

The Answer to How is Yes

Peter Block

A beautiful, intriguing, thought-provoking book entitled *The Answer to How is Yes*, authored by Peter Block, and published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., will get you thinking about the way you carry out your life. That is, Block offers us a new way of thinking about our actions that helps free us from being controlled by the bombardment of messages about how we should live and act. He shows how our obsession with tools and techniques actually prevents us from doing things we believe in, and he identifies what is required of us to not only know what matters but to act on that knowledge.

He reframes leadership as the role of the social architect where convening, engaging, and defining the question replaces vision, charisma, and driving change. This paper is a brief summary of the book, which is about 190 pages and costs \$25.00.

Peter Block has authored three best selling books: *Flawless Consulting*, *The Empowered Manager*, and *Stewardship*. This book, *The Answer to How is Yes: Acting on What Matters*, confronts our passivity and blame. It argues for a life where we choose accountability and demand a more compelling purpose from our work. Most importantly, Block inspires us to say “yes” to our ideals and what we know to be true.

Introduction: Acting on What Matters

1. Transformation comes more from pursuing profound questions than seeking practical answers.
2. “There is 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*, (page 234)
3. We often avoid the question of whether something is worth doing by going straight to the question “How do we do it?” Too often when a discussion is dominated by questions of “How?” we risk overvaluing what is practical and doable and postpone the questions of larger purpose and collective well being. With the question How, we risk aspiring to goals that are defined for us by the culture and by our institutions, at the expense of pursuing purposes and intentions that arise from within ourselves.
4. We live in a culture that lavishes all of its rewards on what works, a culture that seems to value what works more than it values what matters.
 - a) The phrase “what works” captures our love for practicality and our attraction to what is concrete and measurable.
 - b) The phrase “what matters” is shorthand for our capacity to dream, to reclaim our freedom, to be idealistic, and to give our lives to those things which are vague, hard to measure, and invisible.
 - c) My wish is that we exchange “what we know how to do” for “what means most to us.”
5. The HOW Statement:
 - a) The question declares that we, as a culture, and I, as a human being, are fundamentally about getting things done.

- b) In our search for tools, we become what we seek: a tool. We reduce ourselves to being primarily pragmatic and utilitarian.
 - c) One way of understanding the meaning of the question of How? is to consider it as an expression of our wish for control and predictability.
 - d) Choosing to act on “what matters” is the choice to live a passionate existence, which is anything but controlled and predictable.
6. What Does Matter?
- a) The intent of this book is not to try to convince you about the substance of what matters. It is primarily a discussion of what is required of us if we were to act on what we care about.
 - b) Each of us has developed a model of what will make for a better world, or at least a better organization. Following are some examples:
 - Vision, clear purpose, and common goals are essential.
 - We need effective tools and problem-solving skills.
 - Participation and empowerment are key.
 - We need flexible structures and sophisticated information systems to support work processes that fit the task and mission.
 - Leadership is the key.
 - Effective personal skills, good work habits, and behavior that is self-motivating as well as supportive of others is needed.
 - We need learning organizations, places where people are supported to fail, to question their mental models, to experiment with new ways.
 - Organizations are places to live out our spiritual and human values.

[Note: These models have all been popular in recent years. What is interesting is that they are all true.]
 - c) What does matter is the way that we pursue any of these models. How we act to bring these models into the world takes us to a deeper level, which is a matter of individual values. Each of us is drawn to a particular set of values that grow out of who we are. Living our values in the pursuit of our preferred organizational model is what matters most.
7. The challenge of values is not to negotiate the importance of one over another, but to act on them. The quality of feeling alive comes when we act on our values, and find a way to bring our own model or strategy for better organizations and communities into the world.

THE QUESTION: Getting the question right may be the most important thing we can do. We define our dialogue and, in a sense, our future through the questions we choose to address. Asking the wrong question puts us in the philosopher’s dilemma: *We become the blind man looking in a dark room for a black cat that is not there.*

HOW is the Wrong Question

1. There are six questions that are always reasonable, but when asked too soon and taken too literally, may actually postpone the future and keep us encased in our present way of thinking.
 - a) *How do you do it?* -- This is the How question in basic black, serviceable in most situations. It seems innocent enough, and in fact is innocent, for when I ask this question, I take the position that others know and I don’t. I am the student and they are the teacher. The real risk in this question is coming to it too quickly. The rush to

a) How answer runs the risk of skipping the more profound question: Is this worth doing?

