



FROM THE AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLERS
STEWARDSHIP & FLAWLESS CONSULTING

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the answer
to how
is yes

ACTING ON WHAT MATTERS

An Excerpt From

***The Answer to How is Yes:
Acting on What Matters***

by Peter Block

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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introduction: acting on what matters.

There is depth in the question "How do I do this?" that is worth exploring. The question is a defense against the action. It is a leap past the question of purpose, past the question of intentions, and past the drama of responsibility. The question "How?"—more than any other question—looks for the answer outside of us. It is an indirect expression of our doubts. . . .

*"Choosing Freedom, Service, and Adventure,"
—Peter Block, *Stewardship*, (p. 234)*

There is something in the persistent question *How?* that expresses each person's struggle between having confidence in their capacity to live a life of purpose and yielding to the daily demands of being practical. It is entirely possible to spend our days engaged in activities that work well for us and achieve our objectives, and still wonder whether we are really making a difference in the world. My premise is that this culture, and we as members of it, have yielded too easily to what is doable and practical and popular. In the process we have sacrificed the pursuit of what is in our hearts. We find ourselves giving in to our doubts, and settling for what we know how to do, or can soon learn how to do, instead of pursuing what most matters to us and living with the adventure and anxiety that this requires.

The idea that asking how to do something may be an obstacle rather than an enabler ended my 1993 book, *Stewardship*. In the final chapter, there is the suggestion that *How?* is a symbol of our caution and reinforces the belief that, no matter what the question, there is an answer out there that I need and will make the difference. I pick *How?* as a symbol simply because it is far and away the most common question I hear. It has always struck me

that I can write or speak the most radical thoughts imaginable. I can advocate revolution, the end of leadership, the abolition of appraising each other, the empowerment of the least among us, the end of life on the planet as we know it, and no one ever argues with me. The only questions I hear are “How do you get there from here? Where has this worked? What would it cost and what is the return on investment?” This has led me to the belief that the questions about *How?* are more interesting than any answer to them might be. They stand for some deeper concerns. So in this book, the starting point is to question the questions.

What Is Worth Doing

We often avoid the question of whether something is worth doing by going straight to the question “How do we do it?” In fact, when we believe that something is definitely not worth doing, we are particularly eager to start asking *How?* We can look at what is worth doing at many different levels: As an individual I can wonder whether I can be myself and do what I want and still make a living. For an organization I can ask for whose sake does this organization exist and does it exist for any larger purpose than to survive and be economically successful? As a society, have we replaced a sense of community and civic engagement for economic well being and the pursuit of our private ambition?

Too often when a discussion is dominated by questions of *How?* we risk overvaluing what is practical and doable and postpone the questions of larger purpose and collective well being. With the question *How?* we risk aspiring to goals that are defined for us by the culture and by our institutions, at the expense of pursuing purposes and intentions that arise from within ourselves.

If we were really committed to the pursuit of what matters, we might be well served to hold a moratorium on the question *How?* There is an image I first heard from Jim Walker, a change-oriented

executive and good soul, who was put in charge of a struggling AT&T business some years ago. He used to ask, “What do you do when you find yourself in a hole?” His answer was, “The first thing you do is stop digging.” That stuck with me. Most of the time, when something I am trying does not work, I simply try harder. If I am trying to control a business, a project, or a relationship and it is failing, then I doggedly do more of what is not working.

If we could agree that for six months we would not ask How?, something in our lives, our institutions, and our culture might shift for the better. It would force us to engage in conversations about why we do what we do, as individuals and as institutions. It would create the space for longer discussions about purpose, about what is worth doing. It would refocus our attention on deciding what is the right question, rather than what is the right answer.

It would also force us to act as if we already knew how—we just have to figure out what is worth doing. It would give priority to aim over speed. At some point we would either find the right question or grow weary of its pursuit, and we would be pulled into meaningful action, despite our uncertainty and our caution about being wrong. It would support us in acting now, rather than waiting until the timing was right, and the world was ready for us. We might put aside our wish for safety and instead view our life as a purpose-filled experiment whose intention is more for learning than for achieving and more for relationship than for power, speed, or efficiency.

