

A Contextual Observation: Sometimes, an individual receives conflicting advice on when and how to use the word “why” at the beginning of a question. The article below describes a valuable problem-solving tool that requires asking “Why?” multiple times.

Yet an article I wrote in September of 2005 (“‘What?’ and ‘How?’ are Better than ‘Why?’”) suggests that when dealing with interpersonal issues, you avoid the use of questions that begin with “Why?”

Why the discrepancy? What’s the difference? The article below advocates a method for solving a process or operational problem, making sure that you are not inadvertently focusing on just a symptom of the problem. The problem is usually focused on some functional or technical issue, though it may manifest in an interpersonal issue.

The advice in the article from September 2005 focused on questions associated with a person’s choices, especially regarding interpersonal behaviors. The choices and behaviors may be creating a problem in his or her interactions with others, but progress is likely not going to occur if a person feels challenged by challenging “Why?” questions from the boss. Too often, such a question can be interpreted as a challenge to his or her motive or judgment relative to the specific behavior. That is, it feels to the recipient very parental, like a child being asked, “Why did you take a cookie when I told you they were for the church bake sale?”

Read the two articles together, and the confusion should be erased. (If it continues to exist, let’s talk!) The “‘What?’ and ‘How?’ are Better than ‘Why?’” article can be found alphabetically in the Article Archives section of my website:

<http://www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives.html>.

Dennis Hooper
June, 2009

Using “Five Why’s” to Solve Complex Problems

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2007, published in the Houston Daily Journal on Saturday, June 2, 2007

A part of any leader’s job is solving problems. As you are probably aware, however, many problems do not have a simple, single cause.

When multiple people volunteer potential solutions to a problem, the quantity and variety of ideas may seem overwhelming. Before energy and funding are applied to implement any resolution, all individuals involved should be convinced that the real foundation of the problem has been identified.

Otherwise, money and effort could be applied to what is later learned is only a symptom of the problem. Eliminating a symptom is not the same as eliminating the underlying cause.

The “Five Why’s” is a tool frequently used in “root cause analysis,” a term used to identify and affirm the primary underlying reason for a problem. Why? So that an effective solution can be applied.

The power of this tool lies in the fact that it is simple, requiring no technical instruction. For every potential cause of a problem that is offered, just ask, “Well, why does **that** happen?”

This method is called the “Five Why’s” because the root cause is rarely found after the first or second “Why?” question. The technique doesn’t literally require that the question be asked five times. Sometimes the root cause is evident after three or four inquiries; sometimes the root cause is still not evident after six or seven efforts.

The repeated questioning peels away the layers of symptoms that hide the primary cause of a problem. If there is more than a single cause for the problem, this method helps identify the relationship between the different causes.

Though the process is simple, it is helpful to proceed slowly. **Write down** a description of the problem. Usually, you will find that there is controversy immediately—rarely is it easy to write down a problem statement that everyone agrees accurately defines the situation. Patiently work to obtain a description everyone can support—it helps to have everyone working on the same problem.

Ask, “Why does this problem happen?” Often there will be several different answers--write down each potential explanation. Identify one particular “problem cause” statement as the first one to explore. Set aside the others with the intent to explore them later.

For this description, ask, “Why does **this** situation happen?” Again, there may be more than one cause identified. Write down each of them. Select from among them one initial description to pursue further, with the intent to pursue the others later.

Ask again, “Why does **this** situation happen?” Continue to ask this question until you reach the point where the group agrees that at least one foundational root cause has been established.

Now go back to the stage where you had multiple answers to the first “Why?” question. Pursue a root cause of the next stated contributor. Continue to do that for every potential cause you identified.

Can see that this may take a lot of time. Though the process may be simple, doing it well may not be easy--especially if there are many opinionated, impatient people involved! When attention is focused on us humans failing to obtain desired results, we can be defensive, evasive, and short-tempered.

Still, the technique is superb at eliminating conjecture and driving to causes where potential all-encompassing solutions can be offered, evaluated, and if all agree, implemented.

Few leaders know all the right answers. Being able to ask the right questions goes a long way in making progress. Consider using the “Five Why’s” technique next time you face a difficult problem with no apparent easy solution!

Dennis Hooper is an executive coach, helping leaders improve their organizational culture. Contact Dennis with your questions at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com or call him at 770-286-2250.