"Why, What, How" Framework of Influence

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Ginny was a kind caring mother, but unable to persuade her teenage son not to associate with friends who were bad influences on him. Pete was a highly-regarded subject matter expert in his field, but struggled to convince people to adopt his ideas. Susan was promoted into management, but because she lacked the ability to motivate others, she had to rely on her positional authority to get people to perform …. which didn't go well for her. What is the core issue underlying these three scenarios? People's inability to gain buy-in …. aka people's inability to influence.

You might think of influencing as manipulating or convincing. It is not. Yes, influencing can be used for dishonorable intentions, but it is more typically used for good. When we try to help people such as in improving a relationship or adopting a better approach, the intent of our influence is honorable. It is positive and beneficial. This type of influence can be the difference between success and failure, being happy or miserable, and even life or death.

Friends offer each other advice to navigate difficult situations. Parents talk to their kids to guide their development. Bosses coach their employees. Coworkers give each other feedback. Parents, teachers, doctors, pastors, counselors, managers, family members, friends, consultants, sales people, and virtually everyone in any position of influence strive to help others and their effectiveness depends on their ability to influence.

Of course, not all communication is done with the intent to influence. When you are sharing stories with friends, talking about your day with your spouse, or giving an update to your employees, you aren't usually trying to influence them. You don't have a desired outcome for which you are hoping to gain their support. You aren't trying to help them solve a problem or achieve something. You are simply having a conversation, informing, or getting work done.

However, much of our communication is done with the intent to influence. Parents try to get their kids to do their homework, behave, and be safe. Bosses exhort and challenge employees to develop and achieve more. Doctors, coaches, counselors, and teachers are paid to help people learn, develop, and change. If you think about how much communication you do with the intent to influence, you might be surprised. Leaders in the workplace can spend more than 90 percent of their time communicating with the intent to influence.

Executive Summary

How do people who are effective at influencing do it? What are the best practices of effective persuasion? When communicating with the intent to influence, there are three basics that great influencers keep in mind:

1. **Start with the "why."** Before talking about solutions, first gain buy-in for the problem, need, or opportunity to be addressed. Answer the first questions that people generally have: "Why is this important?", "Why should I care?", and "What is the impact of this on me?" Always start with the "why" because people don't typically agree to do something if they don't first believe in the problem, need, or opportunity being addressed.

2. **Discuss and agree on the “what.”** After securing buy-in for the problem, need, or opportunity, turn your attention to the solution. Facilitate the brainstorming and evaluation of alternatives based on agreed-upon criteria. Research and assess the advantages, disadvantages, and risks of the viable options. Select and reach agreement on the solution(s) that best solve the problem, fulfill the need, or leverage the opportunity.

3. **Finish with the “how.”** With agreement on the solution, turn attention to how the solution will be implemented. Since many solutions require changes in thinking and behaving, give considerable emphasis to how mindsets will be shifted, behaviors will be learned, progress will be tracked, and desired results will be achieved. Agee on priorities, budgets, actions, timelines, roles, responsibilities, resources, and the definition of “done.”

In addition to using the why, what, and how, framework, there are three preceding principles to which great influencers give their attention – knowing who to influence, building good relationships, and being credible.

Know who to influence. Know your audience. If you are striving to help someone change their behavior, the target of your influence might be obvious. Or not. Maybe your influence is better given to someone else who is influential in that person’s life. For example, if your adult son needs to change in some way, might your influence be better applied to his spouse? Or best friend? Or in the case of a sales person selling to a large enterprise, who is the buyer to be targeted? The procurement representative, end-user, department manager, senior executive who owns the budget, or is the decision being made by a committee? Know who you need to influence.

Build relationships. Your efforts will be much more welcome and effective when you show you care and have good relationships with the people you aspire to influence. As the cliché goes, people don’t care what you know until they know you care. Your children, employees, friends, clients, business prospects, and family members will be more open to your ideas and eager to receive your advice if they already know and like you. And when you have relationships, you know people better and can personalize your influence. Build relationships with people to the extent you can.

