

 I am convinced that it is one of the most powerful words in our vocabulary. Part of that stems from it serving as the foundation for inquiry and understanding. However, it can also be perceived as one of the most controversial we can utter, depending on the context in which we utter it. Trust me, I use it often, and I've experienced both responses. The word? Why.

I am a self-professed chronic asker of why, a skill I've refined over the years. I started off as the kid who asked it all the time. Sometimes, my efforts were applauded, but sometimes, it got me into trouble. In retrospect, if one word has been the bane of my existence over the years, for good and for bad, it would have to be why. But why is that? Oops I did it again - see what I did there?

Context, as always, is important.

I have always seen why having a role as a force for good and not evil. There is clear and implicit value in asking why. Plain and simple, it serves as the basis for better understanding an issue. When I ask why, more often than not, it isn't to incite debate - far from it. The only way I can truly understand how you got to where or who you are or your thought process along the way may be to simply ask why. The reality is that I don't have the liberty to walk a mile in your shoes, but I might want to understand what those shoes feel like to you. Share the experience with me as best you can so that I can understand or, at worst, simply empathize. I want to understand it - to understand you.

As Leonardo da Vinci noted, "The noblest pleasure is the joy of understanding." I would agree wholeheartedly.

I may also ask why to get at the root of a problem. Proponents of root cause analysis would say that if you ask why five times, you'll get to the underlying problem that drives the issue in front of you. I am always amazed at how effective this strategy can be, even if the answer it generates is one that I might rather not acknowledge at the time. What I do with the understanding generated by the five whys is another topic.

However, like everything else, there are two sides to the why coin. It can get a little tricky at times. The question why can trigger all sorts of emotional responses. Suddenly, three simple letters are felt to challenge authority and trigger defensive behaviors that might be driven by self-image, guilt, power, self-validation, or vulnerability. You see, many people don't want to be asked that question for a plethora of reasons - and that can make why a big problem.

The good intentions of asking why often don't come across as we'd like. You may have wanted to establish the basis for discourse, but that wasn't what you got. The root of why allows us to keep learning and embrace the diverse life experiences of those around us. In the end, keep asking - we owe it to ourselves and those around us.

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