

Why Ask “Why”?

Why are “Why” questions so powerful? Research reported by Wray Herbert in *On Second Thought* (Crown Publishing, crownpublishing.com) provides some answers.

In one experiment, researchers had volunteers think about their health, but they framed the issue in two different ways. Some volunteers were asked “Why” questions (“Why do you maintain good health?” “Why do you exercise?” etc.) while others were asked “How” questions (“How do you maintain good health?” “How do you exercise?” and so on).


Then the psychologists gave the volunteers tests of their willingness to delay gratification. They discovered that those who’d been primed to think about *why* they wanted to be healthy were more apt to delay gratification, show self-discipline, and persevere to reach their goal. Other research confirmed these results, finding that those primed to think about “why” showed greater endurance and more tolerance for discomfort on the way to their goal.

Of course, there are times when it’s better to be up close and practical than abstract and idealized. When it’s time to begin a task, it’s easy for people to procrastinate if they’re absorbed in long-term, theoretical thoughts.

Scientists have found that those primed for concrete thinking are much less likely to delay doing something than those primed for abstract thought. They see the task as more urgent and more doable, so they’re more likely to get started on it than to postpone it.

What does all this mean for you? When motivating people (including yourself) to try something new, first focus on *why*: What’s the purpose? Why is it important? As you get closer to actually taking on the task, switch to the more immediate how-to details.

Once you know *why* you want to exercise, for instance, the best way to actually get to the gym is to stop focusing on how healthy you’ll be, and start thinking about putting on your tennies and tying them, one lace at a time.

But, remember, you’re more likely to get to that first concrete step if you’ve already focused on the big picture. So, first ask “Why?” 

Harness Your Brain for Good Decisions

In recent years, brain researchers have made amazing strides in their ability to see and measure what’s going on in our heads. We can use their conclusions to help us make better decisions. For example:

We’re hardwired to make snap judgments based on stereotypes. Such thinking can save our lives in battle situations, where we need to decide instantly if someone is a friend or enemy. But in a diverse workplace, we need to counter that tendency. The first step is to acknowledge that we all have prejudices. Then we need to consciously refute such thoughts. If we’re vigilant, we can do so.

Once we’ve made up our minds, we tend to reject any contrary arguments. That’s why continually asking questions — did we do the right thing? Are we missing something important? Would it be wise to get another opinion? — is so crucial.

We vastly over-estimate people’s understanding of what we say. They actually absorb and retain only a tiny fraction of what we tell them. Continually ask for clarification, and ask to be sure others understand your message.

The biology of our brains is wired to add value. The best way to take advantage of this fact is to focus on your strengths, not your shortcomings. Put your time into things that add value to your life instead of trying to eliminate defects. Crowded out by your burgeoning strengths, your weaknesses will fade away on their own.

We tend to be too optimistic when it comes to budgeting our time. We think we can accomplish much more than we actually can. Thus, we may end up rushing, getting anxious, not thinking things through, and missing important details. To address this penchant, break problems into manageable chunks. Choose one tough problem to work on each month, and examine it systematically.

Our productivity plummets after four hours of work. Concentrate on important problems during those four hours, and then switch to tasks that don’t require high brain power.


We have the power to regulate our thoughts and sculpt the brain we want. Even though our mind has a multitude of ways to trick us, we can override them if we make a conscious effort. We can create an imaginary “mental butler” who will watch out for these brain traps for us. Once our butler understands our intentions, our unconscious will take over, and our conscious mind can relax its vigilance.



— adapted from *A Mind of Its Own* (wwwnorton.com), *What?* (walkerbooks.com), & *Build the Life You Want* (M2Epress.com)

Keep Your Team on the Right Path

Leverage these four guiding thoughts to keep your team moving forward in the right direction:

- 1. Hire effective team members.** The time to think about building a high-performance team is when you hire people in the first place. Look for four C’s: competence, character, courage, and collaboration. Vet these attributes during the interview process — way before you assign someone to the team.
- 2. Foster trust.** Promote a high-trust environment, in which people do what they say they’re going to do. Along with having the right people, nothing is more important to team-building than forming trusting relationships.
- 3. Encourage candor,** and quickly acknowledge mistakes. The path forward is forged around a series of course corrections based on what’s working and what’s not. Candid, timely conversations are essential.
- 4. Be clear about expectations.** The clearer the mission, the better the team performance. Everyone must know what’s expected of them, in as granular a way as is practical. 

— adapted from “Building Effective Teams Isn’t Rocket Science, But It’s Just as Hard,” a *Harvard Business Review* blog by Douglas R. Conant

Ask the Bold Questions


When you ask the right questions, you'll discover something important — even if it's not the answer you were looking for. And that's even more true when you query *yourself*. Ask these bold questions, and see where they lead you.

1. **What would you do if** you weren't afraid of failing?
2. **What can you do** that draws on both your head and your heart?
3. **Why are you doing** what you're doing? What paths do your actions put you on?
4. **What are you absolutely sure** is true? Why? What and who might refute your truth? What other truths are there?
5. **What is at the heart of the problems** you face?
6. **How did your recent mistakes happen**, and what can you learn from them?
7. **What can the history of your organization** tell you?
8. **Are you confusing change** with progress?
9. **Are you forgetting** something important? Who might help you answer this question and point you to something you've overlooked?
10. **What choice can you make and action can you take**, in this moment, to create the greatest value?

