

The Power of What?

Idea In Short

The "Five Whys" technique helps uncover root causes by repeatedly asking why a problem occurred, but it can sometimes trigger defensiveness. "What" questions, by contrast, encourage reflection without blame. They focus on facts, prompting logical analysis and self-awareness. By shifting from "Why did this happen?" to "What caused this?" or "What could prevent it next time?", leaders foster open dialogue and insight. "What" questions invite constructive exploration, making problem-solving more collaborative and less confrontational.

As children, we are naturally curious. The word "Why?" becomes our constant companion, as we ask endless questions to satisfy our insatiable curiosity. Parents often find themselves responding to a chain of "Why?" questions, sometimes not having the answers, but always answering. This approach, rooted in early development, leads us to a valuable problem-solving tool known as the "Five Whys" technique. However, there is another set of questions, the "What" questions, which can be even more powerful in identifying core issues and are far less likely to provoke resistance.

The "Five Why's" Technique

The "Five Whys" technique is a well-known problem-solving method that involves asking "Why?" repeatedly until the root cause of an issue is uncovered. For example, let's say a company received many complaints about deliveries. A series of "Why?" questions might look like this:

Q: Why did we receive so many complaints about deliveries last month?

A: Because we reprioritized the orders every morning, pushing some deliveries past their agreed dates.

Q: Why did we reprioritize the orders?

A: Because the sales manager directed dispatch to do so.

Q: Why did the sales manager order dispatch to reprioritize the orders?

A: Because promotional orders weren't available last week when they should have been, and they became urgent.

Q: Why weren't the promotional orders available?

A: Because we didn't know about the promotion.

Q: Why didn't we know about the promotion?

A: Because operations weren't included in the promotional planning meetings; only sales and marketing were involved.

The aim is to uncover the root cause by following the chain of actions and decisions. However, while this technique is effective, it can sometimes feel like a bit of an interrogation, especially when each question gets closer to personal or sensitive topics.

The Power of "What" Questions

"What" questions are similar to "Why" questions, but they have a different impact. They focus on asking for facts rather than seeking explanations for actions or decisions. Let's take a look at how "What" questions might unfold in a similar situation:

Q: What caused you to miss training?

A: My alarm clock didn't go off.

Q: What caused your alarm clock not to go off?

A: I forgot to set it.

Q: What happened to cause you to forget to set it?

A: I just forgot.

Q: What might you be able to do to avoid forgetting next time?

A: I'm not sure.

Q: What is it about forgetting to set your alarm clock that you don't know?

A: I don't know how to help myself remember to set it.

Q: What other things do you remind yourself about?

A: I create lists for everything else.

Q: What would happen if you put setting your alarm on the list?

A: I'd probably forget to check the list.

Q: What could you do to make sure you check the list?

A: I could write it in big, bold letters and put it on my pillow.

As we can see, "What" questions move the conversation away from emotional responses and focus on tangible, actionable facts. This method encourages the individual to reflect on their actions and processes without feeling personally attacked or defensive.

Why "What" Questions Are More Effective Than "Why"

One of the key differences between "What" and "Why" questions lies in the emotional response they provoke. "Why" questions, especially those that directly address someone's actions or choices, often lead to defensive or vague answers. For example, if asked, "Why did you stay out late last night?" the person might respond with "I don't know, I just did," which provides little clarity or insight.

On the other hand, "What" questions—such as "What caused you to be out late last night?"—tend to focus on external factors and lead to more reflective responses. If the same person were asked this, they might answer, "I don't know, I guess I was enjoying myself." This opens the conversation to explore deeper factors, such as, "What were you enjoying?" and might lead to a more insightful discussion.

"What" questions don't pressure the person being asked; they focus on facts and experiences. This makes them an effective tool for problem-solving and self-reflection. Rather than feeling like an interrogation, the individual feels encouraged to think through their responses logically and without judgment.

A More Subtle Approach

Another advantage of "What" questions is their ability to subtly explore issues without causing the recipient to feel attacked or interrogated. Unlike "Why" questions, which can sound accusatory, "What" questions gently guide individuals to consider actions and consequences in a neutral way.

For example, a question like "What were you enjoying last night?" might lead to more meaningful insights about social dynamics or personal preferences than a question like "Why did you stay out so late?" The former is neutral and open, while the latter often carries a hidden assumption of blame or judgment.

By skillfully using "What" questions, a leader or problem-solver can uncover issues more deeply and comprehensively. This technique encourages open dialogue, fosters better self-awareness, and helps individuals come to their own conclusions about how to improve or correct their actions.

In the world of problem-solving and self-reflection, the power of "What" questions cannot be overstated. They provide clarity, prompt thoughtful responses, and open the door for deeper exploration. While the "Five Whys" technique has its place, "What" questions offer a more subtle, effective way to explore problems and uncover root causes. By asking "What," you invite individuals to look at the facts, reflect on their actions, and identify solutions without the pressure that often accompanies "Why" questions. Whether in personal conversations or organizational problem-solving, the ability to ask the right "What" question can be a game-changer.

Summary

While the “Five Whys” method reveals root causes, its interrogative tone can make people defensive. “What” questions offer a gentler, more effective approach, guiding individuals to examine facts and actions without judgment. This encourages deeper reflection and ownership of outcomes. In leadership, coaching, and problem-solving, asking “What happened?” or “What might work better?” transforms conversations from blame to understanding. Shifting from “Why” to “What” fosters openness, learning, and sustainable solutions.