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# talking about...

... *designing better relationships for better outcomes*

June 2005  
Talking About Pty Ltd

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## Why, Why, Why??

*"I keep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew); Their names are What and Why and When And How and Where and Who."*

... Rudyard Kipling (1865 - 1936), *"The Elephant's Child"* (1902)

What word do you begin most of your questions with? If you are like most people, you will ask "why" questions more often. Even though this may seem innocuous enough at first glance, there are often some interesting by-products when a "why" question is asked.

The first thing to consider is how "why" questions fit into effective conversations. As coaches, we have learnt that an effective conversation is one that takes the participants to an outcome they desire. You may recall from previous articles, that we can identify three types of conversation – descriptive, speculative and action. A "descriptive conversation" helps those involved develop a shared understanding about something that is relevant to them; a "speculative conversation" is all about creating new possibilities and finally an "action conversation" relates to the coordination of action with others. "Why" questions are largely the domain of "descriptive conversations" and asking them holds people in explaining the reasons behind how things are. Although valuable in developing a shared understanding, "descriptive conversations" focus on the past and have people look backwards. Hence, if you want to move towards new actions, too many "why" questions may not be beneficial as they hold people in the past.

Next, when asked a "why" question about their actions, many people feel the need to justify themselves. This is exacerbated if, as is generally the case, there is no context put with the "why" question. A lack of context allows for a broad interpretation of the question and if a person has a concern about their role in a situation then justification will most likely follow. This has the potential to set up an underlying emotional space that is defensive. If you are seeking to have a conversation where new actions are taken, then such a mood is not conducive to that. Rather such situations allow for the possibility of blaming others or obviating responsibility and these aspects have to then be dealt with before progress can be made.

As coaches, we seek to have conversations to generate new actions and so we do not ask many "why" questions. If we want to explore the story behind a situation, we will most likely ask "what" questions with a context. For example, rather than "Why did you do that?"; we might start by developing context and ask "What was important for you in doing that?". We can then use their response to get a sense of what they hoped to achieve and move the conversation forward from there.

Furthermore, we have often worked with managers who get asked lots of "why" questions and fall in to the trap of justifying themselves and the ineffective moods that go with that. These people often resort to clichés or a parroted company line as their response and this can have a negative impact on their authority with those people who report to them. A useful strategy in

these situations is to learn to reframe “why” questions in to “what” or “how” questions that have a forward focus and then answer those questions.

There is much more to developing an effective conversational style, however one place to start is to listen to how often you use or answer “why” questions and observe the responses you get or give. This awareness may be the start of an improvement in your communication style.

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***“In the late twentieth century there is a curious, highly practical sidebar to this problem. Individuals have never had so much time. In this century alone Westerners have added some 25 years to their life expectancy. We now have 50% more time in which to do whatever we wish. Given our general standard of living and our education, we could be using at least some of that time to think more and to replace the race to certainty with a more relaxed approach towards doubt. ”***

**... John Ralston Saul, “The Unconscious Civilization”**

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### **Some Legal Humour ...**

Apologies to those of you in the legal profession, however we have included this item as it is relevant to theme of this newsletter – questions. As you read this, I invite you to consider the type of questions that are being asked. Thanks to John Boomsma for sending this my way.

These are from a book called Disorder in the American Courts, and are things people actually said in court, word for word, taken down and now published by court reporters who had the torment of staying calm while these exchanges were actually taking place.

ATTORNEY: What is your date of birth?

WITNESS: July 18th.

ATTORNEY: What year?

WITNESS: Every year.

ATTORNEY: What gear were you in at the moment of the impact?

WITNESS: Gucci sweats and Reeboks.

ATTORNEY: This myasthenia gravis, does it affect your memory at all?

WITNESS: Yes.

ATTORNEY: And in what ways does it affect your memory?

WITNESS: I forget.

ATTORNEY: You forget? Can you give us an example of something you forgot?

ATTORNEY: How old is your son, the one living with you?

WITNESS: Thirty-eight or thirty-five, I can't remember which.

ATTORNEY: How long has he lived with you?

WITNESS: Forty-five years.

ATTORNEY: What was the first thing your husband said to you that morning?

WITNESS: He said, "Where am I, Cathy?"

ATTORNEY: And why did that upset you?

WITNESS: My name is Susan.

ATTORNEY: Now doctor, isn't it true that when a person dies in his sleep, he doesn't know about it until the next morning?

WITNESS: Did you actually pass the bar exam?

ATTORNEY: The youngest son, the twenty-year-old, how old is he?

WITNESS: Uh, he's twenty-one.

