

As a reflective writing from her journey as a OD practitioner, **Jacqueline Wong** shares her insights from Peter Block's book "The Answer to How is Yes!". The central message is about making the personal choice to commit, rather than waiting and hoping for the next "right thing" come along.



## The Answer to "How" is "Yes!" ~ Peter Block

By Jacqueline Wong

I once heard a parable from a former Head Civil Service, Lim Siong Guan, during a leadership forum. The story has it that a Prime Minister once visited the Sinai desert project – it was an exciting experiment on how the Sinai desert could be turned into a place to rear poultry and grow vegetables.

The PM commended the host of the project after visiting the place, saying "This is great, when you succeed, you can bring the people here", as in they can then populate the place and have enough food produce to sustain people. The host, however, gave an answer that surprised the visitor. He said "No Sir, with all due respect, you are wrong. When we

bring the people here, we will succeed."

The Sinai project leader knew something subtle but profoundly different: if they had begun by asking the question "How do we succeed" in the first place, they might never get there. Instead, they needed to ask "Who will share this vision, care enough about it, and would choose to do it?", success will then come as a natural by-product.

Behind any seemingly impossible pursuit that was realized in history, we would find a story of faith, goodwill and hard work of the people involved. However, first of all, it required the willingness to tolerate the ambiguity of not knowing how it could be

done and whether results would be measurable or predictable in the first place. "*When we bring the people here, we will succeed.*"

### How? is the Wrong Question

The questions we ask would determine the results we get. Peter Block in his book, "*The Answer to How is Yes*" brought to light the importance of getting the question right in the first place.

His premise was that we as members of a performance oriented culture, have yielded too easily to what is doable, practical and popular, and in the process, we have sacrificed the pursuit of what matters most.

## “When we bring the people here, we will succeed.”

We often avoid the question of whether something is worth doing by going straight to the question “How do we do it?”. He added that in fact, when we believe that something is definitely *not worth* doing, we are particularly eager to start asking How?

Those of us who are bosses have to bear part of the blame in perpetuating a culture that values answers over questions. After all, we all recall a time when we were told by our bosses “Don’t just tell me what is the problem, give me the solution!”

This is not to dismiss the value of pragmatism and of giving priority to what works. Rather it is a warning that by moving too quickly into the “how” during times that require unprecedented solutions, we are setting limits on ourselves to do only what we know how to do today, what is practicable from known answers of the past. Instead, we need to clarify if something is truly worthy of commitment, and if so, persisting long enough to find new and innovative solutions to new challenges.

The big assumption behind any “How?” question is the belief that we can find the right answer, and that it is probably out there somewhere – what we lack is the one right tool, the one right methodology, policy or technical solution. We are mechanics who cannot find the right wrench and it must be out there somewhere and we’re just not looking hard enough. The value we place on utility is so strong that our identity and measure of success is fundamentally based on “getting things done” versus truly resolving the issues at the roots.

### Chasing the Latest Fads

As a result, organizations are constantly in a frenetic search for the next best initiative, the next best “tool”, the next best management guru that might just be the antidote



“If something has no immediate utility, if it does not work, we consider that a limitation. In fact, talk, dreams, reflections, feelings and other aspects of who we are as humans are considered lost production in many organizations.”

Peter Block

to all our problems. The addiction to the tool, rather than the purpose, lulls people into what Timothy Gallwey in his book “The Inner Game of Work” calls a temporary state of “performance momentum” a tunnel of action and reaction, or a sense of comfort that “we are at least doing something”.

As a somewhat futile attempt to change old habits, I once had a colleague with a sign on his desk that said “Don’t Just Do Something, Sit There!” The valuing of action over contemplation has led us to an era of quick fix. As Einstein once said, “the perfection of means and confusion of ends seem to characterise our age.”

When you ask people why are they are doing what they are doing, you would seldom hear that the end game is to get an award or achieve a target. At the core of it, people will tell you that they are doing everything in service of their customers, patients, students, and members, in essence to contribute towards a mission larger than themselves. There is a common desire to improve life for future generations, to create a better solution, build a successful enterprise or institution. External rewards can only serve as symbols of

recognition, but are seldom sufficient to inspire discretionary effort from employees. When our intrinsic desires are substituted with external rewards, the side effect is that winning becomes more important than knowing why we were in the game in the first place. An overemphasis on external targets and rewards eventually replace the innate desires of people in institutions to create, contribute and add value.

**“If we could agree that for six months we would not ask How?, something in our lives, our institutions, and our culture might shift for the better. It would force us to engage in conversations about why we do what we do, as individuals and as institutions. It would create the space for longer discussions about purpose, about what is worth doing. It would refocus our attention on deciding what is the right question, rather than what is the right answer.” Peter Block**

# Reframing Questions From “How” to “Yes”

## What Matters Most?

If asking “How” is not getting us the result we desire, Peter suggests that perhaps it is time to start asking some different questions. “Yes!” questions are questions that help us get to the core of our purpose, and bring us closer to the possibility of more meaningful and sustainable change. The alternative to asking “How?” is saying “Yes!”. Appended here is a table of How? Questions reframed into Yes! Questions.

