

Always Ask “Why?”

The Redemption of Why

by L. Michael Hall, Ph.D. (Anchor Point, May 2002, Vol. 16, No. 5)

When most of us first encounter NLP and an actual NLP training, we are introduced to the Practitioner Mantra. It goes, “*Don’t ask why!*”

This is good and appropriate. Why? Because most of us default to *why* rather than *how*. And *how* is a much more interesting question, in fact, it is the question of process. To ask *how* takes us into the field of modeling, “How do you do that? How does that work?” To ask *how* invites instructional and process information that allows us to recognize *how* a person performs a given task, skill, or state. *How* invites us into the frame of thinking in terms of structure.

Compare.

- 1) “Why are you that way?”
- 2) “How do you scare yourself? How do you depress yourself? How do you enrage yourself? Get yourself in that attitude of mind? Spell so flawlessly? Manage so effectively? Stay resilient even when traumatic things happen to you?”

Why questions of that sort invite us to explain, theorize, provide reasons, and justify. And such is perfectly right and proper. Modern science is built upon this foundation. This is the kind of thinking we learn in school and at the University. We ask *why* in order to explore and extend the background knowledge of a field. It is here that we theorize and build theoretical frameworks that then allows us to forecast possibilities, hypothesize, test, figure out the reasons or “laws” behind a phenomenon, etc.

So what’s so bad about asking *why*? It lies in the higher frame of reference that *why* questions are embedded in, namely, the assumption that *if we understand why, the problem is solved*. That’s the unsanity yet it has been the unspoken assumption of most psychology in the twentieth century. Freud made it explicit. The “gospel” of psychoanalysis, as stated by Sigmund Freud, is succinctly expressed in the statement, “Where there is Id, let there be Ego.” For Freud, making conscious the unconscious processes enables a person to “work through” the understanding, pain, or reality and get well.

Other psychologies and psychotherapies followed suite. They took a basic idea that *sometimes* actually works — the idea that “understanding is curative *per se*,” and they

absolutized it. This made understanding the why of an experience absolutely essential for recovery. “To resolve this you have to understand. Now, why are you this way? Was it something your mother did to you as a child?”

Yet we all know better.

Mere knowledge is usually not sufficient. Knowing *why* we overeat, fail to exercise regularly, don't save 10% of every pay check to build up capital for investment, don't like a certain person, reject certain beliefs, procrastinate, get stressed out, yell at our mate, etc. does *not necessarily equate with acting intelligently on that knowledge*. Knowing *why* is not a panacea. And asking *why* too early and too soon can send us off in the wrong direction, wrongly thinking that when we get “the answer,” the problem will be solved.

Practitioner Level— Don't Ask “Why?”

It was for these reasons that Bandler and Grinder nursed the early NLP practitioners with the *Don't Ask Why Mantra*. They did so to interrupt the old program. They used it to break up the default frame of mind that *why* leads to “answers” and “answers” solve problems. They did so to avoid creating a field of intelligent eggheads who could talk the game but not play **it**.

Instead, they focused on all of the other *indexing questions: how, when, where, what, which, with whom, in what way, etc.* Hearing these kinds of questions from Fritz Perls and Virginia Satir, they created a meta—model about the use of effective language in the context of therapy. They designated **it** *the Meta—Model* and built **it** around 12 questions that challenge the structure or form of meaning. In the Meta—Model, we do not have the *why* question. We have the other questions that index an experience and a person's frames about the experience.

Terry McClendon was part of the early pre—NLP practice group and tells this funny story in *The Wild Days of NLP* (1989).

“It was at the Mission Street groups [in Santa Cruz, California] that we first began acquiring our information gathering tools that were later to become the meta—model patterns. The foundations of the information gathering tools began with the how, who, and what questions from the Gestalt framework, deleting that unspoken question, why. We used to get yelled at and sometimes bopped on the head for saying why.” (p. 40)

This makes sense if you want to reorient a person from operating from the assumption that “understanding the answer” solves a problem. So even today, in NLP Practitioner Training, while we have dropped the yelling at people or bopping them on the head, we continue to invite people to learn the mantra, *Don't ask why*.

There is a *reason* for doing this. And understanding *why* we do this is important. We do it to develop *the modeling frame of mind* and the frame of mind that sees, recognizes, and works with *structure* rather than content. *Why* tends to seduce us into content. *How* frees us from content and, along with the other indexing questions, enable us to move to a meta—position from which we can then think in terms of structure and process. *How does this work?*

This was the original reason for the downplay of *why* in early NLP. It enabled people to recognize that the magic of NLP transformations occurred due to the change in structure, not of content. In *NLP: Going Meta* (1997), I offered this reason as to why they excluded *why* in the Meta—Model:

“Because Bandler and Grinder found psychology so weighed down in the *whys*, and multiple theories explaining *why* people were the way they were, and psycho—archaeology, they wanted nothing to do with what they called ‘psycho—theology? As a result, this led to the general prohibition against asking the *why question*. Many if not most NLP Practitioners have been well trained to “not ask why” and even have this conditioned as somehow a ‘bad’ thing?”