This might elevate the state of not knowing to being an acceptable condition of our existence rather than a problem to be solved, and we might realize that real service and contribution come more from the choice of a worthy destination than from limiting ourselves to engaging in what we know will work.

The How? of Why

This book is a discussion of what it takes to live a life in pursuit of what matters. It is an effort to ensure that what we are effective and good at doing is worth doing. The book also raises the question What are we waiting for? By this time we have all been immersed in visioning, guided imagination, and becoming the possibility. We have been mentored and coached and been a mentor and coach to others. So, if we are waiting for more knowledge, more skills, more support from the world around us, we are waiting too long.

In the face of the struggle to know what matters to us, and to act on it, we have to be gentle with ourselves. We live in a culture that lavishes all of its rewards on what works, a culture that seems to value what works more than it values what matters. I am using the phrase “what works” to capture our love of practicality and our attraction to what is concrete and measurable. The phrase “what matters” is shorthand for our capacity to dream, to reclaim our freedom, to be idealistic, and to give our lives to those things which are vague, hard to measure, and invisible. Now, you might say that what actually matters most to you are those things that are measurable, concrete, and do in fact “work.” I would not argue with you, but would urge you to explore how focusing too quickly and exclusively on what works can have the effect of distracting us from our deeper purpose and sense of fully living the life we have in mind. In other words, my wish is that we exchange what we know how to do for what means most to us.

How? The Statement

In any of its hundreds of variations when we ask How? we are really making a statement: What we lack is the right tool. The right methodology. We are mechanics who cannot find the right

wrench. The question *How?* not only expresses doubt about whether we know enough and are enough; it also affirms the belief that what *works* is the defining question, a major source of our identity.

The question declares that we, as a culture, and I, as a human being, are fundamentally about getting things done.

If something has no utility, if it does not work, then we consider that a limitation. In fact, talk, dreams, reflections, feelings, and other aspects of who we are as humans are considered lost production in many organizations.

Now, this is not really an argument against the question *How?* Rather it is an argument that there are more important questions, and *How?* should be asked later rather than sooner. We are at times so eager to get practical right away that we set limits on ourselves. We become imprisoned in our belief that we don't know how and therefore need to keep asking the question. Also, in our search for tools, we become what we seek: a tool. We reduce ourselves to being primarily pragmatic and utilitarian.

How Many Answers Do We Need?

What is really interesting about *How?* is that we are asking a question to which we already have the answer. In fact, we have a large group of answers because we have been asking *How?* for a long time. We have been collecting answers for years, and yet we still keep asking the question.

We are on a treadmill, because although we keep asking *How?*, we have to wonder what to do with the answers we are getting. No matter how many answers we get, we often decide not to act on them, and when we do act on an answer, what have we got? The fault is in the nature of the question.

Each time we try to act on an answer to the question *How?*, we will fail because, first, the question wasn't the right question, and second, the answer comes out of someone else's experience, not our own. It is difficult to live another's answer, regardless of the amount of goodwill with which it is offered.

Control in the Balance

One way of understanding the meaning of the question *How?* is to consider it as an expression of our wish for control and predictability. This is the appeal of the question. We think that we can find control and predictability in the mastery, the knowing, and the certainty of doing something the right way. Not our way, not one way, but the right way. We think there is a right way, that someone else knows what it is, and that it is our job to figure it out. And the world conspires with this illusion, for it wants to sell us an answer. We ask "*How?*" and the world answers, "*This way.*"

While there are many positive values to our desire for concrete action and results, it does not ensure that what we are doing serves our own larger purpose or acts to create a world that we can believe in—in other words, a world that matters. Thus, the pursuit of *How?* can act to avoid more important questions, such as whether what we are doing is important to *us*, as opposed to being important to *them*. While we do create value when we pursue what is important to others, it is different from doing what is important to us.

If knowing *How?* offers us the possibility of more control and predictability, then we may have to sacrifice them to pursue what matters. The choice to worry about why we are doing something

more than how we do something is risky business. It is risky for us as individuals, for our organizations, and for society.

