

Transforming “Why” to “What”

Often, when we are stuck, we are asking “why” questions: Why is it so hard? Why am I uncomfortable? Why can’t we seem to....? Why is there so much resistance to...? Why don’t I want to...?

“Why” questions tend to move us into resistance, rather than out of it – they ask us to explain or justify our feelings or actions. It is far more effective to ask “what” questions if you want to move forward.

Step 1 is to translate the “why” question into a “what” question, sticking as closely as possible to the original:

- “Why can’t you (*or I or we*) seem to...?” becomes “What is keeping you (*or me or us*) from...?”
- “Why is he always late?” becomes “What is causing him to be late?” AND “What is hard for me/us about his being late?” (See below.)
- “Why is she so difficult?” becomes “What is causing her to behave as she does?” AND “What is hard for me/us about what she is doing?”
- “Why did you prioritize paying for cable over paying your rent?” becomes “What is important about having cable?” or “What did you feel you needed to prioritize over rent this month?”

“What” questions are much easier to answer and they tend to both move us out of judgment and into curiosity, and to provide far more concrete information.

Next steps: Once you have done the most direct translation, look for more “what” questions that will illuminate the challenge you are facing. If the first answer feels self-evident, or like a dead end (i.e. you answer “What is hard about this?” with “It’s scary”) ask a “what” question about that answer (“What is scary about it?”) and see where that leads you. Follow those threads – those “what paths” – until you find the “what” questions that move you, or the person you are working with, out of feeling stuck, and into some **small, workable steps** that will help shift the situation in some concrete way.

Powerful Questions: Here are a few “what” questions to try out when you feel stuck.

- What were you intending/hoping?

- What is hard about that for you?
- What would make this easier/better? Or What would work better for you?
- What had/has your attention?
- What do you need?
- What are you concerned about?
- What are you thinking/what is your opinion/perception?
- What are you assuming?
- What do you want?
- What would make it fun?
- What would make it easy?

What Else?

Perhaps the most powerful “what” question is “What else?” When we invite our minds to give us information by asking a “what” question, our minds will generally start by offering us the answers they know best. These are sometimes just what we need, but they can also be quite limited. Try asking “what else?” and continuing to ask it until you completely run out of possible responses – let yourself be wildly impractical at this stage; this is where the creativity comes from. Later you can go back and decide what you want to act on.

Turning the Curiosity Flashlight Inward

As in the above examples, any “why” question that includes a pronoun other than I, me, we, or us should generate two initial “what” questions – one about the other person or people, and the other about yourself. This is because when you are asking a “why” question about someone else, it generally means you are having a reaction to whatever the other person is doing. This means at least part of what is going on is about you, not about them. **Try asking yourself what is hard for you about whatever is going on.**

This can be a critical step in unearthing our own discomforts and assumptions, giving us a way to step out of the way and focus on what the other person needs in the moment, and then return later to how to get our own needs met. Unpacking the dynamic by using “what” questions that are about yourself as well as the other person can help drag judgments into the daylight, clarify assumptions and provide some breathing room for curiosity to emerge.