Be credible. You will only be influential to the extent you are credible. People might like you, but if they don’t respect your knowledge or experience, they won’t agree with you. They won’t trust you. They won’t give your opinion much validity. Know your subject matter. Have direct experience in whatever topic you are expecting others to place their belief.

The “Why, What, How” Framework Explained

What happens when you try to convince someone to try a new approach without first establishing the reason for trying the new approach? Or when you try to sell a new product without establishing the benefits the product will provide? Or ask someone to stop doing something without first gaining agreement that whatever they are doing isn’t working very well? If you’re like most people, your attempts fail. Your audience has little interest in what you are saying or selling.

When you start a conversation—with the intent to influence—with the solution (aka the “what”) rather than the problem (aka the “why”), you are not likely to be very effective. Your focus on the solution has no context. There is no known problem being solved. There is no agreed upon opportunity or need for the solution. The reason hasn’t yet been established.

At best, when you start a conversation with a solution to a problem, need, or opportunity without establishing the problem, need, or opportunity first, you confuse people. Even more likely, you do the opposite of what you had hoped. You turn people off. You make it easy for them to ignore you. If you are selling something, you make it easy for people to say "no." Perhaps most problematic, you lose people's respect. You look foolish. If you do it repeatedly, you lose future opportunities to help people and make a positive difference.

You may be thinking how obvious it is to start with the why, but hold on. Recognize that most people have a tendency to start with the what. If you're like most people, you do it too. The reason is that you have processed the why in your head many times and are now focused on the solution. You may have even been thinking about how to solve a problem for months and now that you have conceived a solution, so you can't wait to share the solution and get going with its implementation. For example, if you've ever started a conversation with "I have a great idea. I think we need to [fill in the blank]," you started with the what instead of the why. If you've ever started an email or a meeting with something like "Hi everyone. I would like for you to [fill in the blank]," you started with the what.

To effectively influence people, in contrast to starting a conversation with what to do, start with why your audience should listen. Start with why someone should care about the topic you are about to discuss. Talk first about the impact the problem or opportunity has on them and others. Provide background and context that properly frames the topic before getting into the details of what you want someone to do. Help them understand, appreciate, and want to take action on the topic.

After you have discussed and gained sufficient buy-in for the problem, need, or opportunity being addressed, you are ready to move from the why to the what. If you did a good job of communicating the why, your audience now wants to solve the problem, address the need, or leverage the opportunity. They are eager to talk about solutions. They may even be putting pressure on you to help *them* solve the problem. They are so bought-in that they are now motivated if not inspired to take action.

After securing buy-in for the why, start the what part of your conversation. Focus on finding the most suitable solution to the problem. Use brainstorming, testing, proto-typing, or whatever means are appropriate to identify and gain agreement on the solution. Gain consensus on the what before turning your attention to implementing the solution (aka the "how"). Proceeding without agreement on the solution is as ineffective as not agreeing on the problem. If you were to move on to implementing the solution, you would be doing so without support. In many cases, you would be doing so with opposition. People don't want to implement something they've not yet bought in or agreed to.

Securing the what before the how probably seems as obvious as securing the why before the what, but again, be careful. How often do people start conversations with how to do something? Often. If you've ever given someone your favorite recipe, you started with the how. If you've ever talked to someone about how to fix something they didn't think was broken, you started with the how.

Here is a deeper description of each element of the why, what, and how framework to help you put each element into practice:

The "Why"

The goal of the "why" is to create buy-in and an eagerness to solve a problem, address a need, or leverage an opportunity. One of the best ways to do this is to create discomfort with the status quo.

Like in a good movie, make the audience uncomfortable with a situation before bringing in the hero to overcome it. Bring a problem to life in such a meaningful way that ignoring it becomes unthinkable.