Choosing to act on “what matters” is the choice to live a passionate existence, which is anything but controlled and predictable.

Acting on what matters is, ultimately, a political stance, one whereby we declare we are accountable for the world around us and are willing to pursue what we define as important, independent of whether it is in demand, or has market value.

Giving priority to what matters is the path of risk and adventure, but I also believe that the institutions and culture that surround us are waiting for us to transform them into a fuller expression of our own desires. We have the potential to reclaim and experience our freedom and put our helplessness behind us. We have the capacity to experience an intimate connection with other people and with all we come in contact with, rather than feeling that we exist in relationships born of barter and instrumentality. We also have the capacity and maturity to live a life of service and engagement, rather than the primary pursuit of entitlement and interests that focus on ourselves.

But this is getting ahead of the story. I want to begin with a discussion of the wider implications of attending so doggedly to what works and how to do things. What is at stake is not only the quality of our own experience, but also the quality of our institutions and our communities. The primary concern here is the world that we create collectively, for when we commit to bringing our deepest selves to the table, we are transformed by the act of creating something together that we cannot create alone. Therefore any discussion of acting on what matters has to include a discussion of our organizations and our communities. It is in these settings where we will find out who we are. If we can cre-

ate alternative ways of being when we are organized for a purpose, this will impact the way we manage ourselves in all other aspects of our lives.

What Does Matter

The intent of this book is not to try to convince you about the substance of what matters. It is primarily a discussion of what is required of us if we are to act on what we care about. It helps to differentiate between our beliefs about what makes for effective people and organizations, and the way we approach the realization of those beliefs. This book is about the means of acting on our beliefs. It is about how to realize whatever model of effective organizations we hold to be true.

Each of us has developed a model of what will make for a better world, or at least a better organization. Here are some examples:

1. **Vision, clear purpose, and common goals are essential.**
We live into the future that we imagine, and the task is to keep focused on that vision and let that be the context for all our actions.
2. **We need effective tools and problem-solving skills.**
When we have the tools, we have the capacity to bring our intentions into being.
3. **Participation and empowerment are key.** So are high involvement and high collaboration. Workers will perform best when they have influence over their workplace and act as owners.
4. **We need flexible structures and sophisticated information systems to support work processes that fit the task and mission.** More agile, cross-functional structures plus easy access to the right information at the right moment create the capacity to meet shifting demands quickly.

5. **Leadership is the key.** We need intuitive, service-oriented, visionary leaders to set the tone and provide the example for those they lead. They must be role models for the change they want to see.
6. **Effective personal skills, good work habits, and behavior that is self-motivating as well as supportive of others are needed.** Behavioral skills and relevant competencies make the difference.
7. **We need learning organizations, places where people are supported to fail, to question their mental models, to experiment with new ways.**
8. **Organizations are places to live out our spiritual and human values.** We need to bring our whole selves to work, where we create an ethical environment that values people as much as results.

These models have all been popular in recent years. What is interesting is that they are all true. Period. Each is a valid expression of what makes for more effective workplaces and lives. They are all important, and we can cite examples where each of these stances has made a difference. So they are in this way all valid statements about what we want to change in the world, at least in the realm of organizational life. Even though the approaches are quite different, there is no point arguing about the value of one over another. If we want to debate which approach is better, then we are just looking to control what happens, we are not looking for insight. In this way, the differences among them do not really matter. Most any path will do.

What does matter is the way that we pursue any of these models. How we act to bring these models into the world takes us to a deeper level, which is a matter of our individual values. Each of us is drawn to a particular set of values that grow out of who we are. Living our values in the pursuit of our preferred organiza-

tional model is what matters most. If asked directly, each person resonates to a set of values in a unique way. Consider the words:

Love

Collaboration

Freedom

Justice

Compassion

Reconciliation

Faith in a Supreme Being

Creativity

Integrity

Care for the Next Generation

Equality

Values such as these are a deeper statement of what really matters to us. They are also what most profoundly connect us to one another and to the world we have created. They come from our own experience with life, especially our woundedness. In a sense,

I desire to create a world that will solve for others what I have struggled with so much for myself.

