

So What?



This chapter covers how to use the So what? cycle of questions, and explains the difference between using them internally (privately asking yourself) and externally (asking other people). Inquisition is something of a lost art, and there is much we can learn from children about how to do it well. It is important to get your feelings out into the open, organize them, and interlock them with those of others. There is also a knack to working out what not to say, and when not to say it.

How to use the *So what?* cycle of questions

I have subtitled this book “The definitive guide to the only business questions that matter”. This description may sound a bit over the top, but my orientation is one of simplicity, not complication. There is no intellectual high ground being taken here – quite the opposite. What I am suggesting is that if, as grown-ups, we could recapture some of the inquisitive nature that we had as children, then we would be a great deal more successful, and very much happier.

The question *So what?* is the beginning, or the end, of a series of questions that children instinctively ask, and which we often now fail to ask. *So what?* provides the initial screen: what’s the point of this then? If a good reason is provided, then we want to know *Why?* in some detail. Assuming the idea or project passes that test, then we are on to asking *How?*, *Who?*, *When?*, *Where?*, and so on. You may think that all these questions are naturally covered in modern business, but I can assure you that they are not. Once all these elements have been

thought through in a satisfactory way, there are a number of sense-check questions to make sure that we haven't overlooked something. These are *Do we really need to do this?*, *Something must be wrong if...* (a sentence you have to complete), and *Are we there yet?* The *What?* question is left as a postscript at the end because, frankly, if you haven't worked out what you are doing in the first place, then you shouldn't be embarking on the other questions at all.

Which brings us back to the beginning. The diagram in Figure 1.1 shows the cycle, but don't worry, we'll work our way through the whole thing during the course of the book.

THE SO WHAT? CYCLE OF QUESTIONS

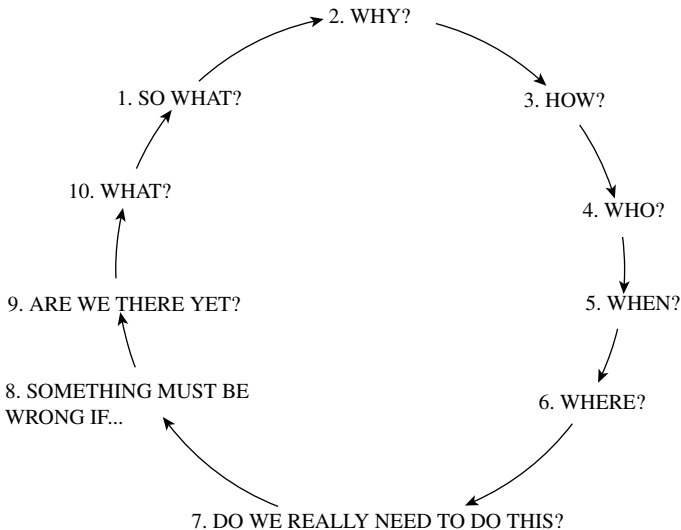


Fig. 1.1: The *So What?* cycle of questions

How to use the *So what?* question

So what? is a very powerful question in its own right. It can deflate the most cerebral and lofty minds in one stroke. Somebody makes an assertion and does not expect to be challenged. But they certainly *should* be challenged. You don't have to be massively confrontational, but you do need to make your own point and stand your ground. So let's investigate the tone in which the *So what?* question should be delivered. It can certainly be used with devastating effect by sarcastic teenagers, as a derogatory measure – the “Am I bovvered?” syndrome. But that is not the style I am suggesting here. *So what?* has use both as an internal question and an external one. In other words, you can ask it of yourself as well as others. Let's have a look at the difference.

For internal use only?

It is perfectly possible to use all the questions in this book to sort your thoughts out without ever having to say them out loud. If you are self-employed, or a decision-maker in a company and do not wish to reveal your thought processes to your colleagues, then you can ask all the questions in this book *of yourself*. The questions are just as valid, and a very useful way of sense-checking your thinking.

“Only he who handles his ideas lightly is master of his ideas, and only he who is master of his ideas is not enslaved by them.”

