

Reducing Conflict 59 Why Not?

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



When trying to reduce conflict use the phrase “why not” more often to lower the tension. The difference between “why” and “why not” seems very subtle. I think there is a psychological case for using the latter more often.

Asking why makes people defensive

When you ask people why they are doing something you put them on the spot. They normally will have a defensive reaction that tries to justify what they are doing or thinking. That reaction sets off an adversarial exchange in many situations.

Asking why not is a softer approach

If instead, you would suggest “why not consider this alternate approach” it seems less threatening. Let’s unpack a situation that happens often to leaders as an example.

Typical leadership issue

Many leaders are quick to give their opinion about a current topic. That action often cuts off discussion among the group and leads to a lack of creativity. One way to approach this leader is with a question about why. “Why do you always give your response before others have a chance to respond?”

That approach would trigger a defensive response from the leader. “I am just trying to be transparent so people know where I stand.” If you then point out that the action stifles open discussion, you are likely to get a negative reaction.

A better approach

Ask instead, “Why not let others speak before revealing your own feelings?” That more positive approach would be more likely to lead to a constructive conversation. You are really asking what would be the impact if the leader changed the pattern. The leader does not need to defend his historical approach.

Conclusion

You can still get into a tangle by using why not, but I believe the odds are better. It seems like a more constructive approach that should lower the rancor.

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