Mature Managers Return to Their Childhood – Do You? An Action-Learning Self-Test
By Shlomo Maital

My wife, a school psychologist and expert on early childhood, reads widely. I find that
the research that crosses her desk is far more interesting than much of the management
fluff that crosses mine. And often, far more relevant. For instance, take the research
monograph by Michelle Chouinard. [1] She studied how and why children ask questions.
Among other things, she studied transcriptions of 24,741 asked by four children, tracked
from age 1 1/2 through about 5, in 229 hours of conversations with their parents. The
pace of the questions was machine-gun – for "Adam", the top interrogator, 198 questions
an hour (3 per minute!!). The average was about 2 per minute, or 108 per hr.

We know that 90 % of what we learn is learned by age 5. We also know that sustained
competitiveness In organizations derives from the ability to learn. So – what can
organizations, and innovative managers, learn from kids? And how, as mature leaders,
can we return to the skills we had as five-year-olds? Here are five findings, along with a
self-test question and implications for innovation. 1. "Children know when they’ve
received those answers [they seek] and they continue to pursue them if they haven’t
received them." (p. 101)

Do you pursue your 'why' questions, to get to the bottom of things? Or do you stop
before you really find the answer, out of politeness? (Do you use "why" predominantly,
or mostly how, when and where?) If the answer is no: You're not yet a five-year-old. 2.
"When children encounter a 'problem', …questions are the tool they use to get
information; when they have [it] they can solve the issue at hand. (p. 105) In tackling
a problem, do you ask strings of questions, including ones that may seem to others
'dumb'? Are you reluctant to reveal lack of knowledge by asking? If the answers are
'no' and 'yes', you're not yet a five-year-old. 3. "When the task gets harder, children
switch strategies and find another dimension to ask about. Children are skilled at using
whatever information they have at hand to efficiently generate a question and resolve a
problem." (p. 95). Do you ask incisive creative questions that can point to solutions and
innovations? Mathematicians say 90% of solving a hard problem is formulating the
question. If the answer is no, you are not yet a five-year-old. 4. "Children recognize
that the first question did not get the information they needed, and ask again. " (p. 88).
"When adults do fail to answer, children persist in trying to get the information they
requested." (p. 43). "Children continue to ask questions until they get the information
needed…and once they accomplish this they stop asking the question." (p. 28).

Do you accept unsatisfactory answers – especially from superiors? Or do you insist on
getting a straight answer, and persevere until you do? If the answer is no – you are
not yet a five-year-old. 5. "The number of questions is [not] the key; asking the right
question is". P. 89. (Children were given a box, asked to find out what was in it, and
then turned loose to ask questions). Can you frame a penetrating question that 'unlocks
the door' to the problem? If you can, you're a five-year-old. One of the 7 key
principles employed by Leonardo da Vinci was "curiosita" – endless permanent curiosity
about the world, and the drive to ask questions about how it works. Children have this.
Adults tend to lose it. Innovators desperately need it. So – managers, return to
Children's Question: A Mechanism for Cognitive Development. SRCD Monograph,