I would not write so much about freedom if I had not personally felt so constrained. What is interesting about values is that they are all true and noble. There is nothing to argue about here. I have never heard a human value that I didn't like. As with the models of organizational effectiveness, when people argue about "values" it is a guise for seeking control, for imposing their beliefs upon others.

The View from Where We Are

The challenge of values is not to negotiate the importance of one over another, but to act on them. The quality of feeling alive comes when we act on our values, and find a way to bring our own model or strategy for better organizations and communities into the world.

What I want to explore is what is required from us in order to do this. This book weaves together several parallel lines of thought. It is a mixture of ideas about what we are up against and what is required of us to act on our values. At times we have oversold the models and the values, and undersold the difficulty of getting there. I want explore why it is so hard to embody or bring into being what we know to be true. Here is a brief outline of the way this discussion unfolds.

Part 1 *the question*

The first three chapters are about the importance of getting the question right. A major obstacle to acting on what matters is asking questions of methodology too quickly. I have symbolized this by obsessively focusing on the question How? It's not that our pragmatic How? questions are not valid. It's just that when they define the debate we are deflected from considering our deeper values—plus asking How? is a favorite defense against taking action. The pursuit of meaning has been written about a great deal, and sometimes we think that knowing what matters is enough. That our dreams will come true if we just continue to hold them. It is not always so. What we may require is a profoundly different way of seeing and acting on the possibilities. Getting the question right is the first step.

Part 2 *three qualities*

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore three aspects of the human condition that support our pursuit of what matters: idealism, intimacy, and depth. These qualities are portrayed as preconditions for acting on our values, intentions, desires. They represent a shift in our mindset, they are the groundwork from which we rise to action. They are some of the hard work, exercise, and diet that are required to live with the risks of pursuing what matters most

to us. The underlying themes here are the power of the culture and the choice to reclaim our idealism in a materialistic environment, to reestablish an intimacy with what surrounds us, and to find depth in a world that is happy with a quick makeover.

Part **3** *the requirements*

Our culture is not organized to support idealistic, intimate, and deeper desires. It is organized to reinforce instrumental behavior. If we can understand the nature of the culture, we gain some choice over it. Part 3 takes the discussion of acting on what matters into the workplace. It expands the discussion from what matters to us as individuals to more collective concerns. It shifts our focus from what matters to me to what matters to us.

Part **4** *social architecture*

These final chapters dive deeper into what we are up against when we want to act on what matters in the collective and institutional arena. Part 4 begins with an in-depth exploration of the instrumentality of the culture, and the archetypes of engineer, economist, artist, and architect. The engineer and economist represent mindsets that dominate the culture. The mindset of the artist is increasingly absent in our workplaces. The mindset and role of the social architect is a way of integrating the gifts of the engineer, the economist, and the artist. The idea here is not to completely define the role or work of the social architect. Rather, social architecture is an image, a role for each of us to help create, for acting on what matters in concert with those around us.

the question

We begin with the costs of asking How? too quickly or too eagerly. When we ask how to do something, it expresses our bias for what is practical, concrete, and immediately useful, often at the expense of our values and idealism. It assumes we don't know, and this in itself becomes a defense against action. This section underlines the importance of getting the question right and paying careful attention to the nature of the debate.

Getting the question right may be the most important thing we can do. We define our dialogue and, in a sense, our future through the questions we choose to address. Asking the wrong question puts us in the philosopher's dilemma: We become the blind man looking in a dark room for a black cat that is not there.

how is the wrong question. How? is not just one question, but a series of questions, a family of questions. It is the predominance of this family of questions that creates the context for much of what we do.

How? is most urgent whenever we look for a change, whenever we pursue a dream, a vision, or determine that the future needs to be different from the past. By invoking a How? question, we define the debate about the changes we have in mind and thereby create a set of boundaries on how we approach the task. This, in turn, influences how we approach the future and determines the kind of institutions we create and inhabit. I want to first identify six questions that are always reasonable, but when asked too soon and taken too literally may actually postpone the future and keep us encased in our present way of thinking.