Lin Yutang

Internal *So what?* questions

So what? questions are essentially infinite, and the reader will instinctively know which issues to address, but first here are some examples of internal ones.

- I hate my job: so what?
- I feel out of my depth: so what?
- I have been told to do it: so what?
- I am in charge: so what?
- I am very busy: so what?
- I have a grand title: so what?
- I disagree with a colleague: so what?

Your first step is to pose a lot of questions. Don't shirk the tough ones because, if you address them honestly, they will help you the most. The next step is to work out what your answers to the questions are, and what you propose to do as a result. For example:

State of affairs	Answer: what I am going to do about it
I hate my job: so what?	(a) Change something (b) Leave this job and get another one
I feel out of my depth: so what?	(a) Get help (b) Enjoy the challenge and learn more
I have been told to do it: so what?	(a) Do it and stop moaning (b) Ask my boss for a reason
I am in charge: so what?	(a) Enjoy the moment (b) Redefine what I do each day
I am very busy: so what?	(a) Keep going and hope I can take it (b) Think harder about which bits matter

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| I have a grand title: so what? | (a) Use it to enforce helpful ideas
(b) Get rid of it and be more humble |
| I disagree with a colleague | (a) Don't mention it
(b) Say so and propose an alternative |
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My purpose here, and the purpose of the questions, is not to be an irritant but to flush out the potential answers that are really going to help you. If there are no questions, or they are too vague and general, they will not help you at all. Rubbish in, rubbish out, as the saying goes. So think hard and get to the heart of the matter early.

“What you have to remember is that civil servants use vagueness and ambiguity with razor-sharp precision.”

Anonymous senior civil servant

External *So what?* questions

External *So what?* questions are equally infinite. They can go on and on. The knack with them is never to ask just one, but to know when to stop when the issue is becoming sufficiently clear. Here are some examples:

- That's your opinion: so what?
- This is my opinion: so what?
- You are my boss: so what?
- I don't have a clear opinion: so what?
- I disagree with all my colleagues: so what?
- The company line is announced: so what?

State of affairs	Answer: what I am going to do about it
That's your opinion	(a) I agree, so we're okay (b) I don't agree and I'm going to say so
This is my opinion	(a) You agree with me, so we're okay (b) You disagree, so we need to discuss it
You are my boss	(a) I'll do whatever you say (b) You pay for my opinion, so I am going to give it to you
I don't have a clear opinion	(a) I am happy to roll with whatever is suggested (b) I need to think and develop one
I disagree with all my colleagues	(a) I need to persuade a number of them (b) I am incompatible with the company and need to find another job
The company line is announced	(a) I agree, so all is well (b) I disagree, so I need to say so

Now try a few of your own. Try filling in the panel:

State of affairs	Answer: what I am going to do about it
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

The art of inquisition

The Spanish Inquisition gave the word a bad name, but inquisition is a thoroughly desirable thing. Without it, everybody rushes around doing things without really

knowing why. In a previous book, I introduced the idea that you should never do anything unless you know why you are doing it (*Teach Yourself Running Your Own Business*, p. 91). It sounds so obvious, and yet every time I ask people in my training courses why certain items are on their list of things to do, the answers are less than convincing. Think about it. Never do anything unless you know why you are doing it.

Inquisition: the act of inquiring deeply or searchingly; a deep or searching inquiry

Put simply, if more people were more inquisitive more of the time, we would start a chain reaction of good things. Let's imagine:

- Your boss is more inquisitive, so he or she is less likely to ask you to do pointless things.
- You are more inquisitive, so you are less likely to accept instructions to do pointless things without asking why.
- Your boss knows you are inquisitive, so he or she thinks even more carefully before suggesting something pointless.
- You get less stupid stuff to do, so you enjoy your job more.
- Everybody gets the hang of it, and the whole company starts concentrating on the important stuff instead of the trivia.
- Profits go up.
- Your pay goes up.

Another way of looking at this relationship is to view it as a pair of linked equations.

