ADAPTATION 1 OF 4 — NEWSLETTER

What “Why” Actually Does

For readers who expect to hear from you every week.

Excerpt drawn from approx. 6:21–8:41 of the full recording.

There's a coaching talk I came across recently, the kind aimed at managers and team leads, that spends most of its time on the usual ground: closed questions versus open ones, leading questions to avoid. Then, almost as an aside, one line stands out from the rest: swap "why" for "what makes you think that," and watch what changes.

It's such a small swap that it's easy to read past it. But sit with it for a second and the logic is hard to argue with.

"Why did you do it that way?" sounds like curiosity. It shows up in leadership books filed under "understanding root causes," in performance reviews, in the kind of one-on-one that's supposed to feel supportive. But think about where else that exact question gets asked. Courtrooms. Disciplinary meetings. Any situation where someone is expected to account for themselves to a person with the power to judge the answer.

That's the trap. "Why" is grammatically a request for information, but socially it functions as a demand for justification. The person on the receiving end doesn't hear "help me understand." They hear "explain yourself," and they answer accordingly, reaching for the most defensible version of events rather than the true one.

"What made you think that" asks for the same information and does none of that work. It's still curious about the reasoning. It just doesn't put the other person on trial to get there. The spotlight moves off the person and onto the thinking itself, which turns out to be a much easier thing for someone to walk you through out loud.

It's worth noticing how ordinary this pattern is outside of work, too. A parent asking a kid why they did something. A partner asking why a decision got made without them. In almost every case, the honest answer to "why" starts with some form of self-defense, because that's the posture the word puts people in, whether or not it's the posture anyone intended.

Journalists get trained on a version of this same instinct. Ask someone why they left a job, and the answer is usually the polished one they've given a dozen times already. Ask what led them to start looking, and sometimes you get the real story instead, the one with an actual moment in it rather than a tidy explanation built for public consumption.

None of this makes "why" a word to avoid entirely. Sometimes you do need the reason, stated plainly, and there's no way around asking for it directly. But in a coaching conversation, where the goal is to help someone think more clearly rather than defend a decision they've already made, the softer phrasing tends to get further. It lowers the temperature just enough that people stop performing an answer and start actually producing one.

What makes this particular fix worth sharing isn't that it's clever. It's that it's almost embarrassingly available. No new framework to learn, no structural change to how a conversation runs. Just one word, swapped for another, in the exact moment most managers default to the version that puts people on the back foot without meaning to.

Try noticing it this week. Not changing anything yet, just noticing how often "why" comes up in conversations where the actual goal is understanding rather than accountability. Most people are surprised by the number once they start counting.

Then try the swap where it fits. "What made you think that" instead of "why did you think that." "What led you to that decision" instead of "why did you make that decision." The information you're after stays the same. The person answering tends not to.

There's a longer piece coming on the other habits worth building into how a leader coaches a team: what to do after someone fails, what active listening actually requires, the discipline behind a good coaching model. This one felt worth sending on its own, mostly because it's the easiest of the group to try in the very next conversation you have.