Ask Who What Why How

Idea In Short

The five classic journalism questions, who, what, why, when and where, have guided problem framing since antiquity, echoed by writers from Cicero to Rudyard Kipling. For consultants, two additions matter enormously: how and how much, since a brilliant recommendation that ignores implementation cost and feasibility risks becoming shelfware nobody ever acts on.

A Framework Older Than Consulting Itself

Who, what, why, when and where are questions children learn in grade school or during a first foreign language class, a basic checklist for understanding any situation's context.1 The framing is old and well-traveled, echoed across centuries by figures from Cicero to Thomas Aquinas to Rudyard Kipling, and journalists are trained specifically to answer all five whenever they write a news article or press release.

Two Additions That Matter for Consultants

The five classic questions work well as a general checklist, but consultants benefit from two specific additions: how and how much. Any consultant eager to see a recommendation genuinely implemented needs to think carefully about how it will actually get executed and what it will realistically cost. Behind the familiar, somewhat snarky joke about strategy consultants delivering high-minded recommendations destined to sit as unused shelfware lies a real kernel of truth: plenty of good ideas quietly die on the hill of implementation and cost rather than on the merits of the idea itself.

Diagnosing What Kind of Problem It Is

Most client problems sort fairly cleanly into one of two general buckets. A strategy-focused engagement typically centers on a genuine what question, defining the right direction or choice. An operations-focused engagement typically centers on a how question, figuring out how to execute an already-good idea efficiently. Experienced consultants tend to have worked across both categories at different points in their careers, which helps them recognize quickly which kind of problem they are actually facing.

Confirming the Real Question First

It is remarkably easy to fall into the trap of thoroughly addressing the wrong issue. Clients frequently hire consultants to solve a stated problem, only for the engagement to reveal that the real underlying issue lies somewhere else entirely.2 The same trap shows up in personal decision-making too: focusing intently on how to execute a decision while skipping past the more fundamental why and what questions that should have come first. A well-known management thinker's distinction captures the underlying idea precisely: management is doing things right, while leadership is doing the right things.

Thinking Broadly Once the Right Question Is Set

Once the genuinely correct question has been identified and targeted, it pays to think a bit more laterally and consider which of the remaining questions still deserve real attention. The appropriate level of detail will vary by project, but the general goal is being as comprehensive as available time and budget reasonably allow, rather than stopping the moment one plausible answer appears.

Watching for Adjacent Opportunities

Solving one problem thoroughly frequently uncovers other, related issues along the way. It is fairly common for a modest diagnostic engagement to reveal enough additional value that it expands into a considerably larger, more profitable project spanning multiple work streams and a bigger consulting team. Clients who see genuinely good work naturally want more of it, which benefits both sides of the engagement, and staying alert to those adjacent opportunities is simply good practice rather than opportunistic upselling.

Curiosity as a Genuine Professional Asset

A well-known management thinker once described his own greatest strength as a consultant as being comfortable admitting ignorance and asking a handful of genuinely good questions rather than pretending to already know the answer. That kind of humility, treating every engagement as an opportunity to learn rather than to perform expertise, tends to produce sharper diagnostic work than false confidence ever does.

A Simple Habit for Meetings and Memos

A practical way to operationalize this checklist is running through it deliberately before any important meeting, memo or client deliverable goes out the door. Pausing to ask whether the who, what, why, when, where, how and how much have all genuinely been addressed, or only the two or three that felt most obvious at the time, catches gaps before a client or colleague has to point them out. That small discipline, repeated consistently across dozens of engagements, compounds into a noticeably sharper reputation for thoroughness over the course of a career.3

A Checklist Worth Returning To

Taken together, who, what, why, when, where, how and how much form a genuinely complete diagnostic checklist applicable to nearly any consulting problem, personal decision or organizational challenge. Returning to that full list deliberately, rather than defaulting to whichever question feels most urgent in the moment, produces noticeably sharper thinking across a wide range of situations.

- 1Five Ws
- 2Problem statement
- 3Root cause analysis

Summary

Who, what, why, when, where, how and how much together form a complete diagnostic checklist for any consulting problem. Answering the wrong question well is still the wrong answer, so confirming the real question first matters more than rushing toward an impressive-looking one.