How “Why” Induces Unresourceful States

There’s another important reason for the prohibition against *why*. Check out for yourself. What happens when you ask the *why question* regarding a problem state?
Why are you that way?
Why did you fail that test?
Why did you fall into that depression?

Typically asking *why* invites us to *explain* our problems and problem states. It evokes us to come up with *reasons* for these experiences, with reasons that support and *justify* them. When we gather reasons, explanations, justifications, etc., these higher-level frames give validity to our problem states. The *why* question sends our brains backwards in history to the time when the problem arose. This puts us back in state. It reinforces the generalizations we made then.

Sometimes, awareness does bring about relief, even transformation. Yet it does not always do so. Perhaps, not even usually. More typically, the *exploration of the why creates more of a problem—focus so that it increasingly solidifies us in our problem or negative state*. Neuro—Linguistically this makes sense. After all, when we ask *why*, we invite a person to explain and justify an experience. This drives one inside where one engages in a transderivational search to the history and model of the world that made it so. This invites the person to initiatory experience as *if* that *explains* why we built our understandings as we did. In doing this, it locates a person even more solidly inside the very frames—of—reference that create the problem. To strengthen and entrench a person’s beliefs, just ask them *why* they believe that.

When a person discovers the *why* and so creates or finds a *reason* frame, that frame immediately functions in a meta—relationship to a problem or limitation. This means that the *reason* frame will meta—state the problem frame into the person’s neurology and physiology and thereby lock in the problem. It will then become more entrenched into what we call “the unconscious.” To avoid this problem we have to recognize the power of a reason or *why* meta—frame. That recognition will, in turn, empower us to know how to step aside from that framework. Only then will we not fall victim to the limitation becoming more entrenched.

Further, brains seem to have this peculiar habit, they can just as easily *invent answers* as they can find answers.

Plant a question in consciousness, and your brain will go to work to construct an answer to that question. It will do this even for toxic questions, unanswerable questions, fallacious questions, etc. Unless you teach your brain to question some questions (meta—questioning skills), your brain will naturally operate from the assumption, “If there is a question, there is an answer. So there is an answer to this question?’ What are some questions that are especially dangerous and toxic, that we should never even consider answering?

Why am I so stupid?

Why don’t things go smoother for me?

Why did I marry such a jerk?

Why do I always sabotage myself?

Ask those questions of a brain untrained in questioning frames and meta—frames and it will immediately go about the job of finding or creating answers. As it does, however, it unknowingly *accepts all the assumptions* in the questions while it focuses on simply explaining things! By the way, this demonstrates the importance of running our meta—mind with a meta—awareness of choice.

“I do not have to, nor should I, accept every question at face value. I can question questions before I even begin to answer them! I can decide which questions will elicit useful information?’

Why can elicit so much that’s irrelevant. I like what Joseph Yeager wrote,

“NLP often bypasses consciousness to work at the unconscious level. So if you feel compelled to ask ‘why you will get lots of irrelevant reasons. Go ahead if you must... But . . . you will find questions like ‘*How* do you know *when* to do what will let you a lot further a lot faster.’” (p. 9)

Becoming a Master at Asking “Why?”

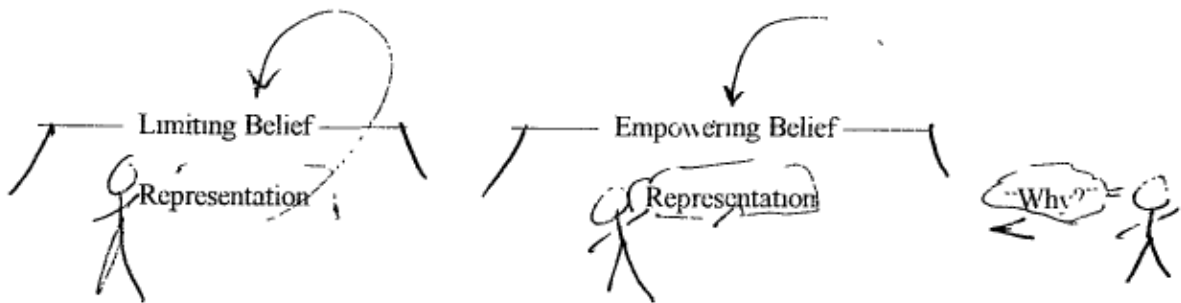
This avoidance of *why* continues until Master Practitioner Training. That’s when we reintroduce the *why* and invite people to ask a more mindful and intelligent *why*. Master Practitioner involves learning the model of Meta—Programs. There we distinguish those who process “how” information and those who need to know “why” (the Philosophical

Direction sort meta—program). There we move from the models of modeling, to the meta—frames that enable a person to ask why and to explore higher-level reasons, causation, influencing factors, domains of understanding.

Dennis Chong disagrees with this. Having incorporated the *Don't ask why* mantra into a book, *Don't Ask Why?!* (1991), he assumed that Bandler and Grinder avoided the *why* because there was something “bad” about causation. He thinks that because a cause—effect statement can be “ill—formed” that it has to be ill—formed and that it is absolutely bad. It is interesting that there is not one mention against “why” in *The Structure of Magic*. He says that Bandler and Grinder “denounced” cause—effect. Of course, they did not. They never said that. They just used it as a linguistic distinction and questioned “how” does one thing cause another. They used it to question psychological statements like, “She makes me angry?” They had no problem with statements like, “Rain makes me wet?”

