

Jeff Bezos on Planning for the Future in Uncertain Times

A simple three-word question can help guide you through changing circumstances over the long haul.

Source Inc magazine [link](#)

BY [JASON ATEN](#), TECH COLUMNIST@JASONATEN



Jeff Bezos. Getty Images

One of the hardest jobs of a leader is planning for the future. That's always the case, but it's especially true in uncertain times like today. Even though

cities and states have started to reopen for business, there are simply so many variables out of your control that trying to figure out how to plan for next week, let alone next year, or 10 years from now, seems like guesswork.

Jeff Bezos, however, has a suggestion. At Amazon's annual shareholder meeting last month, the CEO was asked about how to make long-term plans. His answer included a simple, three-world question that he says guides the company's long-term planning, even in uncertain times:

Well, certainly, in 10 years many things will evolve; technology will change. Machine-learning technology, in particular, will evolve very significantly over the 10-year time horizon.

But I would always encourage people, when they think about 10 years, to ask the question, what won't change?

That's actually the more important question. You can build strategies around things that will be stable in time. In that 10-year vision, there are a bunch of things at Amazon that are not going to change.

One of them, maybe the most important one, is that we will stay customer-obsessed instead of competitor-obsessed. We will work on maintaining that culture.

Did you catch that question? "What won't change?"

Instead of trying to imagine everything that will be different over any given period of time, look at the aspects of your business that will remain the same. Then, focus on how to build on that.

In Amazon's case, Bezos says it's the company's customer-first obsession.

While the products and services may expand or change to adapt to evolving needs or circumstances, that focus won't change. Establishing that baseline allows you to create plans that help you move forward, even when you can't foresee what may be around the corner.

To help you distill what that looks like for your company, focus on the following three areas.

Purpose

There's a reason you started your business. That reason hasn't changed just because things have gotten rough. It might look different, and you may have even switched strategies to adapt to the needs of your customer and team during the pandemic, but none of that changes your "why," or the reason you became an entrepreneur. Focus on that as your guiding factor when thinking

about the future. It's OK that it may look different, but your purpose should remain unchanged.

Priorities

Next, look at what is important to your business now, in terms of priorities, and consider which of them should remain, regardless of changing circumstances. The values and priorities important to you today shouldn't suddenly be less important because of the passage of time--otherwise, they probably weren't that important to begin with.

People

While it's impossible to know what specific roles or staff you may need over a long period of time, your culture is formed by the decisions you make about how you value your people. I suggest you take an intentional approach to creating a culture that reflects your values and will set your team up for success over the long term. For example, how you choose to resource and empower your team is a fundamental question of values, not execution.

Deciding how you want people to interact and build trust shouldn't change just because the world around you is in chaos. In fact, if you aren't intentional about both, the chaos is likely to feel a lot closer than you thought.

JUN 7, 2020

Like this column? Sign up to [subscribe to email alerts](#) and you'll never miss a post.

The opinions expressed here by Inc.com columnists are their own, not those of Inc.com.