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## **Emotionally Intelligence Language: The Power of Simply Asking “What”** By MJ Harwood

We can often over-think or over-complicate ways to effectively connect and/or communicate with another. Sometimes there are simplistic ways to enhance dialogue. How we use the words “what” and “why” are great examples.

*“Why are you reading this article?”* Almost sounds a bit rude, doesn’t it? What if I were to ask instead, *“What do you hope to gain from reading this article?”* There’s a very subtle—but very real difference. “Why” often puts people on the defensive (the enemy of open dialogue) and can often make them uneasy, consciously or not. In addition, the responses received from asking “why” typically include justifications instead of optimal, quality information and insight. Just by simply using the word “what” vs. “why” softens the nuance—projecting a sense of being understood vs. being judged. Following are three applications that further demonstrate the value and effectiveness of this simple communication technique.

### **Avoid Defensiveness:**

*Awareness* for the subtle yet powerful affect our words can have can lead to deliberately choosing the most optimal ones. And the words we *choose* to weave in and out of our conversations can have a very definite effect. If you are genuinely after insight into another’s objection or confusion over a project, an idea, a decision, just asking “what” questions vs. “why” will get you far better results—results that can spell the difference between getting a corporate “puppet nod of approval” or the truth worth hearing. As an example, we can all appreciate how being approached with *“I can see you don’t like this, why not?”* vs. *“What is troubling you about this idea – can you elaborate?”* elicits a very different response and stirs up a very different motive behind our responses. ‘Why’ provokes the desire to defend ourselves, ‘What’ paves the way for more information sharing to help explain a legitimate potential flaw worth exploring further in a new idea, plan, or situation. Try it.

### **Getting Below the Surface:**

Another use for “what”. When we receive input from someone on an issue, problem or challenge, before giving feedback on what you’ve heard—try interjecting with *“What matters the most to you about this, what do you feel is truly most at risk?”* Prefacing the exchange with “what” can help to ensure your eventual response drives right at the heart of the other’s *real* concerns—and helps them to identify and articulate it as well. If we simply respond based on the initial *content* of the words that were spoken (vs. through the “context” of the individual’s underlying and fundamental concern), we are apt to over-rely on our IQ to provide a logical analysis and response that’s very off target from the *real* problem. But so often—likely most often—there’s something else at play—something that’s bothering the individual at a more primal/values level. And for that person to be truly satisfied with a response, you’ll need to speak to the real concern. This ‘what’ question helps accelerate discovery of what’s “really” lurking below the initial surface words.

### **Ownership:**

When working with someone on challenging issues and/or work relationships, before responding with ultimatums and/or pronouncements of what “needs to happen” from your perspective, it is far more powerful to have the other join you in “understanding the playing field” first. You can often accomplish that by asking such questions as *“In your opinion, if nothing changes what you believe is at stake here for you?”* (Or for the team or the company; etc. - if for example deadlines continue to be missed; if conflict continues at every meeting; if customers continue to complain, etc.). Most important is having the self discipline (the emotional intelligence equivalent of self/impulse control) to sit out the initial silence and/or justification and then patiently having a sincere dialogue about what is indeed at stake (the “cost” side of the traditional cost/benefit analysis work). This very often gets someone past the point of defending “why” something happened and/or is happening, and “why” you might be pointing the finger at them, and leads them to the realization of the “impact map” of their actions (or lack of), and onto committing involvement to the necessary problem solving stage.

So why does “what” work so well? It does because of an ‘emotional security gate’ through which all information enters into our brain—one that is pre-dialed to protect and defend our sense of safety and survival—real or perceived, physical and/or emotional. And such is the destiny and scrutiny of words spoken to us. While our intellect remembers through “fact recall” (*content* that we can identify and summon up when needed), our emotional brain center remembers through what is referred to as “silent recall, or *context*”. It also remembers every event but with a “sense”—a feeling, an attitude—not in “fact form”. At the moment we’re born, “silent recall” begins the process of associating what is a good/bad thing and when something similar comes that way again, it silently remembers and affects our perception of a similar event, regardless of how illogical. This is where words play out. My guess is that we’ve all heard the parental cry of *“Why did you do ...”* many, many times, and most often NOT associated with a *positive* deed. On the other hand, our “silent recall” on the word *“what”* typically involve situations that are likely more neutral than our recall of “why” situation—once again the subtle subconscious at work.

EQ word choices: the use of “what” not “why” helps avoid or reduce defensiveness; it gains deeper insight into the issues below the surface; and it helps individuals better understand the impact of not changing in critical areas of need.  
Try it out.

***EQ: “To talk so people will listen, and to listen so people will talk.”*** Travis Bradberry, PH.D.

NOTE: Emotional Intelligence Defined - - While expert opinions vary, for the most part they are all in concert on what it consists of: primarily personal and social competence; interpersonal skill. Their position is effectively expressed more academically by Dr. Reuven Bar-Oh, PhD. as follows: *“To be emotionally and socially intelligent is to effectively understand and express oneself, to understand and relate well with others, and to successfully cope with daily demands, challenges and pressures.”*



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