

Episode 78: When Overthinking, Here's What to Ask

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Here is my starting question today: Do you ever find yourself overthinking a decision or situation?

For me, that's a solid Yes. If you are an overthinker like me, you're thinking about what already happened, and what might happen next week or next year. You're reflecting on the past and planning for the future at the same time.

That can be normal, and thinking too much can make it hard to make a decision or take action. Being able to think about many things at once is a superpower, and it can sometimes make it hard to know where to focus in a conversation and hard to answer a question concisely. We might find ourselves going into too much explanation or oversharing. At work, having too many ideas can cause meetings to veer off course and off topic.

In the world today, with so many things to think about, we need a way to help organize and focus our thoughts. We need a way to move from thinking to action.

Today's communication tool can help. It's a question that immediately helps organize thoughts and access more effective, higher-level thinking.

It's easy and versatile. This single phrase creates focused thinking, easy answers, and momentum to get things going in productive direction.

It's a tool you can use with yourself when you're feeling stuck and unclear. You can also ask it to the people you work with, to help bring their thoughts into focus and make conversations feel more productive and efficient.

Here is the question we're talking about today: What is one thing? What's one thing?

The key part is to emphasize is the word one. When we ask our brain for one thing, we're asking it to choose and focus. This reminds us that we have agency and that there are things in our control.

Here are some examples of how to use phrase "What's one thing?" in a question to yourself or others.

What's one thing you want to accomplish today?

What's one thing making it hard to accomplish that?

You can also get more specific, and replace the word "thing" with other descriptive words, like in these questions:

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What is one piece of information that will help you make the decision?

Who is one person you need to check with about that decision?

Again, the emphasis with this phrase is on the singularity of the thing you're asking about – the focus on one thing.

The phrase "what's one thing" is the key to effective thinking and efficient conversations for a few reasons.

First, it makes it easier for someone to respond. When you ask someone for one idea, you're not asking for the perfect answer. You're simply asking for a starting point. And once you have a starting point, it allows thoughts to flow more easily and opens up thinking and planning.

This can be helpful to solicit more opinions, especially from those who usually keep quiet. For people who are reticent to speak up, asking for one idea only – not the best one, just one – can make it much easier for them to answer and voice an opinion.

The second reason the question "what's one thing" is powerful is that it engages our prefrontal cortex, higher-level thinking. When you ask for one idea, you're asking someone's brain to think about all the different ideas they have and then choose one. This shifts them into intentional thinking.

The third reason using the question "what's one thing" is helpful is that it brings efficiency when time is a factor. At work and in meetings, our time is a valuable resource. It seems like there's always more to discuss in meetings than the time allotted.

I hear from clients too often that they wish certain meetings were more productive.

Using the "what's one thing" question can help cover more ground and hone in on the heart of the matter more quickly. When asked and answered, it can illuminate more easily what's most pressing and top of mind for someone.

Here's an example of how a client and I talked about how this phrase and question could be used in real life. This leader shared a situation with me. He had heard that his team was frustrated about their interactions with another team because they felt the other team was encroaching on their work. So he had scheduled a meeting with his team to discuss the situation. He said that he wanted to avoid having the meeting turn into an unproductive venting session.

First, we talked about his goal for the meeting. He said that his goals were to learn more and start to identify concrete steps to solve the problem.

We talked about the question "what's one thing" and how he could incorporate it into the questions he asked.

Keeping his goals for the meeting in mind, he landed on these questions that he planned to ask his team:

One: What's one way you have advocated for yourself in the past with this other team?

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Two: What's one thing that is in your control?

Three: What's one way I can support you right now?

Using and emphasizing the phrase "what's one thing" immediately shifts the energy of a question. It takes a conversation from vague or highly charged to one that is specific, actionable, and focused. My client was hopeful that using the "one thing" concept would help his team move from general frustration to remembering what's in their control.

This phrase is one to use liberally with the people you work with and lead. You can also use it when you reflect on your life.

Some of my clients have a regular reflection practice each week to think about their successes and learning opportunities.

I asked one client which question she reflects on, and she said she often asks herself this one: "Where could I have been more effective?"

While this is a powerful open-ended question, it does feel big, and it might too easily let an inner critic answer with all of the ways you fell short this week. That would not be helpful.

Bringing in the "what's one thing" idea and reframing the question to this one: "Where's one place I could have been more effective this past week?" suddenly makes the question more manageable and containable. It shifts from focusing on the negative to more of a growth mindset.

And when we're in a growth mindset, we're kinder to ourselves and able to remember that we are on a journey of learning.

So, here's my invitation to you. In the next few weeks, use the phrase "what's one thing" more intentionally. Write it down on a sticky note and put it where you can see it. Ask it to yourself. Ask it to a friend. Ask it in a meeting. See how it changes the content and flow of the thinking and conversation.

The question "what's one thing?" encourages others to engage, choose, and share. It helps conversations become more focused and efficient. It creates a path toward clarity, and when there's clarity, it's easier to take action. And taking action is what helps us move forward in life and at work with more purpose, direction, and confidence.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. What is one development goal you would like help with? Please reach out and let me know. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com and schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!

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