b) *How long will it take?* -- How long drives us to actions that oversimplify the world. If we believe that faster is better, we choose those strategies that can be acted upon quickly. Similarly, in the workplace we choose change strategies that we can act on now. We want changes to occur in days, weeks, and months, not years. The most important effect of the How Long question is that it drives us to answers that meet the criteria of speed.

c) *How much does it cost?* -- The question of cost is first cousin to the question of time. Instead of instant gratification, we seek cheap grace. The question makes the statement that if the price is high, this will be a problem. Regardless of our personal stance on an issue, when we zero in on cost too soon we constrain our capacity to act on certain values. The most common rationalization for doing things we do not believe in is that what we really desire either takes too long or costs too much.

d) *How do you get those people to change?* -- This is the power question. There are many ways to position it. "Those people" need to change for the good of the organization; they need to change for their own good, for the good of the family, for the sake of the next generation, for the sake of society. We may say we want others to change for good reasons. But no matter how we pose the question, it is always a wish to control others. In asking the question, we position ourselves as knowing what is best for others.

The behavior we describe in others may be an accurate description, but that is not the point. The point is our focus on "those people" is a defense against our own responsibility. The question "How do you get those people to change?" distracts us from choosing who we want to become and exercising accountability for creating our environment. We cannot change others, we can just learn about ourselves. Even when we are responsible for employees or children, we surrender our freedom and our capacity to construct the world we inhabit when we focus on *their* change.

e) *How do we measure it?* -- This question makes the statement: "If you cannot measure it, it does not exist." Or to paraphrase Descartes "I can measure it, therefore it is." So much for love. The engineer in us needs a test to affirm knowledge, a ruler to mark distance, a clock to demonstrate time. Many of the things that matter the most defy measurement. When we enter the realm of human nature and human actions, we are on shaky ground when we require measurable results as a condition of action.

The useful aspect of measurement is that it helps us make explicit our intentions. The dialogue about measurement is most helpful when we apply it to ourselves. The shift to make is from "How do you measure this?" to the question "What measurement would have meaning to me?" This opens the discussion on the meaning of the activity and the use of the measures we take. It keeps measurement from being a supervisory device, and turns it into a strategy to support learning.

f) *How have other people done it successfully?* -- "Where else has this worked?" is a reasonable question. It is dangerous when it becomes an unspoken statement: If this has not worked elsewhere, perhaps we should not do it. The wish to attempt only what has been proven creates a life of imitation.

The value of another's experience is to give us hope, not to tell us how or whether to proceed. This is not to argue against "benchmarking," but to express the limits of what value we can actually find in looking elsewhere for how to proceed.

2. Taken in isolation, and asked in the right context, all How? questions are valid. But when they become the primary questions, the controlling questions, or the defining questions, they create a world where operational attention drives out the human spirit.

Yes is the Right Question

1. The alternative to asking How? is saying Yes – not literally, but as a symbol of our stance towards the possibility of more change. The right questions are about values, purpose, aesthetics, human connection, and deeper philosophical inquiry. To experience the fullness of working and living, we need to be willing to address questions that we know have no answer.
2. The goal is to balance a life that works with a life that counts. The challenge is to acknowledge that just because something works, it doesn't mean that it matters. A life that matters is captured in the word yes. Yes is the answer – if not the antithesis – to How.
3. To commit to the course of acting on what matters, we postpone the How questions and precede them with others that lead to more questions that perhaps lead us to more questions. So much for answers. In fact, the more useful questions are ones that entail paradox, questions that recognize that every answer creates its own set of problems. Here are some Yes questions that draw us into what matters:
 - a) *What refusal have I been postponing?* -- If we cannot say no, then our yes means nothing. When we realize, as Carl Jung stated, that all consciousness begins with an act of disobedience, then saying no opens the door to pursuing our own desires. Refusal becomes a realistic option when we realize that saying no is the beginning of a conversation, not the end.
Accepting the possibility of refusal means that when we finally say yes it is an act of volition. It is the clearest test of whether we are acting on our own instincts, according to what matters to us, or whether we have internalized the direction provided by others.
 - b) *What commitment am I willing to make?* -- The question recognizes that if change is to occur, it will come from my own free choice, not from the investment of the institution or the transformation of others. The question of commitment declares that the essential investment needed is personal commitment, not money, not the agreement of others, not the alignment of converging forces supportive of a favorable outcome.
 - c) *What is the price I am willing to pay?* -- There is a cost to pursuing what matters, and money is the least of it. In acting on what matters, we are leaning against the culture, and we may be disappointing those around us who have adapted to the way we used to be. Asking what price we are willing to pay also means that if we fail, we expect there to be negative consequences. This is one aspect of accountability: If it does not work out, we will not be rewarded.
 - d) *What is my contribution to the problem I am concerned with?* -- This question is an antidote to our helplessness. It affirms that we have had a role in creating the world we live in. If we believe that we have not created what we are facing then the payoff is a moment of guilt-free innocence – it is not our fault. If we decide to choose freedom, we surrender innocence and exchange it for guilt.
 - e) *What is the crossroad at which I find myself at this point in my life/work?* -- This question affirms the idea that it is the challenge and complexity of life and work that gives it meaning. We expected to live happily ever after and find that yesterday's triumph is no longer enough.