— adapted from *Work on Purpose* (Echoing Green Publishers, workonpurpose@echoinggreen.org) & *Answering the Central Question* (axiogenics.com)

Changing the World with Social Entrepreneurship

We all have the capacity to be leaders, forge meaningful lives, and change the world through social entrepreneurship. *The Future Makers: A Journey to People Who Are Changing the World—and What We Can Learn from Them* (Greenleaf Publishing, greenleaf-publishing.com) provides profiles of people who have transformed their careers by finding innovative, sustainable solutions to social problems.

The Future Makers shows how to blend capitalistic drive with a life of ideals. Its tenets are valuable to all of us in the nonprofit sector, highlighting ways we can use business practices to help build civil society. 

— reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

Low-Cost Ways to Show Employees They're Valued

To reduce turnover and build an engaged workforce, you need to know what's important to your staff:


Provide Discretionary Time: The New Definition of Employee Wealth. Workers deeply appreciate being given more control of their time. Here are a few ways to do so.

• **Flex time.** Let people adjust their schedules to fit their lives. Evaluate them on results rather than face time.

• **Unlimited vacation time.** You'll cultivate a culture of deep trust if you let people set their own vacation time. Organizations that have tried this find it rare for anyone to abuse this trust.

• **Paid sabbaticals.** Offer month-long sabbaticals after five years of service or two months after 10 years. This is a great way to separate your organization from the pack, as well as an antidote to burnout.


Offer Learning and Self-Improvement Opportunities. In addition to letting people choose educational opportunities they care about, give them time to work one on one with mentors and coaches.

Nurture Their Hearts, Souls, and Stomachs. Provide employee interest groups, a fully stocked kitchen, wellness and exercise programs, laundry service, professional housekeepers, and other things that people love. If you aren't sure what your employees want most, ask them. Then start implementing programs and practices to strengthen your connection with them. 

— adapted from *Talent Magnetism* (Nicholas Brealey Publishing)

Six Effective Ways to Ask Questions

Certain types of questioning can enhance the quality of your communications and relationships, as described in *Attractive Communication: 300 Ways to Make Communication More Attractive* by Michael Rooni and Juris Doctor (publishinternational.com):

1. **Open-ended questions** such as “What are your observations?” encourage people to share their thoughts and feelings freely. They're much more productive than questions that call for a yes or no answer.
2. **Positive-imaginative questions** invite imagination. For example, “Would you consider the idea and let me know what you think?”
3. **Reflective-clarifying questions** include a reflection of what you've heard and a request for clarification. For instance, “I hear you saying . . . Is that correct?”
4. **Opinion questions** urge others to express their beliefs and feelings. (“What do you think about this issue?” “How do you feel about it?”)
5. **Modifying questions** change the nature of negative communication directed at you. They transform disapproving or hostile statements into positive, productive questions. For example, if someone says, “You're being cheap,” you could respond, “What I understand that you want to know is why I believe this expenditure is necessary, correct?”
6. **Apologetic questions** include, for example, “I was wrong about this, wasn't I?” or “I could have done this differently, couldn't I?” They show your openness to the idea that you may have made a mistake. They communicate candor, concern, and a desire to make things better. 

The Ice Bucket Challenge Debrief: Was It Worth It?


A new study delves into the true value of one of the most talked-about viral marketing campaigns in history. Some highlights:

1. **While the campaign raised more than \$100 million in just a few months for the ALS Association, the actual conversion rate** from “dumper to donor” was only 20%.
2. **One in four participants didn’t even mention ALS** in their videos of ice water dousings. And a paltry 20% mentioned donating money.
3. **Participants who did mention ALS were five times more likely** to donate.

The harshest criticism of the ice bucket campaign is that it’s just another example of slacktivism, notes Robert Moore, the study’s author and CEO of RJ Metrics (rjmetrics.com). This relatively new term is defined as half-measures in which people donate with their tweets and shares rather than their wallets, focusing more on themselves than on the

charitable cause. There are certainly data to support this claim (see #2 above).

“So,” asks Moore, “was this whole thing a big waste of time? Hardly.” Don’t forget the \$100 million — an astonishing 3,504% increase over donations during the same period last year. Even with some obvious slacktivism, the campaign worked because it hooked something deep in people’s psychology. It was fun, different, a little outrageous, and tied to the always-popular field of celebrities and would-be reality stars performing for the camera.

By getting people’s attention with an entertaining video and a simple message, the campaign moved millions of people one step closer to donating. This phenomenon is known as “successive approximation” or, more commonly “the foot-in-the-door technique.” Once people make a small commitment, they become emotionally invested and more likely to become increasingly involved. The very nature of successive approximation suggests that participants in the challenge “will continue to feel an emotional investment in the future success of ALS research,” says Moore. “We’ll raise a bucket to that.” 

laughter alert

YOU WRITE THE CAPTION CONTEST

Thanks to all of you who entered the contest. You’ll have another chance to win with a new cartoon in our next issue. We’re glad to see you all have a solid sense of humor! Keep laughing! And keep sending us your nonprofit jokes, riddles, observations, humorous anecdotes, and the funny experiences that occur every day in the nonprofit sector. Please send to Jill@NonprofitWorld.org with “Laughter Alert” in the subject line.

The cartoonists’ original caption is below:



Reprinted with permission and our thanks to cartoonist Christopher Burke.

and the winner is....



The winner of *Nonprofit World's* cartoon contest is **Gail Coover**, University League, Chicago, Illinois. Congratulations, Gail! As the winner, Gail will receive a card deck of “52 Ways to Motivate Your Board and Volunteers” from Carol Weisman (carol@boardbuilders.com), founder of Board Builders (www.boardbuilders.com).