The Inquisition Equations

1. *Demanding, thoughtless boss + passive, meek employee = status quo*
2. *Demanding, thoughtless boss + inquisitive employee = change of ingrained habitual behaviour*

In the first scenario, nothing changes. The boss gets away with slack thinking, and the subordinate does nothing about it, leading to an unsatisfactory working relationship. In the second scenario, the boss has to react, and suddenly the employee is in the driving seat. Power to the people! And just before you cry out that you never contradict your boss, bear in mind that one of the biggest complaints that bosses have is that their staff never come up with any ideas.

“A timid question will always receive a confident answer.”

Charles Darling

There’s the rub. Asking timid questions will only ever lead to two things:

1. You fail to make your point.
2. The other person enjoys a second opportunity to ram home theirs.

Weak questions are no help to you at all. They make you look daft, neuter your capability, and ultimately lead to you not enjoying your work. So don’t ask them.

Learning from children

Children are the experts at inquisition, albeit often in an annoying manner. Their persistent lines of inquiry

frequently leave us exasperated. You know the sort of thing.

Child: Why is that man fat?

Parent: Because he has eaten a lot.

Child: Why has he eaten a lot?

Parent: Because he was hungry.

Child: Why was he hungry?

Parent: Because he hadn't eaten for a while.

Child: Why hadn't he eaten for a while?

Parent: Look, he just hadn't, all right?

This is hardly a satisfactory explanation for a young inquiring mind, and as a grown-up, you certainly shouldn't be fobbed off with half-baked answers and poorly thought-through requests. Don't stand for it. Tell them what you feel.

Venting your feelings

Venting your feelings is no bad thing. Most of us these days get paid for our opinion anyway, and we have every right to express them. Equally, as a consequence of doing so, we must be prepared to defend them and expect a robust response from someone who does not hold our view.

“Every man has the right to utter what he thinks truth, and every other man has the right to knock him down for it. Martyrdom is the test.”

Dr. Johnson

The trouble with feelings, of course, is that, annoyingly, other people have them too. So we are not just grappling

with yours, but everybody else's. And in business, that person could well be your boss or a customer. It is much easier to blurt out a fact than a feeling that you may not be able to substantiate, and yet, in many contexts, it is the feelings that resonate more powerfully and may hold the power to generating better ideas. Indeed, in many businesses these days, they call it passion, and value it very highly. On the continent, they have been doing this for centuries.

In essence, control represents containment (holding things back), and feelings offer a springboard for imagination (unleashing potential). This balance of yin and yang is at the very heart of any decent business.

Sticking it to the man

Most bosses aren't half as good as they think they are, nor as good as they would like you to believe. In their private moments, they all think they are still in short trousers anyway. Many are simply getting away with it. It is your job to stand up to them. Give them a run for their money! Are you a man or a mouse? Are *they*? It's time to "stick it to the man", as the rock vernacular goes.

"Keep your head down and always wear brown."

Father's career advice to his son

This appalling piece of advice was given to a friend of mine by his father. I think we'll keep that one anonymous, don't you? This is not how it works in the modern world. Work out what you stand for, and let them know, in a charming and engaging way, of course.

The power of feelings

“There is no opinion however absurd, which men will not readily embrace as soon as they can be brought to the conviction that it is generally adopted.”

Schopenhauer

Feelings can be highly persuasive. It rather depends on how they are presented. The facts will speak for themselves to a large degree. So will the control factors – the constraints that apply to the business issue, such as production capability, budget, resources, time limits, and so forth. But it takes personality to bring an opinion to the fore and argue its case. The question is: are you just expressing your own bias? If so, is that of any benefit to the matter in hand?

“Everyone is a reactionary about subjects he understands.”

Robert Conquest

Twittering on about your small sphere of interest or your long-held prejudices is unlikely to create the right conditions for the big idea or a clever solution, so consider whether your perspective is simply too narrow to be of use in this particular context. If it is, bow out of the discussion or get informed quickly so that you can contribute in a helpful way.

The importance of getting feelings out in the open

Of course, you could argue that the less you know, the more useful you can be in many contexts, and this may well be true if pure objectivity is required. How often have

you heard it said that someone is “too close” to the subject to have a sensible view?

“Not to expose your true feelings to an adult seems to be instinctive from the age of seven or eight onwards.”

