

Word to rule them all



It's amazing how much can be achieved by one simple question – why? Speaker, trainer and author **MIKE CLAYTON** explains

One word is more powerful, more annoying and more challenging than any other. And when you understand how to use it, it becomes a huge asset for any project manager.

Why? Yes, that's the word. We all know how much young children love to torture their parents and carers with it, but we don't stop asking it as adults. We just forget how powerful it really is.

The Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson suggested that in some walks of life we grow out of why: "Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die." Whether this is true anywhere in the modern democratic world, I don't know. But it should certainly never be the case when managing projects. So, let's look at five of the blades of the Swiss Army word that why is.

First, let's understand the razor-sharp blade that cuts to the heart. When you ask 'why did you do that?' it strikes at my very core; my values. It asks what

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was important to me when I made the choice. It challenges my decision, and it challenges me. Consequently, you will often get defensive answers to that kind of why question that are of little use in making progress. Use it with great care and, to avoid defensiveness, ask questions about my process instead, such as: 'how did you make that decision?' or 'what were your criteria?'

Powerful motivation

Second is the big blade that we use most often. Why exposes meaning and purpose. We ask why of our sponsors and clients to understand the reasons for the project, because we know that if we cannot give our team an answer to their why questions, we will fail to motivate them. Because is the answer to why, and it confers meaning. If you don't know why you are being asked to do something, you want to rebel and, at best, you do it reluctantly. Because is one of the most powerful motivators.

The third blade is that pointy thing that works stones out of cracks (and hooves, my non-equestrian dad told me). Use why as the first step in finding solutions to problems, by asking 'why?' and 'why?' and 'why?' to expose root causes. Without understanding what is at the core of causing the problem, any solution you find can only be a temporary patch. The 'five whys' technique (for which, incidentally, five is not a necessary number) is fundamental

to a project manager's toolkit. Fourth, the tweezers are often derided as a tool in a pocketknife, but I find myself using them a lot. They are a useful tool for picking up little things and examining them in detail – your knife may also come with a small hand lens. Why is the agent of curiosity. Use it to learn new things, because greater knowledge leads to understanding, and understanding leads to mastery. Curiosity is not merely a joy: in the harsh world of projects, it is a survival skill.

Fifth, there is the saw blade that can hack off the branches of untested assumptions and the limbs of hares that are running out of control. Why is the question we ask when challenging myths and received wisdom. Why does not accept excuses, it decries arm-waving arguments, and it laughs in the face of 'because that's the way we do things around here'. Why demands a higher standard of rigour: testing, data and hard evidence.

So, let's hear it for why... the most powerful of words and the sharpest of tools at a project manager's disposal. **Q**



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