Question One:

How do you do it?

This is the How? question in basic black, serviceable in most situations. It seems innocent enough, and in fact it *is* innocent, for when I ask this question, I take the position that others know, I don't. I am the student, they are the teacher. The question carries the belief that what I want is right around the corner; all that prevents me from turning that corner is that I lack information or some methodology. What this question ignores is that most of the important questions we face are paradoxical in nature. A paradox is a question that has many right answers, and many of the answers seem to conflict with each other. For example, "How do we hold people accountable?" Well, real accountability must be chosen. But if we wait for people to choose accountability, and they refuse, don't we then need to hold them accountable? If we set up oversight

systems to ensure this, then what are we getting: accountability or compliance?

The paradoxical questions that lead us to what matters most are those familiar, persistent, complicated questions about our lives, individually and organizationally, that defy clear solutions. We all want to know what we were placed on this earth for, what path is best for us, how to sustain long-term intimate relationships, how to raise a child, how to create a community. At work we try to change the culture, increase performance, find and keep great people, deal with failure, develop leaders, predict where our business is going, be socially responsible. These are large questions, but the small ones also are difficult: Where do I spend this day? Where has the time gone? What is this meeting really about? Why is this project on life support? Where can I get eat a healthy meal? Why don't I get home by 6:00 PM?

We can pursue methods and techniques for answering these questions, or we can appreciate their profound complexity. We can acknowledge the possibility that if there were a methodological answer, we would have found it by now. We can accept the possibility that dialogue and struggle with the question carries the promise of a deeper resolution. Maybe if we really understood what the question entailed, if we approached it as a philosopher instead of an engineer, this would take us to the change or learning that we seek.

The real risk in the "how to do it" question is coming to it too quickly. It finesses deeper questions of purpose, it implies that every question has an answer, and rushes past whether or not we have the right initial question. The rush to a How? answer runs the risk of skipping the profound question: Is this worth doing? And it skirts the equally tough corollary questions: Is this something I want to do? Is this a question that is mine, that matters to

me? Or is it a question, or debate, that has been defined by others? And if it has been defined by others, do I have a right to say no to the demand? Here is one more question that precedes methodology: Why are we still asking this question?

You might say that this more profound line of inquiry takes too long, that it can paralyze us from taking decisive action. Well, hold this concern for the moment, because it is just this concern that keeps us operating within boundaries that do not serve us well.

Question Two:

How long will it take?

We live in a culture of speed, short cycle time, instant gratification, fast food, and quick action. So the question of How long? becomes important. Why wouldn't we want everything right now? How long?—like the others—makes its own statement: If it takes too long, the answer is probably no. It implies that change or improvement needs to happen quickly, the faster the better. In this way,

the question How long? drives us to actions that oversimplify the world.

If we believe that faster is better, we choose those strategies that can be acted upon quickly. As individuals, we would rather lose weight with a quick fix of diet pills than the slower, more demanding process of changing a lifetime of eating and exercise habits.

Similarly, in the workplace we choose change strategies that we can act on now. We want changes to occur in days, weeks, and months, not years. This is one appeal of attempting to change the culture by changing the structure, revamping rewards, and instituting short, universal behavior-specific training programs. These are concrete and decision-able actions, amenable to instant

execution. Change through dialogue and widespread participation is rejected.

The most important effect of the How long? question is that it drives us to answers that meet the criteria of speed. It runs the risk of precluding slower, more powerful strategies that are more in line with what we know about learning and development. We treat urgency like a performance-enhancing drug, as if calling for speed will hasten change, despite the evidence that authentic transformation requires more time than we ever imagined.

Question Three:

How much does it cost?

The question of cost is first cousin to the question of time. Instead of instant gratification, we seek cheap grace. The question makes the statement that if the price is high, this will be a problem. It embodies the belief that we can meet our objectives, have the life and institutions that we want, and get them all at a discount. It carries the message that we always want to do it for less, no matter how rich we are. For many issues, this is fine. When we are dealing with tangible goods and services, then cost should drive the discussion.