ATTORNEY: Were you present when your picture was taken?

WITNESS: Would you repeat the question?

ATTORNEY: So the date of conception (of the baby) was August 8th?  
WITNESS: Yes.  
ATTORNEY: And what were you doing at that time?  
WITNESS: Uh....

ATTORNEY: She had three children, right?  
WITNESS: Yes.  
ATTORNEY: How many were boys?  
WITNESS: None.  
ATTORNEY: Were there any girls?

ATTORNEY: How was your first marriage terminated?  
WITNESS: By death.  
ATTORNEY: And by whose death was it terminated?

ATTORNEY: Can you describe the individual?  
WITNESS: He was about medium height and had a beard.  
ATTORNEY: Was this a male or a female?

ATTORNEY: Is your appearance here this morning pursuant to a deposition notice which I sent to your attorney?  
WITNESS: No, this is how I dress when I go to work.

ATTORNEY: Doctor, how many of your autopsies have you performed on dead people?  
WITNESS: All my autopsies are performed on dead people

ATTORNEY: ALL your responses MUST be oral, OK? What school did you go to?  
WITNESS: Oral.

ATTORNEY: Do you recall the time that you examined the body?  
WITNESS: The autopsy started around 8:30 p.m.  
ATTORNEY: And Mr. Denton was dead at the time?  
WITNESS: No, he was sitting on the table wondering why I was doing an autopsy on him!

ATTORNEY: Are you qualified to give a urine sample?  
WITNESS: Huh?

ATTORNEY: Doctor, before you performed the autopsy, did you check for a pulse?  
WITNESS: No.  
ATTORNEY: Did you check for blood pressure?  
WITNESS: No.  
ATTORNEY: Did you check for breathing?  
WITNESS: No.  
ATTORNEY: So, then it is possible that the patient was alive when you began the autopsy?  
WITNESS: No.  
ATTORNEY: How can you be so sure, Doctor?  
WITNESS: Because his brain was sitting on my desk in a jar.  
ATTORNEY: But could the patient have still been alive, nevertheless?  
WITNESS: Yes, it is possible that he could have been alive and practicing law.

*In a court of law, there tends to be a predominance of "closed" questions – those which demand a single answer response such as "yes" or "no". Closed questions do not encourage the respondent to expand on their answer and as such are not very conducive to opening up conversations. These sorts of questions establish a conversation as a series of forks in the road and can easily become frustrating for those involved. If you asked lots of closed questions, see how you can find a way to ask more open questions and change the pattern of your conversations*

*"The organisational pyramid is a hierarchy of experience. Senior executives got promoted for doing one thing very well. But sooner or later, the organisation must learn how to do another thing. Today the competitive terrain is changing so fast as to make experience irrelevant or dangerous – you can't use an old map to find a new land. If you're a senior executive ask yourself, "After two or three decades of industry experience, am I more radical or more conservative? Am I more willing to challenge conventions or less willing? Am I more curious than I've ever been in my adult life or less so? Am I a radical or a reactionary? Am I learning as fast as the world is changing?" Senior executives have the same chance to be radicals as everyone else – but it is hard, because they have more to unlearn. Look at a company that is underperforming, and invariably you will find a management team that is the unwilling prisoner of its own out-of-date beliefs. When it comes to business concept innovation, the bottle neck is at the top of the bottle"*

... Gary Hamel, "Leading the Revolution"

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## Improve your reading and memory

We are always pleased to promote work being done by our strategic partners and this month we would like to focus on Gloop to give you the opportunity to boost your personal effectiveness even further.

Did You Know That...?

- 80% of all information filed by organisations is never looked at again?
- The average person wastes 150 hours every year looking for lost information?
- Information Overload is a serious and growing problem?

Gloop specialises in combining memory, speed reading and mind mapping to help you to achieve more, faster. The Gloop Personal Training Program is a unique and innovative series of 6 individual coaching sessions designed to double your reading speed, improve your memory and unleash your creativity...fast!

If you are serious about tackling information overload, visit [www.gloop.com.au](http://www.gloop.com.au) and you can find out more about how they can help you with these concerns.

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*You can look to the stars in search of the answers  
Look for God and life on distant planets  
Have your faith in the ever after  
While each of us holds inside the map to the labyrinth  
And heaven's here on earth  
We are the spirit the collective conscience  
We create the pain and the suffering and the beauty in this world*

*Heaven's here on earth  
In our faith in humankind  
In our respect for what is earthly  
In our unfaltering belief in peace and love and understanding ...*

... Tracey Chapman, "Heaven's Here On Earth" from the album "New Beginning"

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