George Orwell

It seems that in many cultures, both national and corporate, there is something of a conspiracy or hidden rule that prevents people from being allowed to air their views without fear of recrimination. Don't open your mouth in case your boss frowns upon it! Say nothing until you are spoken to! Unfortunately, this approach is useless in business.

“If you're working on things that everyone accepts, you're not working on anything.”

Alan Snyder, American scientist

So it is perfectly healthy and natural to be sitting in a room violently disagreeing with someone, or several people. Ask *So what?* regularly. Remember, you were probably hired for your opinion so you can hardly be criticized for expressing it, and it is certainly preferable to sitting around violently *agreeing* with each other. There will be plenty of time for that later, when you actually know what you are doing, and in what direction the solution to the matter in hand is heading.

“Think for yourself, and let others enjoy the privilege of doing so too.”

Voltaire

So we want your thoughts out on the table, and that means allowing others to do the same thing too. You can't have it

all your own way! The knack is to organize your thinking so that it is clear to you, clear to everyone else, and helpful to the debate. Keep asking *So what?*

“A problem shared is a problem halved, so is your problem really yours or just half of someone else’s?”

David Brent, The Office

Directional and pointed lines of inquiry

Feelings and opinions are essential in providing direction to creative thinking, particularly in business, precisely because they are directional and pointed. When they are clearly articulated, it is often called leadership. You know the sort of thing:

Boss: *“I have a dream and it’s somewhere over that hill!”*

Staff: *“We like that dream, so we’ll go over that hill!”*

They have no more idea as to what is over the hill than the boss does, but because they like the direction, they will gladly follow. Charismatic leaders have the power to inspire.

Feelings are pointed. They cannot always be explained, but they are often inspirational in creative thinking.

“Whatever you may be sure of, be sure of this: that you are dreadfully like other people.”

James Russell Lowell

Organizing your feelings

Organized feelings: an oxymoron or a helpful idea? Many would argue that this is a contradictory notion. Surely, feelings just *are*? And don't they spill out whether you like it or not? Mmm. Not necessarily. With a little thought it is quite a simple matter to work out what your feelings are, jot them down, arrange them, edit them, and work out which ones help the subject in hand, and which ones don't. Once you have got the hang of it, you can apply exactly the same process to everybody else's feelings, so long as they are being honest, and so is the person noting them down.

“Nothing is easier than self-deceit. For what each man wishes, that he also believes to be true.”

Demosthenes

As the proponent of a feeling, you need to be quite grown-up about it too. Blurting out comments randomly might make you feel better in the very short term, but it usually causes havoc. Just take a couple of seconds to work out your point of view before it comes flying out of your mouth.

“‘Point of view’ is that quintessentially human solution to information overload, an intuitive process of reducing things to an essential relevant and manageable minimum. In a world of hyperabundant content, point of view will become the scarcest of resources.”

Paul Saffo

Also bear in mind that sometimes you have to hear yourself say something before you can actually work out whether you believe it or not. The classic case of this is during interviews.

When you are caught on the hop by a question that you haven't thought about, you will always provide some kind of answer. Sometimes it's not until later that day that you can decide whether you believe what you said or not.

"The man who sees both sides of the question is a man who sees absolutely nothing at all."

Oscar Wilde

So you need to believe your feelings completely. This helps the other person hugely too, because you can't make any progress if you keep contradicting yourself. Thought is also required if you have multiple feelings on a subject, or there are multiple subjects.

Who cares about other people's feelings?

"It is as absurd to argue men, as to torture them, into believing."

John Henry Newman

You can't force someone into believing something, nor can you blame them for having a strong point of view, otherwise you would be a hypocrite, because you presumably have one yourself. So don't try to steamroller them with your views, and don't do down their opinions. Regard the whole thing as an interesting exchange of views. Listen hard and work out the common ground.

"There is no such thing as conversation. There are intersecting monologues, that is all."

Rebecca West

Interlocking your feelings with theirs

Interlock your feelings with those of your colleagues. Only by doing this will you make any progress. Most forward motion in business is halted by stubborn behaviour and entrenched opinion. This can be resolved in a few minutes with a bit of mature thought and a clear mind. Self-employed people make quicker decisions and get things done more quickly because they sort things out in their own heads and get on with it. Corporations take twenty times longer to do this because people can't agree and don't work hard enough to air and sort out differences efficiently and rapidly (see "Corporate time moves slower than normal time", *Teach Yourself Running Your Own Business*, p. 78).