The cost question, however, also controls the discussion of questions that are less amenable to economic determination. At work, there are concerns about safety, about the environment, about the treatment of people; these are larger and vastly more complex issues than getting a product out the door. When we put cost at the forefront, we are monetizing a set of values, and we do this at great risk. At a regional meeting of the National Forest Service I attended, one subgroup felt that services and activities offered by the NFS, such as outdoor education and recreation, as well as commercial use, should be individually costed so as to create a valid marketplace for decisions on how much financial support

was needed for each. At stake, though, were the more difficult questions: Whose forests are they? If people do not have the money to pay, should they not have access to public lands? Plus, what impact would essentially commercializing the forest lands have on the goal of preserving them?

Regardless of our personal stance on an issue, when we zero in on cost too soon we constrain our capacity to act on certain values. We value people, land, safety, and it is never efficient or inexpensive to act on our values. There is no such thing as cheap grace. When we consider cost too early or make it the overriding concern, we dictate how our values will be acted upon because the high-cost choices are eliminated before we start.

As individuals, we affect our families and the community we live in by how we address the cost question. We vote on the culture we want by the way we opt to control costs. When we save money at the superstores, we make it difficult for local businesses to survive. When we vote for reduced taxes, we put an unbearable strain on local education and government services.

The question “how much will it cost?” puts the economist at the head of the table. We want the economists to sit with us, but how much do we want them to dominate the discussion? When the cost question comes too early, we risk sacrificing what matters most to us for the sake of economy.

The most common rationalization for doing things we do not believe in is that what we really desire either takes too long or costs too much.

Question Four:

How do you get those people to change?

This is the power question. There are many ways to position it:

“Those people” need to change for the good of the organization, they need to change for their own good, for the good of the family, for the sake of the next generation, for the sake of society. Here are some examples of the ways we hinge our desired future onto someone else’s transformation:

- **At Home:** How do you get children to clean up, study more, show respect . . . you name it. How do you get your him or her to pay attention, get a job, show love, stay home . . .
- **At Work:** How do you get top management to walk its talk, work together, be role models, send one message, know we are here . . . you name it.
- **Abroad:** How do you get another culture to work as hard as Americans do, to consume more, save more, live the values of the U.S. corporation . . . in essence, to be more like us.

We may say we want others to change for good reasons. But no matter how we pose the question, it is always a wish to control others. In asking the question we position ourselves as knowing what is best for others.

In all the years I have been doing consulting work and running educational workshops, this is the most common opening question. The majority of all consulting engagements are commissioned with the goal of changing other people’s behavior. You constantly hear clients ask, “How do we get those people on board?”—as if we are in the boat and they are not. We want to enroll people, align people, bring them up to speed, motivate them, turn them around, and in the end, get rid of the dead wood.

The desire to get others to change is alive and well in our personal lives also. If only the other person would learn, grow, be more flexible, express more feeling or less feeling, carry more of the load, or be more vulnerable, then our relationship would improve. Most of us enter therapy complaining about the behavior of parents, partners, co-workers, children. While we may

package our complaint as a desire to help them, we are really expressing our desire to control them.

The behavior we describe in others may be an accurate description, but that is not the point. The point is, our focus on “those people” is a defense against our own responsibility. The question “How do you get those people to change?” distracts us from choosing who we want to become and exercising accountability for creating our environment. We cannot change others, we can just learn about ourselves. Even when we are responsible for employees or children, we surrender our freedom and our capacity to construct the world we inhabit when we focus on *their* change.

No one is going to change as a result of our desires. In fact, they will resist our efforts to change them simply due to the coercive aspect of the interaction. People resist coercion much more strenuously than they resist change. Each of us has a free will at our core, so like it or not, others will choose to change more readily from the example set by our own transformation than by any demand we make of them. To move away from the spirit of coercion, we replace the question “How do you get them to change?” with “What is the transformation in me that is required?” Or, “What courage is required of me right now?” When we shift the focus to our own actions, we also have to be careful not to ask it as a How[?] question. This is not a question about methodology, it is a question of will and intention. And when we honestly ask ourselves about our role in the creation of a situation that frustrates us, and set aside asking about their role, then the world changes around us.

