

Sometimes, an individual receives conflicting advice on when and how to use the word “why” at the beginning of a question. The article below deals with interpersonal issues and advocates avoiding the use of questions that begin with “why?”

Yet an article I wrote in June of 2007 (“Using Five “Why’s” to Solve Complex Problems”) suggests using the word “why” multiple times to move from symptoms of the problem to the root cause of the problem.

What’s the difference? The article below is 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, too, but progress is likely not going to occur if a person feels challenged by the use of “why?”--as if the question is one challenging his or her motive or justification for the particular behavior.

The advice in the article from June of 2007 is part of 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/technical issue, not an interpersonal issue.

Read the two articles together, and the confusion should be erased. (If it continues to exist, let’s talk!) The “Using Five ‘Why’s’ to Solve Complex Problems” can be found in the Article Archives section of my website: <http://www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives.html>.

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June, 2009

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

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2005, published in the Houston Home Journal on Tuesday, September 20, 2005

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

As toddlers, our asking “Why?” usually brings information. Most parents are patient and provide answers that youngsters can comprehend.

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 very 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?”

The question implies a judgment that the performance was inadequate. The immediate tendency is to justify or defend, momentarily feeling “one down” relative to the questioner.

There’s a better way for bosses to obtain the information they want that also encourages and builds future leaders!

Many people will not take responsibility to make needed changes in their lives. Instead, they justify their current situation or actions. Let me share the insights of Dr. James B. Richards in his 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 good enough reason, I can get away with anything.” From childhood on, we use justification and judgment to negotiate our way out of personal responsibility.

Richards suggests that parents 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.

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 should have been done this time or can think creatively about future possibilities. Rather than criticize the recent behavior, this questioning puts the emphasis on 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. Excuses? Feelings of inadequacy? Guilt? Fear? Or would a drive for personal improvement be better?

For example, you may be tempted to ask, "Why are so many people leaving your department?" 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 think, imagining potential improvements. After the individual's energy wanes, if you have experience that might be valuable, ask if you can 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. Consider clipping this article and circling the previous four paragraphs. Then file this where you can easily access it and remind yourself that "What?" and "How?" is better than "Why?"

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