplace."

Robbery J. Stempel, CEO of General Motors, at a corporate-wide market research conference in I

EXHIBIT 2 inquiry Center Definitions

1. To improve on, and then institutionalize, an ongoing process for drawing upon various sources of information, knowledge, data, and wisdom in order to bring them to bear on important decisions about the business (more than just vehicles).

2. Premise: The IC will define itself. Steps for implementation-Broad goals for employees: Take responsibility for the success of the entire corporation.
   * Find the right people (good inquirers/change agents)
   * Give them broad goals
   * Let them go
   * Figure out what they did
   * Institutionalize it

3. The purpose of the IC is to build expertise and provide assistance to facilitate improved thinking, decisions, and actions.

4. The purpose of the Inquiry Center is to break down the barriers between functions and foster/accelerate systemic thinking that is needed to produce quality, innovative products that are necessary in order to compete successfully in international markets.

5. The purpose of the IC is to increase the problem-setting and problem-solving capacity of managers by acquiring, synthesizing, developing, evaluating, and disseminating information.

6. The purpose of the IC should be as advocate for the customer. This should involve raising consciousness of customer needs through all levels of thinking about the marketplace. The latter includes helping managers ask better questions (where “better” is defined in terms of "How might a customer react to this?") and also to answer the questions faster.

7. An IC makes managers aware of what:
   * They think they know
   * They think they need to know
   * They expect to happen given certain decisions
   * Assumptions they hold about the if-thens" regarding decisions

An IC is a safe haven for exploring possibilities, dreams, visions, and fears.

8. Providing a center of continuously growing expertise in data management (getting and managing information) and analytical techniques to help people throughout the corporation identify and surpass the world’s best practice in all functions, and help them do so with increasing effectiveness and efficiency. For example, it has as an important part of its mandate the diffusion of relevant expertise and it does this in part by moving high-potential people through the function on short-term assignments.

9. The primary purpose of the inquiry process is to reach quality decisions at all levels. This requires a systematic process for asking the right questions and finding good answers. The purpose of knowledge development centers is to build ever-improving answering systems for broadly defined and interrelated knowledge domains.

10. The purpose of the Marketing Inquiry Center is to support a corporate goal for making better products that reflect marketplace conditions and consumer desires. The IC will do so by developing a body of corporate marketing knowledge that will help managers think creatively about the outcomes of the market, in consumer sensitive planning for new and improved models, and decision making, and implementation that is consistent with
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consumer-driven marketing.

Inquiry Center concept definitions collected from information specialists attending a General Motors Marketing Research Department conference held in 1988.