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## "Why?" Is More Powerful than #@#%!

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"Why" is a three-letter word that can pack more punch than more conspicuous four-letter words! Throughout my years in working with clients and audiences, I have found that asking someone to explain the *reason* for a particular statement, action, or decision almost always puts things into context and enables forward progress. So it's surprising that we do not ask "why?" more often.

Leaders of volunteers too frequently perceive themselves as having little control or influence in their organizations. The majority of us tend to avoid confrontation and rarely assert our opinions, even if something happens that we feel is not best for volunteers. But posing a sensible question – which anyone can do – is a means of taking action in a different way.

Asking "why?" allows you to test those with whom you disagree in a neutral, analytical way. Specifically it is a reasonable tool to:



### Get an Explanation

If someone proposes something or tells you to do something problematic, ask "why?" Or questions such as: What is the basis for this? How did it come about? What concerns are driving it? Why do you think this course of action will succeed?

Some people think that asking "why?" is a negative reaction to a new idea, implying that it is groundless or starting an argument. You may well want to deflect what has been proposed, but the question is not an attack. It is professional to clarify the reasoning behind any decision. If you elicit defensiveness, you've learned that the person knows she or he is on shaky ground and can't explain the rationale.

It is of course possible that, once you've heard why, you may even agree. But if you still disagree, you now can base your counter response on what is truly going on, not on what you might presume to be the rationale.

## Challenge Assumptions

Unfortunately, many people are uneducated about volunteers and apply all sorts of negative stereotypes when talking about them. We may want to grab them by the lapels and scream, “What makes you so sure about your uninformed opinion?!” But usually we can keep that impulse in check.

A more productive approach is to listen to the comment and then ask “why?” Something like this:

They: “You know that volunteers aren’t dependable.”

You: “Why do you think that?”

They: “Of course, we should not ask volunteers to do \_\_\_\_\_.”

You (in a puzzled tone): “Why?”

These are what we call teachable moments because you will surprise the other person by not simply nodding in agreement. We cannot let prejudice go unchallenged, especially if we can make a cogent case for a different perspective.

Again, by asking why and *listening* to the response, we may discover that the issue is not what we thought. Perhaps a previous bad experience with a volunteer causes this person to infer all volunteers are unreliable. Maybe there is some legal restriction of which you are unaware. If it turns out the person is just misguided, you get the chance to explain the actual facts.

## Clarify the Rationale Underlying a Decision

Even if you like a proposed action, it still is good management practice to take a moment to ask “why?” The process of *articulating* the rationale for any decision, especially in a discussion with others, allows you to make sure you have thought of all the angles. You want your plan to be intentional and strategic, not something generated simply in reaction to an incident or determined because it is the easiest or cheapest thing to do.

What we need is more thoughtful decision making. Frequently, I hear of situations in which something goes wrong with a single volunteer – perhaps one volunteer is accused of inappropriate or unlawful behavior – and suddenly an executive decrees that *no volunteers* may continue working until the issue is resolved. “Why?”

## Reaffirm Agreement

Apart from using “why?” as a way of taking action against something, it is a very useful tool in ongoing planning. For example, we might ask, “Why are we doing something and do we still think that is the best course of action?” Think about the discussion you could generate in answering these sorts of questions:

- Why do we want volunteers in the first place? (My most favorite question of all, since most people cannot really answer it.)
- Why are we still doing X this way?
- Why are we *not* doing X?
- Why do some volunteers stay and others leave? (And why are we losing the ones we most want to stay?)
- Why is a specific staff member or unit resistant to developing volunteer roles?
- Why is it so hard to get volunteers to submit their reports?

Remember that asking “why?” does not imply anything negative. But if you can’t explain why, then maybe you should stop doing or planning until you can.

## Ask the Right Source!

If we are in the midst of a conversation with one executive, volunteer, or colleague, it’s obvious that we will be asking “why?” of them directly. But for some issues, we have to determine to whom the question should be addressed. Are we asking the right source so that we are able to get the right answers?

Volunteer resources managers are notorious for whining to each other, I’m afraid. Unless we direct our concerns and questions to those with the information or authority to do something about them, we may as well sit and ponder why the sky is blue. Go back and look at the bulleted questions I suggested in the previous section. If you genuinely want to examine volunteer involvement, you will have to ask a variety of people “why?” You’ll get different answers and different insights the deeper you probe.

*How has asking “why?” served you well? And if you haven’t begun using this tiny but powerful tool, why not?*

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**Submitted on 24 September 2012 by Star Nobles, CEO, Praise Day Care Center Inc., Akron, OH, USA**

This is very good insightful information. " Why" is a powerful word. It should be used more often for positive response and listening. When used properly by individuals, it can produce positive results and cut down on arguments and resistance on projects. Both parties are heard and can reach an agreement.

**Submitted on 15 September 2012 by Wendy Moore, Volunteer Coordinator, , Brisbane, Australia**

Great hot topic Susan. Asking the question "Why?" to address uninformed, negative, stereotypical, statements, puts the ownership right back on the person making the statement. It also allows us to remain professional and use our emotional intelligence to address these issues in a calm manner.

**Submitted on 13 September 2012 by Nicolette Winner, CVA, Volunteer Resources Manager,  
Community Blood Center/Community Tissue Services, Dayton, OH, USA**

Love this. The first thing we need to teach ourselves is that it's okay to ask the question in the first place. Asking "why" doesn't mean that you're being disrespectful. It means that you are being strategic in your approach to projects, and that's a trait to be appreciated in any work place. Today I made a sign for my office with the probing questions from this article, and I'm going to start asking them as often as possible!

**Submitted on 06 September 2012 by Peg Vincent, Lifestyle & Volunteer Coordinator, Restvale  
Aged Homes, South Australia, Australia**

I find that asking "Why" gives me a chance to catch my breath & not react when uninformed statements, requests, etc... are made about my management of our volunteers. It is a safe guard against my own immediate responses! I can then continue communication politely & unemotionally.

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