"The trouble with having an open mind, of course, is that people will insist on coming along and trying to put things in it."

Terry Pratchett

Taking your opinions and stubbornly restating them is no route forward. Intelligent people can entertain another person's view without necessarily agreeing with it. It is also worth remembering that there is essentially no right and wrong in business, just an opinion that ultimately prevails. So keep an open mind, and change it if you are confronted with a better idea.

"Minds are like parachutes; they work best when open."

Thomas Dewar

The interlocking of two sets of feelings can be viewed and expressed in many other sets of ways. It could be two different companies with different opinions on a proposed

deal. It could be the customer in relation to the company. It could be male and female contrasting views. What it essentially boils down to is the distinction between what's in it for you, and what's in it for me.

"Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and the beginning of morality."

Ian McEwan

To crystallize your thoughts, answer each of these questions in one short sentence, and write it down.

- What do I feel about this issue?
- If there are multiple issues, repeat the process for each one.
- Is there anything else?
- What does the other person feel about this issue?
- Is there anything else?

Now reduce the issues down to as few as possible. Summarize each feeling in one word if possible.

What not to say, and when not to say it

"For a marriage to have any chance, every day at least six things should go unsaid."

Jill Craigie

Do also bear in mind, that some things are better left unsaid. This does not mean that you should negate your own

feelings. Clearly, if it matters that much to you, then it must be said. But be diplomatic, rather than strident. A strong view is a strong view. It doesn't need to be blared through a megaphone at point blank range to have the desired effect. However, some feelings are simply antagonistic without contributing anything of merit. Here are some examples.

Pointless expressions of feelings

"That's utter crap."

"I hate it."

"You always say that."

Helpful, directional expressions of feelings

"I don't like it at all, but I can think of a better idea."

"I don't think that idea A works, but idea B certainly could if modified a bit."

"If we just concentrated on X, would you be satisfied?"

"Probe with a bayonet: if you meet steel, stop. If you meet mush, then push."

Lenin

Intelligent lines of inquiry reveal flaws in flabby thinking, and it is your job to find the weak points. The purpose is not to humiliate your colleague or assert your intellectual authority, but simply to work out if something is essentially nonsense. There is too much of it about, frankly. So what we are after here is the expression of feelings that offer direction. I call it pointy thinking.

The power of pointy thinking

There is no point in having a massive dust up and blurting out all sorts of feelings if no alternative direction is offered up in the process. Imagine several people doing that. There would be scores of opinions flying around, with no helpful resolution on the table for consideration. A hopeless state of affairs, in all probability leaving a trail of bruised egos and an important business issue unresolved. Does that remind you of any business meeting you have been in, I wonder?

“When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.”

African proverb

Pointy thinking aims to clarify all of this chaos. The enemies here are vagueness and hurtful expression of pure emotion. They simply don't help at all. You need to marshal your feelings, work out whether you truly believe them, and express them in simple, clear terms so that the other person can work out what your point is.

“How can 65,000 people do anything other than agree on something unspecified on an unspecified date?”

Zac Goldsmith on the Earth Summit

It may not have escaped your notice that the opposite of pointy thinking would be pointless thinking. It is also your job to make sure that you are not being so vague as to be unintelligible to the other person, nor simply digging in for the sake of it.

“It is difficult to get a man to understand an argument when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.”

Upton Sinclair

Getting the mix right

Progress is only ever defined by consensus. You only need a little bit of agreement to move forward. Don't try to agree on everything, and don't try to fix everything at once. Just pay attention to the other person's opinion, and look hard for areas of common ground. Don't keep repeating your position – look harder at theirs to achieve progress.

“The essence of liberty is not that my interests should be tolerated, but that I should tolerate yours.”

Tom Stoppard

Conceding ground to make progress

This is particularly important if your point of view is partial or only recently formed. How strong is it? How much do you really believe in it? If, privately, you can see holes in your own argument, then don't press the point. Try saying nothing, or saying that you don't know. Then everyone can move on.

