

WHAT'S WRONG WITH WHAT IS THAT IT'S NOT HOW

Even if you know what that means, knowing is not always enough.

My undergraduate degree is in philosophy, but since court-philosopher positions have always been in short supply, my first gainful employment was with a small management-consulting firm writing marketing material and articles on quality management. An *éminence grise* in the firm, Gerry Michaelson, was kind enough to offer encouragement and constructive criticism on my work. I slaved away over a hot word processor, churning out explanations of the importance of reducing variance in output and the negative correlation between cost and quality. Gerry would read my missives and offer various suggestions for improvement, but he always ended his gentle nudges with the following strong admonition: "It's not enough to tell people *what* to do. You have to tell them *how* to do it if you're

really going to make a difference."

This seemed like good advice to me, and still does. It's something I've tried to take seriously, and I feel as though I've succeeded in shifting my orientation over the last twenty years. But I learned recently that "getting to how" can be a lot more difficult than I thought.

Clayton Christensen is a professor of no small reputation and deserved fame at Harvard Business School. He wrote *The Innovator's Dilemma*, the book that for a generation of managers has come to define "disruptive innovation," whereby a product or service enters at the bottom of a market before eventually moving up to displace competitors. Clayton has built on that concept an edifice of research and consulting that has spawned significant new growth at hundreds of companies around the world. (If Clayton has a fault, it's that he's a good friend and colleague of mine—we co-authored *The Innovator's Solution*.)

Part of the reason for disruption theory's success, I had come to believe, was that it bridged the "what-how" chasm. For example, in the face of low-cost threats from numerous competitors, Intel had used disruption theory to respond with its Celeron line of low-cost microprocessors. According to then-CEO Andy Grove, disruption theory didn't prescribe *what* the company should do—rather, it suggested *how to think about the problem*, and so the company was able to discover for itself

what the appropriate response should be. Gerry would have been proud.

In light of this, I was really set back on my heels when Clayton recounted the following anecdote. Some years after the success of Celeron, Intel set out to launch a number of new growth businesses. Andy asked Clayton, "How do I set up these new businesses so that they'll be successful?" Clayton summarized what has become the orthodoxy of disruption: "Well, Andy, you need to set up new business units independent of the core. They need to have clear strategic charters that set them on a path to disruption, targeting non-consumers of existing products with solutions focused on the jobs they're trying to get done. You need to be patient for growth but impatient for profit." And so on.

"@#%!@#!%," was Andy's response. "You haven't told me *how* to do it, you've only told me *what* to do. I *knew* that!"

"It was then," Clayton said, "that I realized I didn't even know the difference between *what* and *how*."

Oh boy. If Clayton Christensen can fall into a what/how trap talking about disruption theory with a client who understands it and has used it successfully, what chance do the rest of us have?

To make any headway on this problem, perhaps we need to define what counts as answers to the *what* and *how* queries. After all, maybe Clayton wasn't underspecifying his answer—maybe Andy was underspecifying his question.



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(I knew that philosophy degree would come in handy sometime.) What does it mean to explain to someone *how* to do something?

Here's my best guess: When you have explained to people how to do something, they are able to do it. That sounds trivial, but it might not be. It requires not only that they *know* how to do something—they must actually be capable of taking the right actions in the right sequence under the right circumstances to achieve the right result consistently. So a cooking show that tells you *how* to make a soufflé will leave you able to make a soufflé. A how-to book on golf will leave you able to hit the ball down the middle of the fairway, within the limits of your physical abilities.

With those criteria, I've never seen a cooking show or read a golf book that taught me how to do anything. My second child, Max, was up a lot during his first eighteen months. I spent many a night rocking with him asleep on my shoulder. To pass the time, I watched a cooking channel. A lot. My cooking didn't get any better. I've also read my fair share of golf books. My golf hasn't improved. I can explain what you should do if you want to make a refreshing yet spicy gazpacho, and I know exactly what's required to play a blind chip shot out of the bunker . . . but I can't actually do either one. Yet I'll wager that Martha Stewart, Nigella Lawson, Jamie Oliver, Jack Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, and Tiger Woods all thought they were providing me with at least some measure of *how*.

I think the same can be said of advice-giving in just about every field, including management. Jack Welch, Larry Bossidy, Lou Gerstner—they've all tried to give us some insight into how to achieve the kinds of results they did. With so much knowledge out there, why do we so consistently fail to exploit it effectively? Why does what Jeffrey Pfeffer and Bob Sutton call the

"knowing-doing gap" persist?

I'm increasingly of a mind that whether one is providing *what* or *how* advice is less a function of the advice than a function of the recipient of the advice. I'll bet that if Tiger Woods' coach were to say something like, "Don't hesitate at the top of the backswing" (assume that Woods might, distracted by his recent off-the-links troubles, do such a thing), this would be useful advice—that is, he would be able to act on it. Me? Not a chance. The reason is that Woods' abilities allow him to translate direction into action in ways that I cannot.

In general terms, I've come to believe that *how* devolves into *what* when it comes up against limits of one's personal experience. What counts as a *how* for Woods is a *what* for me, even though it's the same advice.

I can't think of a formula for determining what level of detail is required to connect with a person's experience so that you can be assured that whatever direction you're providing transcends the *what* to become the *how*. But we may be able to take a page from Toyota's approach to root-cause analysis. Toyota applies a "five whys" principle when exploring the cause of a problem. When something goes wrong, typically, the company quickly identifies a proximate explanation. Then the fun begins: By asking, "So why did *that* happen?" four more times, Toyota has found that it very often gets to the root cause of a problem. (I don't know that there's anything magic about the number five, but it may be a useful rule of thumb.)

Applying the five hows to what/how issues, I've started testing the usefulness of any advice I give or receive. When offering guidance on what to do, I try to think through whether or not I



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can specify "so how do you do *that*?" to whatever additional levels of detail are required to connect with what people already know how to do. It doesn't matter if I think I've explained *how*; until the recipients of the advice can find an equivalence between what they already know how to do and whatever new thing they are being asked to take on, the advice will remain in the entertaining but ultimately sterile land of *what*.

So I think I'd tell Clayton not to feel bad. None of us knows the difference between *what* and *how*, if only because whether a particular recommendation counts as one or the other is a function of whom you're speaking to. ■