- f) *What do we want to create together?* -- This question recognizes that we live in an interdependent world, that we create nothing alone. We may think we invented something, or achieved something on our own, but this belief blinds us to all that came before and those who have supported us.
 - g) *Bonus Question: What is the question that, if you had the answer, would set you free?* -- This is the mother of all questions. It is a question that can only be mediated upon. Each time you answer it, you begin a different conversation. While there may not be one answer that you can settle on, each attempt aims you in a good direction. It is like a laser beam into what matters. It brings the question of our freedom front and center.
4. Bringing these two sets of questions together will better define the meaning of a shift from How? to Yes – or from What Works? to What Matters?:
- a) How Question 1: **How do you do it?** Becomes Yes Question 1: **What refusal have I been postponing?** -- The shift here is from a question of method to one of choice.
 - b) How Question 2: **How long will it take?** Becomes Yes Question 2: **What commitment am I willing to make?** -- We have time for all that is truly important to us, so the question of time shifts to what is important?
 - c) How Question 3: **How much does it cost?** Becomes Yes Question 3: **What is the price I am willing to pay?** -- The real cost of change or creating something of value is emotional, not economic. What is most valuable cannot be purchased at a discount. The price of change is measured by our effort, our will and courage, our persistence in the face of difficulty.
 - d) How Question 4: **How do you get those people to change?** Becomes Yes Question 4: **What is my contribution to the problem I am concerned with?** -- This is a shift in accountability. The focus of my contribution keeps the decision maker in the loop of accountability. Too many decisions to initiate change are made by people untouched by the change effort. The Yes question embodies Gandhi's idea that we need to become the change we want to see.
 - e) How Question 5: **How do we measure it?** Becomes Yes Question 5: **What is the crossroad at which I find myself at this point in my life/work?** -- The central question in exploring a change is whether or not what we are considering will have meaning for us, for the institution, for the world.
 - f) How Question 6: **How are other people doing it successfully?** Becomes Yes Question 6: **What do we want to create together?** -- These questions represent the tension between what is proven and what is still to be discovered. If we want our institution to hold a leadership position, then we need a question that does not distract us too much by holding too closely to the experience of others.
5. The Paradox of How?
- a) What will matter most to us, upon deeper reflection, is the quality of experience we create in the world, not the quantity of results.
 - b) The array of Yes questions brings meaning and reminds us that if freedom is what is essential to a life that matters, and to an institution that fulfills its purpose, then along this path are acts of disobedience and even betrayal – a willingness to move against the dominant beliefs of the moment.

- c) Freedom asks us to invent our own steps. The phrase that expresses this most clearly is: “to be the author of our own experience.” This does not mean that we cannot learn from others. It is just that asking how is a poor method of learning.
- 6. Picking the right question is the beginning of action on what matters, and this is what works. This is how we name the debate, by the questions we pursue, for all these questions are action steps. Good questions work on us; we don’t work on them.

