

Managing Generation “Why?”

by Mark Murphy, CEO of Leadership IQ

Today thousands of managers are sitting at their desks both puzzled and annoyed at the three-letter-word that keeps getting thrown at them by their young workers. Baby Boomer and Traditionalist leaders describe this word as sounding, as one manager told us, “like nails on a chalkboard.” What, you might ask, is this word? And, if you’re a Generation Y-er, you might ask, “Why is it driving you crazy?”

“Why.” It seems like such a small, innocent word. However, it is actually a loaded term that has different meanings depending on which generation you belong to. In this article, we’ll spell out what “why” means to both the older, seasoned managers, and the young, new workers. And, we’ll give you the tools to overcome your distaste for “why” and embrace it to your managerial advantage.

For those of us raised before the era of “free love” or even “disco”, we were taught not to question our elders. As children we were to be seen and not heard. As school-age children we were taught to take what we were given and not complain about it. And, as adults we were supposed to do our tasks solely because they needed to be done. We understood that we were cogs in a wheel, and if we just did our job, everything would work out fine. So, to us, the word “Why?” denotes challenging of authority, thumbing your nose at the rules, and general disruptiveness. Even in its mildest interpretation, we see it as annoying. When we tell one of our young workers, “finished documents must be printed in triplicate on blue paper,” we want them to say, “Yes, of course! Consider it done!” Not, “Why?”

However, for Generation Y workers, “why” is not a dirty word. They were raised in different times. These adults grew up in a period where parents not only focused on their children, but set them on a pedestal, told them they were unique and important, and fought for them to be not just seen, but heard as well. Generation Y children were also taught that there is learning value in everything they do – so that every job that must be done has a reason, meaning, or significance. They were taught to look at the “big picture” and how their contribution fits in with everything around them. So instead of just being content with knowing they are a cog in the wheel, they need to know, “Why am I this cog instead of that one? Why are we turning slowly? Why, why, why?”

Overall, our research found that there are two big reasons Generation Y asks “Why?”

Reason #1: Big Picture “Why?”

Generation Y workers want to know how they, as well as their work, fit into the whole. They want to know how the tasks they do affect the department, organization, field, or world as a whole. They’ve grown up wanting their lives and work to be meaningful, and they want to see how meaningful it will actually be. Generation Y workers have little patience for tasks that are rote and, as they see it, meaningless. So, as a manager, you need to make their work fit into the big picture. The clearer you make it, the more productive they will be. Pre-empting the “why?”

question by assigning tasks AND giving the big picture up front is a trick that top managers have learned.

Darren Griffith, a top sales manager at an auto insurance agency tells it this way, “When I give my Gen-Y sales reps a task, I let them know how it affects everyone of us here. For instance, I asked two of my reps to read through about 200 surveys and pull out all the written comments. I knew they’d ask why because it is such a boring task. So I just said right away – I told them ‘we need to find out if any of our customers are unhappy with anything we’ve done in our sales process. We need to go through those surveys to get those negative comments so that later we can all sit down as a team and figure out what we need to do better.’ That was just what they needed, and they got right on with the task.”

Reason #2: Significance “Why?”

Employees from Generation Y are typically more than enthusiastic to do something when they know the reason behind why they need to do what they need to do. Their parents taught them that rules and instructions are important and good, but only if they make sense and fit the situation. They also taught them that every rule and instruction is an opportunity to learn more. For example, if one of their parents said to them, “Bedtime is at 9:00 P.M.” and, the kid asked “Why?” – they would not typically get the response (as most of us non-Gen Y-ers would have), “Because I said so.” They would more likely get an explanation of how the parent came up with the rule and why it is important. Further, the parent would actually have a “good” reason much of the time (from reading all of those research studies and parenting books and magazines that were so popular at the time). For example, the parent might say, “Because kids your age need at least 9 hours of sleep, and you have to get up at 6:00 A.M. – so 9 P.M. is the latest you can go to bed and get the required amount of sleep.”

That’s the reason this particular “Why?” can be more of a challenge. It forces us, as managers, to question the reasoning and significance behind what we want our workers to do and how we want them to do it. It becomes tricky when there are procedures or policies in our companies that we have absolutely no idea why they are in place and they don’t make a lot of sense to us either.

For example, it might be easy to discuss company dress codes if they make sense. Ricki Archer, the director of a tutoring company, told us, “I discuss dress code with my tutors right away. I tell them that we have a strict white collared shirt, khaki pants, and closed toe shoe policy. I explain that the white collared shirt and khakis identify our tutors no matter what school we go into, and the closed toe shoe means that we are teachers and not students. We have to look professional and separate ourselves from the kids that we teach. Our tutors are young- but they ‘get it’. After we talk about it, they understand that they need to look like grown-ups to get the respect of the parents, teachers, and students. I’ve never had to discuss it further with any of them.”

What is more difficult is when it makes less sense. However, we did find one manager that handled the “why?” particularly well. David Kim, a department manager at a research firm, had many employees question their dress code. “We have a ‘no shorts, no sandals, no jeans, and no t-shirts’ rule at our company. And some of our new hires asked me about why that policy was in place because they all work at computers in cubicles all day and clients don’t see them. I told them that, in all honesty, I had no idea. Realistically, we are isolated from the rest of the

company physically – we are in a different building. And, it is just me, my assistant, and eighteen associates who crunch numbers and write reports all day. So, I told them that they had my blessing in trying to get the policy changed if that is what they wanted. They could research it, draft a new policy, and get a petition and signatures – whatever they needed. And I would take a representative with me and bring it up to corporate. But they couldn't do it during work time. I had to stress that! I haven't heard about it in a few weeks, but I know there are a bunch of them working on it.”

Unlike the Big Picture “Why?”, the Significance “Why?” can't always be pre-empted. This is because this type of “Why?” often takes us by surprise. Things we wouldn't naturally question get questioned. This type of questioning, as you may notice, is not always a bad thing. In fact, employees asking, “Why?” can bring about significant change and growth and help us to look beyond where we might normally look. In fact, where would Microsoft be without Bill Gates asking “Why?” Or where would Nike, or Apple, or Starbucks be? These companies did not just allow “Why?”, they embraced “Why?”

Summing up the Techniques

In short, Generation Y asks “Why?” for two main reasons. And, as our top managers have shown, there are two good ways to turn the “Why?” to your advantage. First and foremost, anticipate that your Generation Y employees are going to want the Big Picture. By knowing this, you can pre-empt questions by providing details of how their work fits in with the work of other workers, the department, organization, or outside world. Make what they are doing meaningful and relevant. Creative managers have a knack for making every job important.

Second, understand that Generation Y workers want to know the Significance of what they are doing. If you can anticipate their questions, then certainly pre-empt them by providing the reason. But, because these are often unanticipated questions, give yourself time to respond or put the work back on them. If you don't know the answer, it is fine to say, “I don't know, but I can find out.” It is also more than OK to give them permission to search for the answer themselves, or to try to change things (with you guiding the process, of course).

With this knowledge in hand, maybe we can reduce our annoyance at that little three-letter word. It is not there to usurp your authority. It is not there to make your life miserable. “Why?” is being thrown at you because you have curious, inquisitive, and intelligent young workers who want to learn and grow through their work with you. You may not love it, but with these tools you can turn it to your advantage.