“Learn to say ‘I don't know’. If used when appropriate, it will be used often.”

Donald Rumsfeld

Equally, don't give in on something just because someone else is shouting louder than everyone else, being a bully, or pulling rank. None of these actions make their opinion any more valid. There will be moments when you have to stick to your guns, and you should, so long as you have thought your feelings through comprehensively.

“You can always spot a well-informed man – his views are the same as yours.”

Ilka Chase

Stay strong on your opinion, even if your boss is vehemently disagreeing. There is no merit in simply reflecting their views because of their position. They will respect you much more if you restate your view calmly and clearly, and, so long as you are not just being stubborn for the sake of it, you will make progress together. No one likes a lily-livered individual.

“He had a whim of iron.”

Anthony Powell on John Betjeman

The difference between an instruction and a true purpose

Just because you are ordered to do something does not mean that it serves a purpose. Don't tolerate it. Of course, the army relies on blind acceptance of orders, otherwise the battlefield would be a random bunch of people wandering about doing what they fancied. But, despite all the macho literature telling you that it is, business is not war. It should be a robust exchange of opinion leading to a decent outcome, and serving a commercial purpose. Never forget it. Many a gung-ho leader has used the language of war to describe business activities – campaigns, tactics, strategy, blitzes, assaults, attacks, and of course the hideous “targeting”, which has now been turned into a highly unsatisfactory verb. Don't fall into the trap of using this lazy and pseudo-macho

language. I guarantee that it will simply increase the likelihood that you are talking poorly thought-through nonsense.

Summary of *So what?* thinking

“You have to know how to accept rejection, and reject acceptance.”

Ray Bradbury

In essence, *So what?* thinking boils down to a few simple principles:

1. Acknowledge that feelings are just as relevant as facts and control factors.
2. Get them out in the open.
3. View them as directional and pointed.
4. Organize your feelings – this is not a contradiction in terms.
5. Be honest about them, and say that you don’t know if they are too thin or unformulated.
6. Pay attention to other people’s feelings.
7. Interlock them with yours and find areas of common ground.
8. Stick to your guns if you fervently believe in something.
9. Concede ground if necessary to make progress.
10. Use the consensus to launch your initiative.

***So what?* summary**

- Consider how to use the *So what?* questions carefully.
- Work out whether they are for internal use only.

- Draw up your lists of internal and external *So what?* questions.
- Embrace the art of inquisition.
- Learn from the approach of children.
- Vent your feelings using directional and pointed lines of inquiry.
- Think about what *not* to say, and when not to say it.
- Express your feelings in a helpful, directional way.
- Consider the power of pointy thinking.
- Concede ground to make progress.
- Spot the difference between an order and a true purpose.

“It is better to have a known enemy than a forced ally.”

Napoleon

However, on the assumption that there is some basis for agreement, we can now get to grips with the *Why?* question.

Exercise: Expressing your feelings

1. Write down your own feelings on the topic in question. One is ideal, two is okay, and three is the maximum. Any more than that, and we won't be able to make sense of the resulting mess.
2. Start each feeling with "I believe..." Write each one down and read it back to yourself. If, on re-reading, you are less sure about it, then re-phrase it or throw it in the bin. Remember, no more than three.
3. Either get the other person to do exactly the same exercise from their perspective or, if you are quite clear what they think, write their opinions down facing the other way. Take the time to make sure, however, that you are not distorting or misrepresenting their views.
4. This shows you how to overlap the two sets of feelings. Some opinions may overlap, some may not. Exclude irrelevant feelings that neither of you can agree on. If at all possible, try to sum up each feeling in one word to make sorting them out easier.
5. Check the areas of overlap. In most cases, assuming reasonable people and common goals, there should be some. If there is not, then have an earnest conversation until you can find some. If, eventually, you conclude that there are none, then nothing can help you reach agreement. You will simply have to fall back on one of two old rules:
 - (a) The boss's opinion wins.
 - (b) The one nearest the mantelpiece wins (Monty Python, 1979).

