

A better way to get the big picture

The “5-Ws” – Who? What? When? Where? Why? – are perhaps the best known questions in the English language. Sometimes troubleshooters learn the 5-Ws as a system for gathering information or getting the big picture about a problem. While they may be easy to remember, these five one-syllable utterances aren’t the most effective way to get the big picture. Nor do they truly fuel problem-solving. Add sophistication to your information gathering with more conscious use of precise questions that illuminate the big picture.

Budding journalists learn to ask who-what-when-where-why to ensure that they have a complete picture when covering a story. These five questions are particularly easy to remember, since each is a single syllable, and each begins with W! (The question “How?” sometimes gets to tag along with the 5-Ws.) When we are trying to think on our feet or gather information fast, five easy-to-remember and easy-to-articulate questions are better than nothing. But are the 5-Ws the best way to get the big picture?

Not if you are a knowledge worker who aims for effectiveness and efficiency. By default, the 5-W questions take a discussion out of specificity and move it into generality. But remember that the level of an answer usually matches the level of a question. Asking an extremely general question will typically yield a story or a think-aloud answer. And those answers are rarely the most effective or the most efficient ways to engage in analysis and problem-solving.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE BIG PICTURE?

When we talk about “the big picture” in knowledge work, we usually mean the context surrounding an issue that is our focus. Suppose we discover that the wrong version of a fact sheet has been published on the corporate website. The incorrect document is our focus. But as we try to understand how to fix the mistake, we realize that the origin of the mistake was not in the document itself but in the handoff of the document from the operations group to the marketing group.

Gaining a view of the big picture involves moving out from a focus on the fact sheet itself to several rings of context surrounding it, including the creative processes that generated it, the review processes that approved it, and the business processes that published it. We might envision the fact sheet at the center of a series of concentric circles that extend outward from the area of emphasis. The further out you move from the initial focus, the bigger your picture of the issue.

Whether and to what extent we emphasize the big picture, and how many “rings” outward we extend our thinking, is related to the task at hand as well as our organizational

levels, roles, and responsibilities. Regardless of levels or roles, however, we all need to hone our intellectual agility to move from detail toward a bigger picture.

HOW TO PAINT A BIG PICTURE WITH QUESTIONS

The difficulty in using the 5-W questions to paint the big picture is that they are too blunt an instrument to actually help us discern what we want to know. The ease of blurting out: “What?” doesn’t require us to make the necessary effort to be articulate about what we don’t understand. Our rule from the Precision Q+A workshop holds here: the first question that comes out of our mouth is likely to be too general.

To paint the big picture with questions, pause. Edit your thinking. Articulate the question that will help you see the big picture more fully. Here’s an example, going back to our faulty fact sheet:

Jane asks a 5-W question:

Why did this happen?

Jack answers with a story in response to the general question:

“When we did the handoff, Bob was out sick and Marni didn’t know that she was supposed to log the new version. Since she didn’t log it, Anton didn’t know the draft had been modified, so he used the previous version to generate graphics, and then marketing...”

Jill asks a more precise question designed to help paint the big picture:

“Let me stop you there for a moment. Let’s jump up a level of abstraction. Instead of mapping each person’s action in this situation, let’s understand the steps that happen in a successful handoff. Could you describe the sequence of key events?”

Notice that Jill showed Jack that she wanted get to the big picture. Then she asked a question that tapped into the picture in her mind much more precisely than Jane’s general “Why?” Don’t fall back on the 5-Ws simply because they are easy to articulate!

This Month's Practice

Most of us fall back on the 5-W questions to paint the big picture, simply because we don't have more sophisticated techniques. Used in this way, the 5-Ws are essentially a memory device. This month's practices expand your repertoire of ways to effectively and efficiently paint the big picture in your thinking and problem-solving.

PRACTICE 1

CATCH YOURSELF IN THE ACT!

We all default to the 5-W questions at times. Whenever you hear yourself ask a 5-W question, stop and consciously build awareness. Over time you will see how to substitute more precise questions when you're tempted to use general ones.

We're here to help. If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at QuestionMaster@vervago.com.

You may also join our LinkedIn group for Precision Q+A alumni by visiting us here at [LinkedIn](#).

PRACTICE 2

PRACTICE THE SEVEN CATEGORIES EVERY TIME YOU USE THE 5-WS

When you catch yourself asking "Who?" you could actually mean to ask a question from any one of the seven categories of analytic questions. Challenge yourself to ask a precise question from each of the seven categories:

"When I said 'who', did I mean..."

Go/NoGo: Who should attend a meeting to review version control policies?

Clarification: Who is involved in the steps of a document handoff?

Assumptions: Who are you assuming made a similar version control mistake?

Basic Critical Question: Who analyzed this data on version control errors?

Causes: Who triggered this error by failing to log in a new version of a document?

Effects: Who is impacted by a new version control process?

Action: Who will we designate as the new czar of version control?"

PRACTICE 3

PAINT THE BIG PICTURE WITH DISCUSSION TECHNIQUES

- Use a phrase that shows the answerer you want to shift the level of generality, such as "Let's jump up a level."
- Tell the answerer that you want to build a picture or a model, as in: "Let's name the steps."
- Ask for more description of the precise part of the picture that is still unclear, such as: "Could you describe the sequence of key events?"