

How well do you evaluate reasons to take action?

Imagine yourself in a meeting with the director of HR for your organization or group, and he recommends this to you:

"We should allow employees to dress casually every day of the week. It will improve morale."

The HR director is presenting a recommendation with one reason to justify taking an action that is likely to impact many people in the organization. Wouldn't you want to ask some questions? We hope so!

The HR director is using a very common form of reasoning that you'll find in the workplace: it's technically known as *means-ends reasoning*. It works like this: X is a way to get to Y. Therefore if we want Y, we should do X. In your meeting with the HR director, he is using this exact structure. We could map it like this: casual dress (X) is a means to higher morale (Y); therefore if you want increased morale (Y), adopt a casual dress policy (X).

Learning how to analyze this pattern of reasoning systematically is highly advantageous professionally, because it allows you to understand and ask questions about common patterns of justification that may or may not be valid. Asking questions about means-ends reasoning will help you prepare your own reasons for recommendations more thoroughly, boosting your credibility, and will also help you make better decisions about actions to take.

Using Precision Questioning to Analyze Means-Ends Reasoning

Three categories of questions are going to be very helpful as you take apart the claims that someone is using in means-ends reasoning: clarification, assumptions and the BCQ. But with means-ends reasoning in particular, one other category—causes—is crucial.

Let's go back to that meeting with your HR director and use some of our Precision Q+A tools.

HR Director: *"We should allow employees to dress casually every day of the week. It will improve morale."*

You, using your PQ+A toolkit: *"Are you assuming our employees understand what casual dress is appropriate for interacting with customers?" "If we implement this policy, what criteria will you use to draw the line between what is appropriate and what is not?" "What sources did you use to generate those criteria?" "How will we be sure that employees understand and adopt those criteria for casual dressing at the office?"*

With a means-ends argument, you will also want to use questions to dig into the causality implied in the reason. Causality keeps a means-ends argument glued together, and so you want to test the strength of that glue!

In your meeting with the HR director, you might want to ask cause questions such as:

HR Director: *"We should allow employees to dress casually every day of the week. It will improve morale."*

You, using cause questions: *"Is our current dress code a root cause of the morale problem? If not, why do you believe that changing the dress code will have such a significant impact on morale?" "Are the causes of the morale problem the same in all parts of the company? If not, why will a company-wide policy change raise morale significantly?" "Are the causes of the morale problem constant or are they changing? If you don't understand the causes of the change in morale, how do you know that changing one constant variable (the dress code) will impact the change in morale?"*

Once you master using cause questions, you can use Precision Q+A to systematically ask about the causal reasoning of any means-ends argument.

SHARPEN YOUR SKILL WITH THESE TWO PRACTICE EXERCISES:

1. Use the recommendation from the HR director that we discussed above and write down twenty questions related to this one means-ends argument. Use five categories: clarification, assumptions, the BCQ, causes, and effects. (There are a few questions in the practice hints section below if you need a jump start.)
2. Identify a decision you are currently making, and isolate the most important means-ends argument. Use the most powerful questions from the first practice exercise to ask about your means-ends reason. If you want to get tougher on your reasoning, write down twenty questions from five categories: clarification, assumptions, the BCQ, causes, and effects.

PRACTICE HINTS:

Clarification questions:

Is morale currently falling? At what rate?

What is your baseline?

When will you first see an impact on morale?

How much improvement will there be in the first year?

What parts of the company will see the most impact on morale? The least?

Break down the morale impact by gender, by age, by country.

Assumption questions:

Are you assuming that we have a morale problem?

Why should improving morale be a priority?

Are you assuming that we have an accurate way of measuring morale?

Are you assuming that morale won't get better on its own?

Basic Critical Questions:

What data shows you the extent of a morale problem?

What data suggests this change in policy would improve morale?

What is the source of this data?

Is that data current?

What kinds of analysis did you use to correlate dress code and morale? Are the results statistically valid?

Are there any companies similar to ours that have adopted this policy and as a result have seen an improvement in morale?