The Most Important Tool

for

Clarity

Cliff Martin

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What is clarity? Clarity is a clear vision of what is or will be. If we are talking about a problem it is a clear definition of **what the problem is** and **what the desired outcome is** i.e. the solution desired. If we are talking about understanding an event and we wish to understand why things evolved the way they did then **clarity is a complete map or story**. This includes what the perceived problem the event dealt with, the motivations behind it, the conflicts inside and outside the event and the pressures involved. In short it is the story of what went on and why. If we are talking about an organization and its purpose then we talk about the vision of the organization; what things it works on, how it works on it and the mechanisms inside the organization for bringing focus to bear on the problems it works on. Creating a new company or entity requires clearness about what your purpose is, what your markets are, how you will develop the product; who will direct the work; what the power structure is inside and what the lifetime of the entity. It is certainty born of creative intuition and the desire to bring that vision to life.

Much of what I talk about when I discuss clarity is about business but clarity is important in designing and living a life. Let us make no false promises here. Clarity is difficult. Let me repeat that: clarity is difficult. There is no easy path to it, no one step magic. In future writing I will discuss how to become clear but this 'method' is a trial and error sort of construct. It is not an infallible method. It is not a fast method.

So what is the most important tool for obtaining clarity? Drum roll….the most important tool is questions. Does this feel a bit anti-climatic to you? If it does you (like most of us) don't understand the power of questions. Most of us are bored with questions and if there are more than 3 of them in a row we start to get irritated. Think about a small child between the ages of 2 and 3. They ask questions incessantly. After a bit we tell them to shut up and go play. Why is that? We don't have answers for them that show clarity and understanding. So they continue to ask questions because they wish to understand. And we are irritated because we can't satisfy them.

It is this type of questioning that is required in becoming clear. To keep on asking questions until you obtain clarity i.e. understanding. People don't like this type of questioning. It makes them uncomfortable. They feel stupid and confused. So they become angry and stop answering. If you ask these kinds of questions and you're an investor the people you are asking think you are an asshole. A lead systems engineer in a typical high technology firm is very unpopular because he is always asking everyone difficult questions. And then he goes away, makes calculations and shows them that their assumptions are wrong. It is no wonder when engineers see him coming they run away.

But it this kind of questioning that leads to a vision that can be built and should be built. The nice thing about this kind of asking is that it shows you where work needs to be done. If a string of questions leads to a string of "I don't know!", then I have fertile ground to explore. This helps resolve critical issues and bring shape out of fog. In short this kind of dialogue is absolutely necessary for clarity.

STORY

I'm going to tell recount a dialogue that really happened. Notice how clarity is obtained.

This took place between me (CAM), a professor/entrepreneur Andy (not his real name) and his colleague Joe, a financier of some kind.

ANDY: "We've got this great concept for a new scanner that fits on the desktop and is really revolutionary."

CAM: "Great. How does it work?"

ANDY: "It's better than anything on the market and it uses diffraction to scan images better."

CAM (an expert in diffractive optics): "Okay so tell me how it works. How do you use diffraction to make an image scanner?"

JOE: "It's really cheaper and smaller than anything else on the market."

CAM: "To get back to how it works can you sketch how it works and maybe some of the equations?"

ANDY: "Well, it's a little difficult." He makes a sketch and talks for a bit. It is incomprehensible.

CAM: "This isn't diffraction you are talking about." I sketch a picture of diffraction and write a few equations. They look at me like deer in the headlights. I try another tack. "OK, what is your market; who is going to buy it and what will he pay for it. Who is your competition?"

JOE: Very enthusiastically, "Oh it will be cheap, a couple of hundred dollars. And everyone will want one."

CAM: "Why? I just spent $80 for a very nice Epson scanner. What does yours do better than the Epson?"

ANDY: "Oh, better resolution and color, faster…you know."

CAM: "So what are the parts you need to build a prototype and how much will it cost?"

ANDY/JOE: A very long discussion with no estimates of costs, parts needed or production methods needed.

CAM: "What do you need from me?"

JOE: "We'd like you to do the prototyping and get it to work."

CAM: "What kind of money is available to do the job?"

JOE: "We hope you'll do it for stock shares."

CAM: "What percentage of the company?"

JOE: "Oh we'll be generous, 15%"

So what did these questions determine?
1. Their concept of what they had as a product was at best weak.
2. They did not understand the basic principles behind their product.

3. They did not understand the market needs or price point.
4. They wanted someone else to design, build and produce their product – for free.
5. They were lazy and greedy.

Needless to say these questions determined that I was not interested in them.

The interesting thing about asking questions of others is that it is easy compared to asking yourself questions. When a person not associated with you asks questions you try to answer and are embarrassed if you can't. You try very hard. You may be annoyed but you do your best. If you are honest and you couldn't answer everything completely after being grumpy for a while you will spend time to answer these questions.

But if you are working on problems like, "What career should I pursue?" or "Who should I marry?" then the questions that need to be asked are to you. And the answers have to come from you. This internal dialogue is tricky and requires:

• Honesty
• Deep desire for the answer
• Stubbornness
• Courage

The reason for honesty is clear. You have to be willing to tell yourself unpalatable things without beating yourself up. It is the deep desire for the answer that keeps you honest and doesn't let you stop. Stubbornness is the ability to keep demanding an answer from your self to the same question. And courage is needed to be able to face your weaknesses without

quitting. It is easy to lie to you self. There is no one else to point out your incorrect reasoning; or your emotional decision making; or your refusal to see that what you've created in your life is your responsibility.

Did you notice that this whole discussion was handled with the use of questions? Start cultivating the habit of questioning; not to be annoying or argumentative but to obtain clarity. The habit of clarity is freeing.

I will be talking much more about questions and clarity. These discussions will be in my blog and in my soon to be published book. Information about me and clarity is at my website; www.claritytodesire.com. All the best in your desire to be clear.

About Cliff

Cliff Martin has spent his life looking at issues from a systems viewpoint. This means looking at the whole picture when trying to solve a problem not just the isolated issue that seems to be the problem.

His whole approach to becoming clear is based in his experience with systems of all kinds. This includes complex engineering systems, entrepreneurial activity and management.

From this experience he has developed a methodology that lets him become clear. He enjoys investigating and applying his methods to personal issues, management issues and historical decision making. His methods are general and needed for living a good life or running a good organization. He has used these methods in corporate engineering environments, managing companies and counseling others.