

The Single Worst Question a Leader Can Ask

Asking your direct reports questions rather than always telling them what to do is a key way to develop their abilities and help them grow. That said, there is one question-word in your leadership tool chest that I suggest eliminating altogether:

"Why?"

Why? (Couldn't resist...) The very nature of the question causes defensiveness. Even the most seemingly innocuous questions like "So, why are you wearing that tie today?" or "Why did you go to Frankfurt last week?" can get the most mild-mannered employees feeling as though they need to defend themselves.

There's nothing positive about the defensiveness that results when a "why" question is asked. In fact, depending on the specifics of the question, asking "why" can imply blame, create suspicion, and break down trust. It fosters an immediate "you vs. me" atmosphere and can even subconsciously put people into fight-or-flight mode. I've seen "why" questions create antagonistic relationships and cause otherwise dependable employees to hide information from their bosses.

"Why" questions also tend to keep you in the past. Try asking a "why" question that is focused positively toward the future. I don't think it's possible. That's because "why" is most often about what happened yesterday or about a problem happening today. It's rarely about what can be done to find a solution to a problem or move toward a positive future state.

For example, questions like, "Why did you do it that way?" or "Why are you late?" are destructive because the recipient of the question will no doubt feel put down and/or guilty and defensive. These questions do nothing to help motivate and find constructive new ways of thinking and moving forward positively into the future.

"What" and "How" Questions

Instead, results come when leaders replace "why" questions with "what" and "how" questions. Here are a couple of examples:

"Why" Question: "Why isn't this work completed yet?"

"What" or "How" Question: "What resources would it take to get this work done today?"

"Why" Question: "Why did you do it that way?"

"What" or "How" Question: "How will the approach you chose help us reach our objective for this project?"

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These types of "what" and "how" questions lead to powerful and innovative thinking, proactive planning, and visioning for the future.

Be careful, though! "What" and "how" questions can sometimes be "why" questions in sheep's clothing. For example, nicer-sounding phrases like, "What's the basis of your thinking?" or "What caused you to be late today?" may start with the word "what" but are simply "why" questions in hidden form.

The Power of Eliminating "Why"

Deborah was the head of internal audits for a large multinational corporation. During our first coaching session, she shared openly, "I'm not happy in my job, and the morale of my team is way down, too. I feel that my direct reports and I all have fairly combative relationships with other departments in the organization."

"Tell me more about what you and your team do, Deborah. What's your day-to-day work like?" I asked.

"Well, from others' perspectives, there's nothing particularly 'fun' about what we do when conducting an audit. Throughout the organization, everybody dreads our arrival like a root canal because it's our job to investigate what they might be doing wrong and then tell them to correct it. We sometimes need to report big discrepancies to the Board, and the entire company knows that. I feel like we've been branded the 'ugh! people'... when we show up, everyone says 'ugh!'"

Through probing to better understand her existing challenge, Deborah revealed that a standard discussion with the company's internal auditing clients often relied primarily on "why" questions to carry out their auditing work. "Why did you take that approach?" and "Why didn't you follow the agreed-to process?" were the typical types of questions asked by Deborah and her team.

Once the problem became clear, Deborah and I practiced several examples of how she and those in her division could replace "why" queries with "what" and "how" questions. For example, rather than ask, "Why did you do it that way?" Deborah's team of auditors could ask, "How does the process you used support your long-term objectives?" A question like, "Why didn't you follow standard operating procedures?" could be replaced with, "How well did the process work for you given it was not the normal protocol?"

Armed with this new way of forming questions, Deborah and her team immediately shifted the way they interacted with their internal auditing clients. The outcome? When the auditors arrived on the scene, company employees had a much less negative attitude toward them and began to see the auditing team as there to help rather than judge. Within just 60 days, members of the auditing department reported being able to build better, more trusting relationships across the organization, and the morale of Deborah's team improved.

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As a big plus, the auditing team members shared with Deborah that they were also receiving more honest answers to their non-threatening, open-ended questions-the kind of information that actually helped them perform their jobs better.

What about you? Begin to notice how you phrase questions of colleagues and team members, and make adjustments as necessary. They will most likely respond more positively if you say goodbye to "Why."

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**BUILDING SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP BRANDS
FOR COMPANIES AND EXECUTIVES**

Brenda S. Bence is an internationally-recognized branding expert, Certified Executive Coach, Certified Speaking Professional, and the author of several award-winning books, including the *How YOU™ Are Like Shampoo* personal branding series and *Smarter Branding Without Breaking the Bank*.

In her latest book, *Would YOU Want to Work for YOU™? How to build an executive leadership brand that inspires loyalty and drives employee performance*, Brenda brings her many years of transformational coaching successes, insights, examples, and real-world stories to the rewarding task of helping leaders reach their full potential.



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