Defenses Against Acting

1. Changing the focus from questions about practicality to questions about personal commitment entails more than simply a shift in agenda or a change in conversation. When we embrace the Yes questions, we are confronted with our freedom.
2. The most difficult aspect of acting on what matters is to come face to face with our own humanity – our caution, our capacity to rationalize our willingness to fit into the culture rather than live on its margin.
3. The devil in this instance is not the behavior of the boss or politician; the devil is the denial of our own power and the expectation that someone else will lead us to a better tomorrow.
4. When no answer satisfies, and people continue to act as if they do not understand, then the wrong question is being asked. Authentic questions, on the other hand, are asked with the expectation that those doing the questioning will join in devising the answer. The question is not used to make a statement, or to minimize choice. A question about method has value when we are willing to act on its answers.
5. It is important to acknowledge that to confront people with their freedom – in this case, to face them with intimate and paradoxical questions and postpone getting into the familiar territory of the pragmatic – is to invite their anger. Many will resent the idea to bring their personal ideals or longings into the conversation.
6. The problem is that when we invest emotionally and economically in – in fact, organize ourselves around – safety, control, and predictability, we postpone the deeper questions of what matters. [Note: an interesting question by Bruce Springsteen in everyone of his concerts, he cries out: “Is there anybody alive out there?”].
7. Part of the appeal of making How? the question of choice is that it lifts the requirement of going deeper and reflecting upon our ideals. We say we don’t have time for this, but there are deeper reasons to postpone depth, for it can make us anxious. Pursuing How? is the safer path, the more comfortable path. Asking How? thereby is a way to avoid anxiety or, as philosopher Eric Fromm would say: “to escape from freedom.”
8. Freedom is not doing your own thing, but just the opposite. It means we are the authors of our own experience. It means we are accountable for the well being for all that is around us. It means we believe that we are constituting or creating the world we live in. *As long as we wish for safety, we will have difficulty pursuing what matters.*
9. Freedom comes from commitment, not accomplishment. It comes from finding our own voice, not following others. Continually asking how is a form of self-restraint and even subjugation.
10. Our wish for quick action and our love of tools, useful as they can be, distract us from our own values and the reality of our own experience. Endlessly seeking more tools, more skills, more methodology deflects us from accepting our humanity, our limitations, and the fact that the questions that trouble us are inherent in being human and have no real answers.
11. To live our lives fully, to work wholeheartedly, to refuse directly what we cannot swallow, to accept the mystery in all matters of meaning – this is the ultimate adventure. The pursuit of certainty and predictability is our caution speaking. Freedom is the prize, safety is the price, what is required is *faith more than fact and will more than skill.*

12. Summarizing Our Three Key Points

- a) First, our resistance isolates us from a deeper intimacy with ourselves, which is the wish to understand, to wonder why, to find our purpose, to let other people in, to express our feelings, and to affirm our humanity.
- b) Second, it robs us from one aspect of our freedom: the capacity to pursue what matters to us, to create a world that we believe in according to our values, independent of the marketplace or what is fashionable at the moment.
- c) Third, the decision to ask the How? Questions first and postpone the questions of meaning, the Yes questions, has a pervasive effect on how we experience our work as well as the optimism we feel about the organizations we inhabit. It influences the way we think about our lives and the larger society, especially the production/consumption engine that drives it. The love of what is practical and concrete reinforces a culture of materialism. Most of us see clearly the economic materialism out there, but this is simply an expression of the spiritual materialism within us.

THREE QUALITIES --- To fully benefit from questions of purpose and commitment, we need to be grounded in certain qualities that help us hold to our personal intentions when we engage with the pressures of the marketplace.

These qualities are our capacity for reawakening our idealism, our ability to become more intimate in the way we contact the environment, and our willingness to choose depth in the face of the ever-quickenning pace of modern life.

Recapturing the Idealism of Youth

1. We are looking to balance our concern with “what works” with “what matters.” What is lost in a materialistic and pragmatic culture is our idealism. Idealism is a state of innocence that has the potential to bring together our larger purpose with our day-to-day doing. Idealism is required to reclaim our freedom, for at the end of it all, it is our freedom that gives us the possibility to more fully live our lives.
2. Idealism is the pursuit of the way we think things should be. Webster’s definition of an idealist is: “one who follows their ideals, even to the point of impracticality.”
3. Conventional wisdom makes several arguments against idealism. We have come to accept as true the economist’s claim that behavior is driven by self-interest. This seems to be affirmed by the entitlement culture we live in. We organize our institutions around the principle of self-interest, and this gives rise to the question “What’s in it for me?”
4. Idealism is the willingness to pursue our desires past the point of practicality. The surrender of desire is a loss of part of our self. Desire is an affair of the heart. My heart’s desire. This is why the word *desire* is so out of place in a world of commerce. Matters of the heart, such as our deepest values, are not open to negotiation. The heart cannot be explained, or reasoned with, or commanded.
5. We are willing to surrender our freedom, especially in the workplace, in return for protection and promotion. We surrender sovereignty to the boss and they in turn protect us and look out for our interests.
 - a) We offer parts of ourselves, our desires, and our freedom, as part of the bargain and so expect our bosses to fight for our interests every chance they get. And when they do, we think we have made a good deal.

- b) In the barter framework, the cost of the bargain is dependency: We have become so dependent on our institutions and their agents that we think they hold the key to what we most dearly seek.
 - c) We yield the capacity to define what matters. We encourage the institution to define what matters for us by asking our leaders what is important to them.
 - d) Like every other element of our passion for practicality, the barter belief system also bleeds into our personal relationships. I think that to get what I want from my partner, someone I love, I must consciously offer something of value in return.
6. The point to focusing on idealism is that it is part of what can sustain us when we act on our values. Our idealism gives us the conviction to bring the models of effective organizations into the world in a way that affirms our deepest values, regardless of whether the world reinforces our efforts.

