

Dear Master Coach

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Dear Master Coach:

I have a client whose favorite question is “Why?” and I’m not sure we’re making headway. Any ideas?

**Thanks,
Curious**

Dear Curious:

Well, it’s true that with my bias for action, I ask *who, what, when, where* and *how* lots more than I ask WHY. “Why?” feels like a delicate instrument that can stop action as quickly as it can launch it. Proceed with caution.

If I look at you with an expression of deep concern and ask, “*Why did you do it if you knew it was wrong?*” or “*Why are you so mad?*” What happens? I bet you instantly feel like a fourth-grader (looking back at me with your own expression of deep concern), and start explaining and defending yourself. In the battle between cortisol and oxytocin, we both know which hormone is winning in your biochemistry in that moment. Engagement and exploration screech to a halt. And trust may even stop expanding too.

A few years ago I had a client named Frank who was sent to me by his boss because of his habit of yelling in meetings in order to make his (usually good) points. He wasn’t threatening anybody, he was just loud and unpleasant. I asked Frank, “*What happens just before you start yelling?*” Frank looked at me like a cocker spaniel. Clearly, this was a brand new thought, and all the things I like to see in a coaching conversation started coming alive. Instead of shame and defensiveness, he shifted his posture and smiled with curiosity. In the next few minutes, we both experienced engagement, possibility, inspiration and I think increased trust.

In later conversations with Frank, we explored what kind of a leader he really longed to be (Simon Sinek would call this his “Start With Why” moment). I tended to aim any of my “why” questions for Frank at the victories he reported: “*Why do you think your experiment worked so well with the team?*”

In our work with clients the most important thing is always “what happens next.” In my menu of powerful questions, I’ve noticed that for me, “Why?” tends to be the seasoning, not the main course. Unless it’s focused on the future.

PEB, MC

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