

## **“What?” and “How?” are Better than “Why?”**

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We start asking “Why?” at about two years of age. Many of us never stop!

As toddlers, our asking “Why?” usually brings information. Many parents are patient and provide answers that youngsters can comprehend. Answers to their asking “Why?” contribute to their mental development. They gain awareness at precisely the time they are seeking it.

Though some parents may become edgy when “Why?” continues endlessly, no parent finds the child’s questions to be threatening.

However, the boss at work asking “Why?” can be quite intimidating! That’s likely not the intent, but we all know the feeling of someone in a powerful position asking, “Why did you do that?” We cringe, and immediately think back over the situation and wonder what might have been unsatisfactory.

The question typically implies a judgment that the performance was inadequate. The immediate tendency is to justify our thought processes and our actions. Meanwhile, inside we doubt ourselves and are feeling “one down” in power relative to the questioner.

There’s a better way for bosses to obtain the information they want, while also developing and building future leaders!

You probably know some people who do not take responsibility to make needed changes in their lives. Instead, they justify their current situation and behaviors. Let me share the insights of Dr. James B. Richards in his 2001 book *How to Stop the Pain*.

Think back to when you were young. Can you recall the sound of your parents (or other authority figures) asking, “Why did you do that?” Your eyes glazed as you searched for a reason that might get you off the hook!

Dr. Richards points out that parents, without realizing it, teach their children, “If I have a reason that is good enough, I can get away with just about anything.” From childhood on, we use justification and judgment to negotiate our way out of personal responsibility.

Richards suggests that parents simply ask instead, “What did you do?” Children always know what they did. If you ask expecting a simple report of activity, the focus then becomes acknowledging the truth of what happened. The child could lie, of course, but verifying “what happened” is a lot easier than the child thinking back to recall the reason (if there was one) he or she took the action.

You can then ask your child to consider what might be done differently next time to deliver a better outcome. Usually, the child knows what could have been done this time or can think creatively about future possibilities. Rather than criticize the recent behavior, this questioning emphasizes improvement through creative option generation. That’s a great habit to build in young people--and in future leaders!

So think about what you want from the growing leaders in your organization. Do you want excuses? Justification? Feelings of inadequacy? Guilt? Fear? Or would a growing commitment to seek personal and organizational improvement be better?

For example, faced with high turnover, you may be tempted to ask, “Why are so many people leaving your department?” In light of what you’ve read so far, imagine how the manager might respond.

Consider asking instead, "What progress are you making on reducing your department's turnover?" When you hear the status report, consider following with, "It's great what you're learning from your investigation. What changes are you making based on what you have discovered?"

Allow the individual time to describe actual and potential improvements. After her or his energy wanes, if you have an experience that might be valuable, ask if you may offer additional thoughts.

If you are genuinely interested in building leaders, dialogue like this casts you in the role of mentor and coach. It reduces that feeling of being judged and gives individuals the opportunity, especially after several such encounters, to appreciate the contribution you are making to their growth!

Old habits are hard to break. You probably never realized the unintended impact of your asking "Why?" You certainly never connected the tension you felt as a child with the stress you likely cause those individuals under your authority.

Consider exploring this simple concept with the other members of your team. Ask how you might help each other become sensitive to this new insight. Consider agreeing to help each other by offering reminders and feedback.

Also, consider filing this article away for future reference. Store the article where you can easily access it, reminding yourself (and others you influence) that when it comes to interpersonal relations, "What?" and "How?" are often better than "Why?"

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*Dennis Hooper is an executive coach in Atlanta. Contact him at [dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com](mailto:dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com) or leave a message at 770-286-2250. His website is [www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article\\_archives](http://www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article_archives).*

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**Added after publication:**

Tasha Eurich has an interesting TED talk that concludes with similar counsel regarding the questions "What?" and "Why?" You can find that TED talk here:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/tasha\\_eurich\\_increase\\_your\\_self\\_awareness\\_with\\_one\\_simple\\_fix](https://www.ted.com/talks/tasha_eurich_increase_your_self_awareness_with_one_simple_fix)

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**PLEASE NOTE:**

Sometimes, an individual receives conflicting advice on when and how to use the word "why" at the beginning of a question. The article above describes seeking information about an interpersonal issue.

Yet an article I wrote in June of 2007 ("Using 'Five Whys' to Solve Complex Problems") advises that when dealing with processes that aren't working properly, you seek the basic cause by asking "Why?" multiple times.

Why the discrepancy? What's the difference? The article above focuses 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 you using "why?" Too often, such a question can be interpreted as a challenge to his or her motive or judgment. That is, it feels to the recipient very paternalistic, like a child being asked, "Why did you take a cookie when I told you they were for the school bake sale?"

The "Five Whys" article 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, not an issue of interpersonal concern.

Read the two articles together, and the confusion should be erased. (If it continues to exist, let's talk!) The "Using Five Whys to Solve Complex Problems" article can be found alphabetically here:

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

Dennis Hooper  
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