THE “HOW?” QUESTIONS:	THE “YES!” QUESTIONS:
How do you do it?	What refusal have I been postponing? - Do I know how to say “No” to what is not core instead of saying yes to everything and going straight into action
How long will it take?	What commitment am I willing to make?
How much does it cost?	What is the price I am willing to pay?
How do you get those people to Change?	What is my contribution to the problem I am concerned with? - Rather than seeing the “enemy is out there”, how might I be contributing to it in some ways, or even colluding with it silently by not surfacing my concerns?
How do we measure it?	What is the crossroad at which I find myself in my life/ work?”
How have other people done it successfully?	What do we want to create together?
How to attract the right people to join our organization?	What would make this an organization that is truly worthy of people’s commitment?

We pursue what matters independently of how well we can measure it. The crossroad question, for example, makes us pause to reconsider What Matters Most to us. No vision or innovation can be “proven” in the beginning before we even begin our journey in exploring and experimenting. Similarly, it has been futile trying to demonstrate that the world is round at the time of Aristotle, but it didn’t stop explorers from challenging that assumption.

## Let’s Get Real

Only when people can reach out to speak to each other about what really matters that real change can happen. In workshops, we often get this question from well-meaning participants – “how do we transfer this back in the “Real World”? We sometimes return the question by asking “How many of you feel you have been more *real* here in the workshop than you are back at work?”.

On the average, seven out of ten would feel they are much more prepared to surface their innermost thoughts, concerns and discuss the “undiscussables” in the workshops. Think about the loss this must translate to for the organization! What impact do we have, as leaders, on whether people perceive it as safe (or not safe) to share what they believe are most important? How open are we to listening to their “Yes”, even though the How? is not yet formulated?

**Intimacy is the capacity to engage with others in the most fundamental way, not because of the position they hold and what we need from them, but simply as a respect for their innate worth.**

## Reclaiming Idealism, Depth and Engagement

Peter’s book calls our attention to the tradeoffs we have made in the name of practicality and expediency, and offers a way for us to redirect our way of life to be motivated by not what works, but by things that truly matter. He advocated for the reclaiming of three qualities - *idealism, intimacy, depth and engagement*.

Fixation with what works has relegated idealism to a cold room. There is also very little room for intimacy, depth and engagement in modern organisations. Social media has reduced distances but has also become a convenient replacement for spend

Source: Adapted from Chapter 2, “Yes is the right question”, Pages 27 – 39.

**“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

-ing time to build deeper and more lasting relationships in-person. In exchange for the promise of greater efficiency and time, we have also traded off our most primal means of connecting with people. After a while, colleagues become merely people we perform transactions with, means to get the job done. We know very little who our neighbours are at work beyond the job titles they hold, and even less about their other interests, concerns and family situations.

One of the best illustrations of these qualities that Peter Block described came from a story I came across in the book *Deep Change*, by Robert Quinn:

“I remember one executive with a large company that had never downsized. Suddenly, the company announced the need for such a reduction. This man was asked to inform number of people, his close associates and friends, that they no longer had jobs. This painful task was barely completed when it was announced that another downsizing was necessary, and the process was repeated. This was followed by a third reduction. The psychological impact was overwhelming, and the surviving staff members were nearly immobilized.

This man described his own terror when we went home at night, looked at his children, and wondered what it would mean if he could not pay for their education or if he could not maintain his home. He wondered about his own market value. He had started out as an engineer, but now he was a manager – a

specialist in the bureaucratic culture of his own particular company. In a world where many mid-level people were eliminated, he feared he was useless. He felt betrayed and angry. He, like his colleagues, could now barely function at work. As a result, the company’s performance fell, accelerating the entire vicious cycle. After months of gut-wrenching agony, this man could take no more. He began to ask himself who he really was and what he really value. He talked to his wife about these issues. Did he have an identity separate from the organization? Could they live on half his income if he switched jobs?

He was surprised and delighted to discover that the answer to both questions was **yes**. Answering these questions had a freeing effect. He felt personally empowered. He stopped worrying about the dangers of change and how he was being seen by the organization. He began to ask himself what was needed in the present. He saw his immobilized colleagues and realized that he needed to do something to empower them.

He designed a new role for himself. He carefully selected people and invited them into meetings and asked them what they wanted the company to look like in ten years. Initially they were startled by his question, but gradually they joined in the process of designing the company’s future. His sense of empowerment spread to others. Gradually, things began to

improve. In reflecting on the entire experience, the man told me he had a n entirely new outlook on the concept of leadership. He talked about a paradox. He claimed that although he now acted much more independently, he cared more about the organisation and was therefore twice as valuable.

This man had successfully negotiated the process of deep change. Because he was more internally driven, he was able to take part in the creation of his external world. He was no longer an externally determined response to his environment. He became more empowered and empowering. He was more capable a leader under conditions of continuous change. He was a more organic employee.” [Excerpt from book: *Deep Change – Discovering the Leader Within*, Robert Quinn, Page 7.]

**“Each time we try to act on an answer to the question How?, we will fail because, first, the question wasn’t the right question, and second, the answer usually is a product of someone else’s experience or past experiences, not our own. It is difficult to act our another person’s answers, regardless of the amount of goodwill with which it is offered.” Peter Block**

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