Fundamentally, you have two choices when presenting the why. Either present something as a problem to solve or an opportunity to leverage. The topic is the same, you either present it as a negative to be overcome or a positive to be achieved. Depending on the topic, either can be appropriate, but neuroscience finds that avoiding a loss is more motivating to most people than achieving something new. In other words, presenting a problem that points out a potential loss can be more impactful than presenting an opportunity to gain something new. An example of this for some people would be to focus them on performing better in their current job to avoid losing it and their house as well, in contrast to getting a new job and buying a new house.

An important part of capturing people's attention as part of the why is making it personal. Not only raise people's general awareness of an issue, but show how it impacts them. Do this by describing how solving the problem will benefit them as well as the causes in which they are interested. Or describe how not solving the problem will impact them. Emphasize how a problem impacts their finances, reputation, health, or relationships. At work, you might describe how a problem negatively impacts their company, their clients, their team, and them individually.

Making the why clear requires background information. If leading a meeting to solve a problem at work, you might start with the problem statement to be solved and then talk about how the problem became a problem. "Ladies and gentlemen, I called this meeting because we have a problem. The problem is [problem statement]. Let me tell you how we got here ….."

Another important aspect of explaining the impact of a problem is talking about how it is hindering progress toward a desired future. For a couple having relationship issues, it might be pointing out how a behavior is inhibiting the amazing relationship they both agreed to have and still hope to have in the future. For an irresponsible teenager, it might be pointing out the future impact of their bad behaviors on their future profession or college options.

Effective communicators appeal to people's logic as well as their emotions as they gain buy-in for the why. To use the popular cliché, they appeal to people's head and heart. To appeal to people's logic, provide facts, data, and statistics. Show graphs, charts, or results of studies on whatever point you are trying to make. For a company with the problem of declining sales, appealing to people's logic might be as simple as showing the year-over-year decline in sales. For someone with unhealthy lifestyle habits, showing a graph of life longevity by lifestyle could make a strong impression.

To appeal to people's emotions, effective communicators share stories and examples. For example (pun intended), after showing a bar graph of declining sales, you might talk about customers who started buying from your competition. In addition to stories and examples, you might show pictures or videos to capture your audience's emotion and imagination. For example, if talking with a teenager who needs to stop speeding in their car, a parent might show a picture of someone recovering from an automobile accident in a hospital bed. Of course, another way to gain buy-in from a teenager in this example would be to talk about the consequences (e.g. impact) of speeding such as losing their driving privilege.

Providing data, graphs, statistics, examples, and customer testimonials make a problem and its consequences real. They bring your point to life and make it believable. Rather than asking your audience to simply agree with your perspective, you are providing proof. You are moving the problem from an opinion to a reality. You are giving people the justification on which to agree with you.

Popular psychology characterizes people’s desire for logic as being left-brained. People’s desire for feelings is characterized as being right brained. Neuroscience finds that these preferences aren’t that simple. The right and left hemispheres of our brains share responsibilities. They are both involved in taking in information and making decisions. Nonetheless, shown below is a graphic of the typical elements most associated with each hemisphere. Use as many of these elements as needed to secure people’s buy-in for the problem, need, or opportunity you are communicating.

Left:

- Logic
- Reasoning
- Facts
- Statistics
- Data
- Math
- Science
- Analysis
- Words
- Details
- “The Mind”

Right:

- Emotion
- Intuition
- Big Picture
- Relationships
- Art
- Music
- Beauty
- Stories, Examples
- Images, Video
- Quotes
- “The Heart”

When your intent to influence involves helping someone with a behavior change, the why includes creating self-awareness. When someone needs to change in some way, the start of change for them is having self-awareness of the need to change. People don’t generally change unless they are aware of the need to change. The why then includes observations of their undesirable attitudes, levels of effort, behaviors, overall underperformance, or lack of ability. After giving your observations and discussing them, you would close out the why by gaining agreement with the person on their need to improve or learn in whatever area(s) needed.

