



4WH Tool for Inquiry

Who, What, Where, When and How... and Why not Why

The more we can accurately understand “what is going on” (WIGO) around us, the better we are able to evaluate our situation, reach well-founded conclusions, make appropriate decisions, and act effectively. A primary technique for learning about our environment is questioning, using a technique common to journalists:

WHO? WHAT? WHEN? WHERE? HOW?

These questions are simple but powerful tools that enable us to get at the “facts” of a situation as much as possible. Focusing initially on observable, concrete, verifiable, facts creates the foundation necessary to build an understanding of what is going on.

Here are some of the uses of each question:

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| WHO? | “Who” might first identify people involved in the matter being considered, perhaps identified by name, professional position, affiliations, position on the issue, etc. Expanding the depth of inquiry you may want to inquire about an individual's past and present experiences and contemplated future actions; his or her environment, including human relationships; and his or her feelings, thoughts, beliefs and aspirations. |
| WHAT? | “What” can identify actions, activities, movements, and events (“What happened? What did you talk about?”); objects (“What is it? What are its functions? What kinds of building are on that block?”); or institutions (“What is the organization? What is its mission?”). |
| WHEN? | “When” addresses time. Questions can establish the sequence of events, pinpoint how recently things happened, or what was going on at the same time locally or in the broader society. “When” can also reveal stages of growth and development, or the sequence of someone’s experiences. It can also establish the duration of events. |
| WHERE? | “Where” establishes space and place. It can help clarify precise locations (“Where did the accident happen?”) or situate events more broadly in their country, region, or neighborhood. It can also be used figuratively (“Where is she within the organization chart?”) |
| HOW? | “How” refers to the ways things happen. It considers the means, method, processes, systems, strategies, techniques and so forth. (“How do you communicate with your staff?”) |

Like the notes of a musical scale -- or perhaps more like instruments in an orchestra -- these questions can work well in combination. Consider an array of questions that seek to understand the work of a community planning board: When did the last meeting take place? Where was it held? Who was invited? How was the community notified about the meeting? Who attended? Who spoke on behalf of what issues? What was voted on? Who voted for what? How long did the meeting last? How were the results reported? And so forth . . .

The Fifth W or Why Not Why?

Why, of course, is perhaps the most interesting question in life to all of us; the point here is to underscore the questionable reliability of information that is obtained in response to why questions. Most “why” questions seek either **causation** or **motivation**; those who place credence in responses to “why” choose to rely upon the interpretation of others.

It is indisputable that we are often fascinated to learn what others share as his or her motivation. If we examine our fascination, we will often discover it grows from the act of comparing that individual’s after-the-fact stated interpretation with our own interpretation of behavior. Our interest in interpretation is undeniable. The cause of forming our own independent interpretations – hopefully more accurate and likely also instilling a special sort of confidence in all parties concerned – would be better served by seeking more data from verifiable descriptive accounts of events: the sort of information we are more likely to receive when we make skillful use of Who, What, When, Where, and How.

When we ask others “why” for their interpretations without first obtaining all possible verifiable information:

- We are likely to obtain a version that is more embroidered, contains fewer specifics, and is less reliable;
- We will be less able to form our own interpretation of the (reported) facts; and
- We will be without a basis for evaluating interpretations presented to us by others.

Thus, to understand the singing of birds to the fullest extent possible, we ask and study “which birds sing, where, when, as they engage in what anatomical movement(s),” etc. OR we ask “What you did before you chose Spanish, who did you know, where had you been, what was going on around you, who else did you know who learned Spanish, what was your relationship to that individual, where did you want to go next, what happened next,” etc.

Is there a proper use of Why? Of, course.

After ascertaining the objective information it may be important, and instructive, to understand what motivated *that person* to think or do something. The person with whom you have direct access. (That said, you don’t really know if that person is trying to lead you to believe something that may or may not be the true “why.”) But, it is less instructive to get someone to *speculate* on why someone else did or thought something, or to offer an opinion as to the cause and effect.

Stick to the facts, and be judicious in your use of “why.”