



## How do I do this?

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**“There is a depth in the question, 'How do I do this?' that is worth exploring. The question is a defense against the action. It is a leap past the question of purpose, past the question of intentions, and past the drama of responsibility. The question 'How?' – more than any other question, looks for the answer outside of us. It is an indirect expression of our doubts...”**

– Peter Block, Stewardship.

Reflecting on the things that get in the way of implementing change in our lives is a varied and fascinating exploration. Recently I have been stimulated in my musings through Peter Block's book **The Answer to How? is Yes**. I find his writings thought provoking and insightful. We experience life as creative; at times it feels as if we uncover our best answers as life happens, even giving us a sense that the “rules” are changing as we go.

This behavior flies in the face of the logic we inherited about how the world works. Most of us grew up in a world that we believed existed in a fixed and independent state with laws and principles that would make life predictable. Somehow we concluded that safety would be the by-product. Our desire for safety resurfaces in questions that indicate our fear of risk and that relinquish power to others' answers for our lives.

Developmentally, the issue of safety often appears when it is best to live life from the inside out, our answers bubbling up from there. Psychologists call the process individuation and it is critical as we grow up and take responsibility for our own decisions, learning and growing.

Peter Block cautions that when we persistently use the question ‘How?’ we are expressing our struggle between having confidence in our own capacity to live a life of purpose and yielding to the daily demands of being practical. His premise is that in today's culture, and we are members of it, we have yielded too easily to the doable, practical and popular.

In a way the question might better be, 'Are we acting on what really matters to us?' or 'What is worth doing?' or 'Are we acting on our beliefs, our core values?'

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Do we find ourselves comfortable living in the tension of not knowing and working on it rather than limiting ourselves to engaging in what we know will work? To be creative we must live in that tension; some describe it as being at the border between “learning and panic” (Comfort Zone Model).

Here are some of the 'How' questions that so easily pop up and Peter Block's thoughts on them. Wrestle with them for a while.

**How do you do it?** This is a basic question and used in many situations. While the question is often innocent, asking it means I'm taking the position that others know. The question carries the belief that the answer is right around the corner and implies that there is only one “right” answer. It ignores the fact that most important questions have many right answers. Often the process is too quick and in the rush to a How answer, we're running the risk of skipping the profound question: Is it worth doing?

**How long will it take?** While an important question, this question makes its own statement: 'If it takes too long, the answer is probably no.' It implies that change or improvement needs to happen quickly, the faster the better. But re-mem-

ber that classic song from the musical *Porgy and Bess*– “It Ain't Necessarily So.”

**How much does it cost?** This can carry the message of always wanting to do it for less, no matter how rich we are. For the most part it is never efficient or inexpensive to act on what we value.

**How do you get those people to change?** This really is a power question: “those people” need to change for the good of the organization, for their own good, for the good of family, for the sake of the next generation, for the sake of society. In all of the above, we hinge our desired future on someone else's transformation. No one will change as a result of our desires; they will often resist due to the potentially coercive aspect of the interaction. When caught in this dilemma we might better ask, “What is the transformation in me that is required right now?” This then becomes a question of intention and will and not of technology or methodology.

**How can we measure it?** This can be making the statement that if it cannot be measured it doesn't exist. The question should be “What is its use - control, oversight or learning?” A better question may be, “What measurement would have meaning to me?”

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How have other people done it successfully? While this is a reasonable question, within limits, it can become a dangerous question when it limits our creativity or our attempt, if it has not heretofore been proven in action. “The value of another’s experience,” Block writes, “is to give us hope, not to tell us how or whether to proceed.”

The price of practicality has a way of deflecting us from our deeper values. The answer to “How?” is saying, “Yes!” Yes becomes a symbol of our commitment to meaningful change personally and professionally. Yes asks us the right questions about purpose, connection, deeper philosophical inquiry, working and living in balance. The goal is to balance a life that works with a life that counts; sound vaguely familiar? Sometimes when something works we forget to challenge ourselves with the deeper question: “Does it matter?”

While reflecting and writing this article I thought a lot about Dr. Pankey and his Philosophy of Dental Practice Seminars. The first page of the original manual was all about Commitment, with statements like: “Be a 100%er; there is so little competition at the top!” and Napoleon Hill’s quote, “Whatever you want, oh discontented man (woman), step up, pay

the price, and take it.” In a way, they were saying the answer to our question “How?” is “Yes!” First commit, prior to knowing all the answers – our answers, and we will discover them if we are gentle on ourselves and give ourselves a gift of tolerance for our own ambiguity.

Dr. Pankey would always refer to his system of thought as “A Philosophy of Dental Practice.” He did this in the hope, I believe, that each of us would capture the ancient philosophical concepts that lay within, between and foundational to his presentations. The greater hope was that personal tension created within us would act as the spark to make those concepts our own.

Think about it and discover the wisdom within his basic conceptual framework; remember that the understanding is in the “doing.” We must first make the commitment to stay in our personal tension, giving ourselves the gift of ambiguity tolerance, as we listen for and discover within our own answers to our own questions.

**The Challenge is to** become a creative question-asker, one that facilitates conversations from the “inside out” and the “outside in,” leading to even greater discoveries of our deeply held intents and

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what matters most to us. Then, “A Philosophy of Dental Practice” begets another “Philosophy of Dental Practice” – “Your Philosophy.” This will have common ancient historical roots, while at the same time be grounded in what matters most to you and brings you meaning.

Listen for the beat; the beat goes on!

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