

NOTE: 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 generally 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 a problem to the root cause of the problem to its solution.

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, but progress is likely not going to occur if a person feels challenged by a “why?” question. The question probably feels like an unresearched criticism of his or her motive or judgment relative to the particular behavior.

The advice in the article from June of 2007 is part of a method for troubleshooting 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 interpersonal issue (though the stress of it could be creating one).

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

Dennis Hooper
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. Many 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 power of the questioner.

There’s a better way for bosses (or coaches) to obtain information without the unnecessary side effects of doubt or fear. In fact, the alternative approach encourages and builds future leaders!

Sadly, some 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? Hesitancy? Or would a drive for personal improvement be better?

For example, imagine a section of your organization experiencing unusually high turnover. You may be tempted to ask, “Why are so many people leaving your department?” Consider asking instead, “What progress are you making on retaining your department’s team members?”

When you hear the status report, consider following with, “It’s great what you’re learning from your investigation. What enhancements 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?” are often better starters for your questions than “Why?”

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NOTE:

In his book entitled *QBQ: The Question Behind the Question*, John G. Miller provides a strong reinforcement for the information in this article. In fact, I am so enamored of that book that I wrote an article on it. Please see “Creating a Culture of Accountability” published in the Savannah Business Journal on December 2, 2013. Or look on my Article Archives page of my website and scroll down alphabetically to the title: <http://www.buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives.html>

Dennis Hooper, January, 2014

NOTE:

I recently read the book *Insight* by Tasha Eurich. In a couple of pages, and one particular paragraph, Tasha has provided a strong reinforcement for the information in this article. Look on page 110 of the book, and you’ll find “*Why* questions draw us to our limitations; *what* questions help us see our potential. *Why* questions stir up negative emotions; *what* questions keep us curious. *Why* questions trap us in our past; *what* questions help us create a better future. Indeed, making the transition from *why* to *what* can be the difference between victimhood and growth.”

Dennis Hooper, January 15, 2018