



The Power Of “Why” – And When Not To Use It!

Since now decades, most of us are familiar with the term “the five **whys**”, or “peeling the onion” (see [Toyoda Sakichi](#)). There are even books about “the power of why”. So we are aware that the digging that comes with asking several times “why” helps us to find triggers, causes and underlying motivations that then help us to improve and course-correct.



BUT there is a drawback to a question starting with “Why”. Depending on context, it makes many of us feel defensive; even if the topic of the question is concerning a product, a process or a situation. We might feel unsure or even slightly blamed. This is - in most cases - not what the person asking the question is aiming for.

Obviously not in all settings - but especially when giving feedback, coaching, or advising - we want to stay away from the “Whys” and focus on phrasing [open questions](#). These allow us to be less judgmental and broaden the thinking that goes into the answers. A few examples to demonstrate how easy it is to rephrase and still get to the goal of our inquiry:

Instead of ...		Try this ...
Why are we so delayed with project 'x'?	=>	What do you see as the circumstances leading to the delay on project 'x'?
Why did the prototype become so expensive?	=>	What are key cost drivers for this prototype?
Why seems half the team so little engaged?	=>	How do you perceive/interpret the current atmosphere/morale of the team?

One additional benefit of staying away from “why” is that by using other questions it is easier to ask positive and solution-focused questions and not leading or evaluative ones that may have a negative impact. Again: I am not advocating against “Why”, I am only suggesting to become more aware of potential pitfalls and to use our questions more selectively. Questions? Comments? Contact me [here](#) !

You like what you read? Feel free to pass it on to your friends and colleagues!