Sustaining the Touch of Intimacy

1. The second condition for acting on what matters is to choose intimacy in the face of an instrumental world. The challenge is to sustain our humanity when all around us is in the process of being automated. Intimacy is about the quality of contact we make: It values direct experience over electronic or virtual experience. It is immersion into the world of feelings, connection with the senses, and vulnerability – all of which, not incidentally, are considered liabilities in our institutions. In an instrumental world people are considered assets, resources to be leveraged; they are not valued as unique and highly variable human beings. Institutions are based on consistency and predictability, while intimacy relies on variation and surprise.
2. Intimacy is a relationship to the world where feelings, touch, sight, and smell are the point. Close contact with another person, with nature, a work of art, an idea, our own bodies – these are the elements of living intimately.
3. Intimacy is becoming obsolete with the growth of the electronic culture. We choose videoconferences rather than face-to-face meetings, we attend school on-line, we e-mail, voicemail, and more, all for the sake of cost and efficiency.
4. Language is another example. Our language defines us, and we are increasingly bringing the language of technology into our daily dialogue. What was conversation is now considered “information exchange.” When we want a private conversation we talk “offline.”
5. The Illusion of Electronic Reality
 - a) *End of the Touch of Reality* -- When I live a virtual life, in which I can choose my experiences off a menu, I gain the illusion of complete control over my life and those around me, which in clinical terms could be called a mental illness. It is the ultimate state of being out of touch with reality.
 - b) *End of Nature* -- In a way, the loss of intimacy in our modern culture is making nature itself obsolete. In agriculture, we have the terminator gene in a seed.
 - c) *Leveraged Learning* -- Computers and long-distance technology are changing our classrooms and conference rooms. Learning is essentially being “leveraged.” Long-distance learning is automating the college campus and classroom.
 - d) *Digital Activism* -- Our capacity for intimacy is also threatened by the way electronic technology substitutes for social and civic engagement. I think I can get all I need from my home entertainment center and never leave the house, meet my neighbors, know my local government.

6. Like our idealism, intimacy is needed to keep acting on what matters. We have to make a special effort to deepen our direct participation in the world. Intimacy is also about more than a relationship. It is the wonder and connection to the earth, to humanity at large, and to something more important than anything that can easily be talked about.

Enduring the Depth of Philosophy

1. If acting on what matters needs idealism and intimate contact, it also calls us to go deeper into ourselves and become more reflective towards what we most care about. This includes giving ourselves time and space to think independently and to value the inward journey. Without the willingness to go deeper, there is little chance for any authentic change.
2. We are out of the habit of thinking and questioning; we prefer action and answers. Our favorite clichés express our preference for doing and our ambivalence towards reflection and inwardness:
 - We want to have a bias for action.
 - It is not enough to simply talk, we want to walk it.
 - Talk, after all, is cheap. Actions speak louder than words.
 - Don't just stand there, do something.
 - In the end, the proof is in the pudding.
 - Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach.
 - We want a bird in the hand, who cares about the two in the bush (I wonder how the birds feel about this.)
3. Thinking, reflection, and going deeper takes time and require us to get personal – to question our own beliefs, theories, and feelings. When we decide to set aside time to think, to reflect, we get nervous. The fear is that if we took the time for questioning, for thought, for introspection, we might not have what it takes to act or do. *Ours is not to wonder why, ours is but to do or die.* Interesting Message: If you question, you die.
4. Depth becomes a victim of our love affair with speed. When speed becomes the measure of performance it governs the way we experience our lives as well as the quality of our lives. Speed becomes a reason to settle for lower quality and ignore our desires. Living out a set of ideals, doing what I want, making deeper contact with the world, and really engaging those around me – all get postponed.
5. *Why is speed the god and time the devil?* We end up using speed to fight the devil of free time, unstructured experience, aimless ambling, and the emptiness and lack of direction that exists in each of our lives. Perhaps speed fills a void for us so we do not have to struggle with ideals, intimacy, and depth.
 - a) If we want depth, we need to step out of time.
 - b) Acting on what matters means knowing the difference between moving quickly and knowing where we are going.
6. If we decide to act on what matters, then we shift our consciousness about pace. There is always time to do everything that really matters: If we do not have time to do something, it is a sign that it does not matter.

THE REQUIREMENTS --- This section is about ways to detach ourselves enough from the power of the culture to have an outside --- or more accurately, an outsider's --- chance of bringing our intentions into being. The "requirements" are more of a way of thinking than a list of things to do.