As with the next two steps in the why, what, how framework, don’t leave that which you have agreed to chance. Document it. Text it, email it, or record it in a shared document. This helps ensure that what was said is accurate, clear, and agreed to by everyone involved. It prevents the all-too-common and undesirable phrase: “That wasn’t my understanding of what we agreed to.” Documenting the why also helps keep everyone focused on the problem that was agreed on. It helps prevent scope creep that happens when the original problem morphs over time to the point that the corresponding solution doesn’t properly address the original problem.

To state the obvious, the skill you most need to articulate the why is your ability to communicate. Your ability to communicate with clarity and conviction is key to convincing people that a problem is worth working on or not. As you’ll see in the next two sections, the skill most needed for the “what” and the “how” are different. Being articulate is always helpful, but other skills are needed too.

The “What”

Once you have confirmed buy-in for a problem to be solved, a need to be fulfilled, or an opportunity to be leveraged, you are ready to talk about solutions. But be cautious. Don’t rush into talking about solutions. If your audience isn’t bought into the why, you are not ready to discuss the what. You’re not ready to talk about solutions. If, for example, your best friend doesn’t think they are causing an issue in a relationship, don’t start offering advice or brainstorming solutions. They don’t yet think they have an issue. If people don’t think there is a problem, trying to get them to adopt a solution is foolish. It is a waste of time at best. Worse, it will frustrate them and you both. Even worse, it will harm your friendship.

If you haven’t secured the buy-in that a problem is worth solving, go back to the why. Come at the problem from another angle. If you tried emphasizing why someone’s overeating is making them less attractive, talk about how overeating is impacting their energy level. Talk about their increased likelihood of health issues. Talk about how obesity will prevent them from enjoying physical recreation with their friends and family. Communicating multiple angles might take several conversations or presentations. You might need to offer multiple perspectives to fully frame the problem to be solved and get your audience to agree to solving it.

Assuming you have gained buy-in to solve a problem, fulfill a need, or leverage an opportunity, you are ready to talk about “what” to do about it. At this point, you might simply ask your audience “what do you think would best solve this problem?” Or “what do you think should be done?” Or if you are making a presentation to your boss, you might talk about the possible solution alternatives that you and your team have already brainstormed. Most bosses don’t want you to just present a problem. They also want you to give thought to how to solve it. They want to know that you’ve done your research and have ideas on how to solve the problem. And that you’ve assessed not just one solution, but all that are relevant.

When communicating the what, whether presenting to your boss or anyone, be careful not to start by simply suggesting a pre-determined solution. If you expect people to take action, you want to get their handprints on the solution. You want to give them a voice in defining the solution. You want to make them feel consulted and part of the solution. So, telling your teenager or employee what to do isn’t effective. Telling removes their participation and feeling of contribution to the solution.

Instead of telling people what to do, ask questions. Be open minded and seek their ideas. As in effective selling, you will be much more effective by brainstorming potential solutions rather than simply telling the prospect about the one solution you want to offer. To be trusted as a sales person, you would review options beyond the product you are trying to sell. When you think like your customers and consider the alternatives available to them from their perspective, you become a trusted advisor instead of a salesperson. You become more effective.

Whether brainstorming solutions in real-time or presenting the results of your previous brainstorming, discussing multiple solutions has many benefits. It shows you considered different alternatives …. which by the way should always including doing nothing. If, for example, you hope to close a sale, you are much more likely to do so after comparing your product to other available alternatives which includes continuing to use your current product. If you don’t compare alternatives to doing nothing, you are probably missing the most likely alternative—doing nothing. For example, rather than selecting diet A or diet B, people are most likely to pick neither so don’t leave doing nothing out of the list of possible solutions that you will be comparing.