Question Five:

How do we measure it?

This question makes the statement “If you cannot measure it, it does not exist.” Or to paraphrase Descartes, “I can measure it,

therefore it is." So much for love. The engineer in us needs a test to affirm knowledge, a ruler to mark distance, a clock to demonstrate time. We justly want to know how to measure the world. We want to know how we are doing. We need to know where we stand. But the question of measurement ceases to serve us when we think that measurement is so essential to being that we only undertake ventures that can be measured.

Many of the things that matter the most defy measurement. When we enter the realm of human nature and human actions, we are on shaky ground when we require measurable results as a condition of action. As with the questions of time and cost, it is the importance we give the question of measurement that can limit what is placed on the table. A glaring example is student assessment in public education. There are many children whose capacities or accomplishments cannot be measured by a standardized test. We know this, and some schools are developing portfolio alternatives, but our educational system is increasingly driven by a high-stakes testing mentality. When the test becomes the point, then teaching methods and curricula are herded into performing well on the tests. Nontest-related learning becomes secondary.

Our obsession with measurement is really an expression of our doubt. It is most urgent when we have lost faith in something. Doubt is fine, but no amount of measurement will assuage it. Doubt, or lack of faith, as in religion, is not easily reconciled, even by miracles, let alone by gathering measurable evidence on outcomes.

There is also the issue of what use will be made of the measurement. Is it intended for control and oversight, or is it for learning? Is it for the sake of a third party, or for the players involved? The useful aspect of measurement is that it helps us make explicit our intentions. The dialogue about measurement

is most helpful when we apply it to ourselves. We need simply to make the subtle shift from “How do you measure this?” to the question “What measurement would have meaning to me?” This opens the discussion on the meaning of the activity and the use of the measures we take. It keeps measurement from being a supervisory device, and turns it into a strategy to support learning.

Measurement is also tricky because we think that the act of measurement itself is a motivational device, and that people will not act on what is not institutionally valued through measurement. This shrinks human motivation into a cause-and-effect dynamic. It implies that if we do not have a satisfactory answer to the measurement question, then nothing will get done. Again, this restricts what we do and pushes us into a world where we only undertake what is predictable and controllable. So much for imagination and creativity.

Question Six:

How have other people done it successfully?

“Where else has this worked?” is a reasonable question, within limits. It is dangerous when it becomes an unspoken statement: If this has not worked well elsewhere, perhaps we should not do it. The wish to attempt only what has been proven creates a life of imitation. We may declare we want to be leaders, but we want to be leaders without taking the risk of invention. The question “Where else is this working?” leads us down a spiraling trap: If what is being recommended or contemplated is, in fact, working elsewhere, then the next question is whether someone else’s experience is relevant to our situation—which, upon closer scrutiny, it is not.

The value of another's experience is to give us hope, not to tell us how or whether to proceed.

If the change we contemplate has anything to do with human beings, even the most successful experiment undertaken elsewhere has to be seriously customized for our situation, every time.

This is not to argue against benchmarking, but to express the limits of what value we can actually find in looking elsewhere for how to proceed. Most attempts to transport human system improvements from one place to another have been profitable for those doing the transporting—the consultants—but rarely fulfilled their promise for the end user. Reengineering was a good example of this. The ideas behind reengineering were golden, but its widespread expansion via hard selling from some high-level early adopters led in most cases (60-75% according to its creators) to disappointment and even dysfunction.



Taken in isolation, and asked in the right context, all How? questions are valid. But when they become the primary questions, the controlling questions, or the defining questions, they create a world where operational attention drives out the human spirit. Therapist Pittman McGehee states that the opposite of love is not hate, but efficiency. This is the essence of the instrumental bias, our bias toward action, con-

trol, predictability. While being practical is modern culture's child, it carries a price and we are paying it. The price of practicality is its way of deflecting us from our deeper values.

this material has been excerpted from

***The Answer to How is Yes:
Acting on What Matters***

by Peter Block

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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