



WHITE OAK
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”Why?” Questions

“I kep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew); Their names are What and Why and When And How and Where and Who.” Rudyard Kipling, *The Elephant's Child* (1902) *British (Indian-born) author (1865 - 1936)*

Curious people ask questions. *Why* questions are great when we want to learn information and seek deeper understanding. The question, *why*, is one of the important questions that drives the scientific community and many of our scientific discoveries. For example, we can ask, “*Why* is the sky blue?” and “*Why* do trees grow skyward?” Think about children when they won’t stop asking you *why*. They are developing their inquiring mind.

In English class, we were taught the *who, what, when, where, why and how* method of writing. This method was an easy reminder about how to approach writing in the style of a reporter. So, *why* was an essential part of good journalism.

What about the question *why* when used in relationships? Let’s think about it. Yes, I can have a loving, curious desire to better understand *why* others behave in certain ways. It is good to have this interest in others and to want to understand them. Questions like, “*Why* did you do that?” and “*Why* do you think that?” generally lead to a discussion of reasons for their behavior. Sometimes using *why* may be the best question if you are looking for these specific reasons and you want to go right at the answer.

On the other hand, *why* questions can have a strong tendency to cause discomfort in other people. This discomfort can stem from feeling grilled. We may have been grilled as children or even in certain roles as adults, i.e., the military. This discomfort can lead to defensiveness. Defensiveness can be related to our sense of vulnerability and fear of being judged.

Have you ever noticed that you want to put the person on the defensive and so you use the word *why*, saying it with a certain attitude?

If your goal is to deepen your relationship, then you want to reconsider the use of the word *why*. If we notice (it is loving to notice the person’s emotional responses to things you say) that the person is feeling defensive, we can use a different word or phrase. We would use a different approach in order to lessen their discomfort and improve our chances of achieving a deeper conversation. In a sense, you still may be seeking the “reasons” that a *why* question calls for, you are just trying to find a “kinder, gentler” way of approaching the person. This approach may take a little longer and, yet, be more effective in the long run to build trust and sharing in the relationship. You are going for effectiveness, not efficiency, as Stephen Covey would say.

Instead of “*Why* did you do that?”, you could ask the question using “what.” For example, “What was happening with you?” Instead of “*Why* do you think that?” try, “Could you tell me about your thinking?” Minimizing *why* questions were a basic counseling skill taught in graduate school to improve the effectiveness of counseling.

So, to lessen some defensiveness in your conversations with loved ones, consider less use of the *why* question. This is one small behavior that has big benefits by helping the other person feel safer in sharing their thoughts and feelings with you.

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