From a psychological standpoint, you are also more likely to get a "yes" decision on a solution when you review alternatives. In contrast, when you simply ask someone to agree to one solution, you are making it easy and likely for them to reject your recommendation. Instead, when you review multiple alternatives, you involve people in the comparison process. You educate them on the advantages and disadvantages which makes them more comfortable in making a "yes" decision.

Reviewing options accomplishes another powerful objective. It not only involves people; it allows you make subtle points. You point out differences and benefits. If there are evaluation criteria you believe are important, reviewing alternatives gives you the opportunity to suggest the evaluation criteria. For example, you might say something like "this solution costs less over its lifetime", "this solution is easier to maintain", or "this solution is the least risky to implement." By making these statements you are implicitly establishing the criteria on which you think the alternatives should be evaluated.

Giving attention to the evaluation criteria to be used in selecting the alternative is extremely important. If you've ever been in a meeting where everyone is defending their position or holding on to their preferred solution, you know the power of evaluation criteria. Unless you first agree to the evaluation criteria to be used, you will likely find everyone using different criteria, therefore making a consensus virtually impossible.

For example, if you and your mate are evaluating the purchase of a new automobile, if you don't first agree on the criteria you are looking for, you will probably struggle to agree on what to buy. Do you care most about fuel efficiency, safety, utility, purchase price, ongoing maintenance, or prestige? If you don't agree on the criteria, you probably won't agree on which car to buy. The same is true for most any decision. There are many different criteria and if you don't agree to them before selecting a solution, you'll either find it very difficult to agree on a solution, or your audience will probably want to revisit the decision at a later time.

Another element of the what could include testing a potential solution. Rather than agreeing to do something permanent or buy something, you might agree to first try it out. If you and your audience aren't sure if a solution will solve the problem or provide the expected benefits, do it on a small scale. Try it in a practice setting instead of a production setting. Use it for a couple of weeks before making a full-time commitment. Or build a prototype before going into full production.

Ultimately, the goal of the what part of your discussion is to reach agreement on the solution to be implemented. The skills most important in doing this are facilitation, problem solving, and decision making. People who gain consensus on a solution are skilled in facilitating brainstorming, funneling ideas down to a viable few, comparing alternatives against agreed-upon criteria, and selecting the alternative that best meets the needs.

As with the need to confirm the why before discussing the what, confirm the what before discussing the how. Only after people agree to a solution should you discuss the next steps needed to implement the solution. If you are in a business meeting, only after going around the proverbial meeting table and confirming everyone can live with and support the decision being made, should you start talking about how to implement the solution.

The "How"

Once you have agreement on what will be implemented, the last step of the why, what, how framework is discussing the details of implementation. Implementing a solution might be as simple as just agreeing to a new approach, but implementing something new is rarely that simple, especially if it involves a change in people’s behavior. Change is hard. You can secure people’s buy-in for the need to change, you can reach agreement on what they need to do different, and then nothing happens. Without a plan to implement and sustain a change, change rarely happens.

Studies find over two-thirds of business initiatives fail to achieve their intended results. In most company’s historical record, there is a graveyard of failed projects. Without attention to the details of how a solution will be implemented, the ultimate outcome is left to chance. In contrast, when you give the how sufficient attention, the likelihood of success goes way up.

Transitioning from the what to the how is moving from knowing to doing. It is the first step in crossing the chasm from knowing what to do to actually doing it. If you are like most people, this isn’t a trivial transition. How many times have you or others known what to do but haven’t done it? How many times have you heard people say “Yes, I know I need to do that. I’ve just not done it yet”? The how is extremely important to ensuring that what has been agreed upon is actually implemented.

Key elements of the how include who, where, and when. In the how discussion, define roles and responsibilities. Discuss and agree on the timeline of key milestones. Review and secure any resources that are needed including information, tools, equipment, or facilities. Assess the impact on and need for changes in other elements of the ecosystem being impacted. In business, for example, many changes in one element like a process change require changes to other elements like information technology systems, people skills, measurements, or employee incentives.