At the Master Practitioner level we recognize that it is not merely the asking of why itself that is good or bad, useful or un—useful, limiting or empowering, but that the context greatly influences such. We learn that if we ask *why* inside of any limiting belief frame, that the very process of answering the why will reinforce and strengthen the limiting belief or understanding. We also learn that if we ask why inside of any empowering belief, understanding, decision, value, etc., then the process of answering will strengthen and empower that frame.

Figure 1



This changes everything. And it leads us, at the Master Practitioner level, to understanding that while we *never ask why* of a limiting frame, we *always ask why* of an empowering one. We want a person to justify give reasons for, create cause—effect structures for complex equivalences, presuppositions, etc. for empowering frames of mind. Of course!

So it is only after that we have broken the old un—useful habit of asking *why* unthinkingly, and have thoroughly learned and practiced asking the other indexing questions, that we are now ready to learn to ask *why* in a new and more informed way.

This further allows us to recognize that there are many kinds of *why* questions. So, as Master Practitioners we discover that there are several *different kinds of "whys"* and we learn to distinguish these kinds of why questions. Every why question does not necessarily elicit the same kind of response. There are different kinds of *whys*, many of them very useful, healthy, and appropriate. Some *whys* are, in fact, critical for a complete picture when modeling some expertise.

1) The Why of Causation/Source.

Why do you act (feel, think) that way?
Why do you feel this way to that trigger?
Why are you that way?

2) The Why of Explanation.

Why do you judge yourself so harshly?
Why does this pattern repeat in this context?
Why would this experience have these qualities or effects?

3) The Why of Teleology or Outcome. (Final effects, desired outcomes)

Why do you do that? (I.e., What do you seek to accomplish in doing that? For what purpose?)
Why do you want that?
Why are you so intent on that?
When you get that outcome, why is that important to you?

4) The Why of Value and Importance. (Values, frames—of—references, beliefs)

Why do you do that? (i.e., What value does this hold for you?)
Why do you find this important and significant?

Recognizing these different kinds of *whys* enables us to work effectively with these semantic categories of causation and source, explanation, Outcome, value, and intention. While some *why* questions can invite us to blame and to find nonexistent cause—effect structures as Dr. Chong has pointed out, it is not absolute. Not every why question elicits such.

The Redemption of “Why” in Neuro-Semantics

I was in South Africa conducting our very first Neuro—Semantics Trainers Training, when NLP and NS trainer Jim Kyriacou said that he now had a new definition of Neuro—Semantics. He said, “Neuro—Semantics” is the redemption of ‘*why?*’

Where did he get that idea?

From the fact that we use various patterns to find out *why* a person thinks, feels, reasons, and frames things as they do. We ask *why* very intentionally as we explore the meta—level frames of reasons, understandings, beliefs, and layers of beliefs. We do this to more fully understand the matrix of a person’s mind. This gives us the ability to gather a high quality of information and to pace much more thoroughly.

We do this also in modeling. After all, it is often *not* sufficient to understand *what* a person does in managing, delegating, negotiating, writing, creating, building wealth, selling, etc. We also need to know *why* the experts do that. What is his or her understanding about that? What higher-level beliefs and frames of mind govern their experience? Why do they view something as important?

So we *always ask why* when we model an expert who has an expertise that we want to model. To lack knowledge of their *whys* leaves us in the dark as to the higher levels of their mind. This in my opinion partly explains why NLP has not been as creative in recent years as one would expect of this field. It explains why in Neuro—Semantics we have been recovering a lot of the original inspiration, generative creativity, and innovation of new models. We have been asking *why* about higher levels and frames. We have been asking *why* about processes to make the model more explicit.

It was Nietzsche who said, “He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*?” Viktor Frankl based his Logotherapy upon that idea. This highlights the importance of developing a *big enough why* in life. With a big enough why we can do most anything we set our minds to do. That’s the power of a higher meta—frame. This works because the *why of reason and importance* (what we nominalize as “values”) serves as a meta level structure that empowers our propulsion system. It empowers our motivations and energy. An effective propulsion system will always have at least one great big *why* and usually more than one.

Summary

The mantra, *Don’t ask Why* works just fine at the Practitioner level of NLP for many reasons. It enables us to stop assuming that cognitive “understanding” is the solution to everything. It interrupts the default style of asking *why* inappropriately that invites a person to rationalize and justify a toxic or limiting frame. And it creates space so that we can ask more interesting questions—the other indexing questions of what, how, when, where, with whom, etc. At that level, don’t ask why.

Then, after you take charge of your *questioning*, you can learn to *Always ask Why* when you want to flush out the higher neuro—semantic frames. Then you can identify the higher frames of mind and the matrix of consciousness. Doing this enables us to not only model lower level processes but also higher-level processes that involve the semantic reasons and explanations that govern an expert’s frame of mind.

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