The how also includes any approvals needed such as budget allocations or how something will be funded or paid for. It includes anticipating obstacles. It includes thinking through contingency plans should initial assumptions change.

Perhaps most importantly, the how should include agreement on how progress will be tracked. If you’ve ever been in a business meeting where someone says “Didn’t we agree to [fill in the blank]? What is the status of doing that?”, you know what happens when you don’t agree on how progress will be tracked. Often times nothing happens.

Merely assuming that something will be done, is being done, or that something is being done properly is naïve. People can have the best intentions when agreeing to do something, but then “stuff happens.” So, most people need accountability to help stay focused through their distractions. They need accountability to remain motivated to overcome their obstacles. Agreeing on how to track progress provides focus, motivation, and a mechanism to hold people accountable.

Compare these two scenarios: After agreeing with your best friend on how she will stop enabling the bad behaviors she has been enabling at home for years, you have two options. You could leave the conversation saying something like “keep me posted on how it is going.” This might be okay in some situations, but it doesn’t hold your friend accountable. The second option would be saying something more specific like “let’s plan to talk for a few minutes every Tuesday night to see how you are doing.” This option provides accountability.

Another importance part of the how is documenting the implementation plan including roles, responsibilities, milestones, tasks, and due dates. Having a documented implementation plan ensures everyone involved is aligned and in agreement on how a solution will be implemented. A documented plan provides the reference that helps hold people accountable. A documented plan makes it easy for everyone involved to know how their contributions fit in the overall plan.

Of course, if the implementation of a solution only involves one person, a documented plan isn’t as important. But even then, despite not having multiple people to coordinate, a documented plan helps people think through what they need to do and helps them be accountable.

The most important skills you need to have in the how are planning and coaching. When you are leading people through the how part of your communication, you are primarily using your planning and coaching skills. You are helping craft a plan and when in a leadership position, you are also guiding, inquiring, and coaching them in turning the agreed upon solution into action.

Delegation

Not only does the why, what, how framework guide people through the process of communicating with the intent to influence, it provides a framework for delegation for managers, parents, and others in positions that involve delegating to others.

As with communicating with the intent to influence, the best practice when delegating is to start with the why. Describe the big picture such as the problem to solve, opportunity to leverage, need to fulfill, or desired outcome to achieve. Even if you are delegating a small task rather than the ultimate desired outcome, people like to know what the task is ultimately trying to accomplish. Most people want context to what they are doing. Context gives their work more meaning as well as allows them to contribute more value. For example, by knowing the desired outcome, a person might see an opportunity to improve their task in a way that contributes value to other tasks.

After letting people know the why, turn your attention to the what. This is where you start the transition of responsibility to the people you are empowering. Like a runner in a relay race, this is where you hand off the baton to the next runner. Achieve this transition by getting them involved in crafting the solution. Ask for their input. Find ways to incorporate their ideas so they feel consulted and valued. People are much more likely to take ownership for something they helped conceive than for something they were merely told to do.

After being a facilitator of the solution, turn your attention to the how and transition your role once more. You will now become the coach. Get off of the proverbial playing field and move to the sideline. You are still involved, but no longer as a player. You have delegated the implementation to others. This becomes apparent to others as you ask them to draft the implementation plan. You might say something like: “Now that we’ve agreed on the solution to implement, please draft an implementation plan for us to review and confirm.”

By delegating the how, you set a clear expectation that they are being empowered and will now be the owners. You are going to be involved, but in a different role. The importance of making people feel like owners can’t be overstated. When people are empowered and feel ownership for their responsibilities, they put in more discretionary effort, give more attention to quality, and are more likely to complete their work as requested. Think for a moment about the difference between someone who rents their home versus owns their home. Renters rarely give the attention and level of care to a rental home that they give their own home. Great delegators strive to make those to whom they delegate feel like owners.

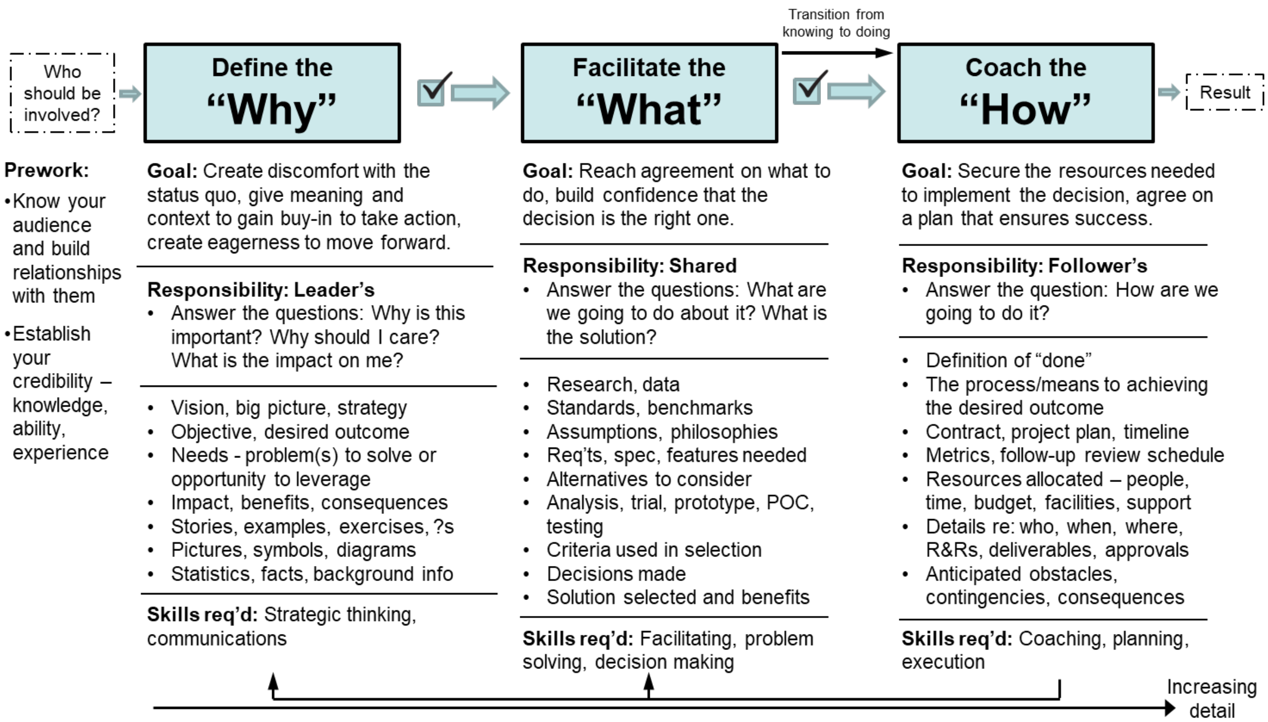
As part of the implementation plan, discuss and agree on how progress will be tracked so as work is being done, you can use the implementation plan to track progress. Tracking progress might be in the form of a regular cadence of meetings or simply providing occasional updates. The key is that you stay informed so you can help overcome obstacles, offer encouragement, provide course correction, and help maintain accountability.

After reviewing and revising the implementation plan with whomever you are delegating to, approve it and then the real work starts.

Summary

As you now know, the journey from discussing the why to the what to the how involves getting into increasing levels of detail. The why is generally a high-level discussion focused on the big picture of problems, opportunities, and the vision of a better future. The what gets into more detail as solutions are conceived and agreed upon. Then, the how gets into deeper detail as the implementation plan is crafted.

Listed below is a flowchart of the why, what, how framework including best practices for your reference. When used in the context of delegation, note the roles of the delegator listed in the top of the three boxes.



Best of luck in applying the why, what, how framework.

PDF version of this article:
https://alpinelink.com/docs/why_what_how_framework_of_influence.pdf.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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