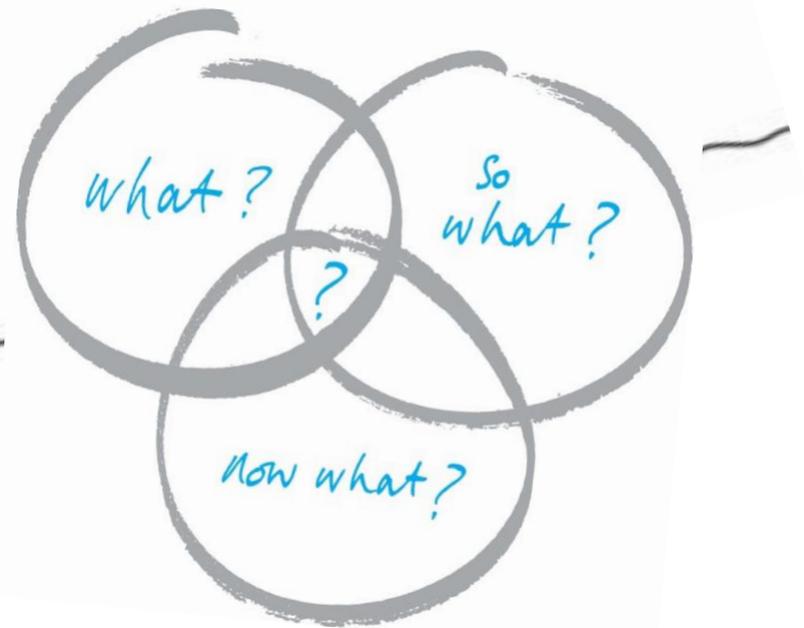
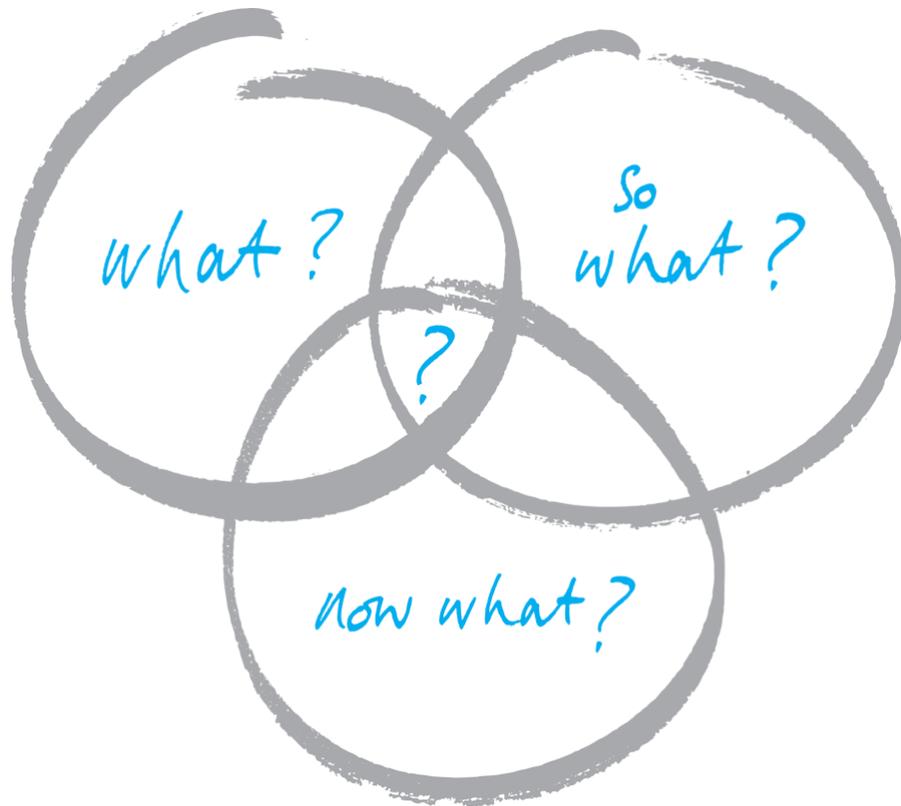


# Our Method

The ThreeWhats Approach



ThreeWhats Playbooks



## The Method

## ThreeWhats

High Performance Insights  
The Method Playbook

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# ThreeWhats

We write Playbooks. We distil our years of experience into guidance. Our guidance is pure and simple. We work with, for, and around, high performers - individuals, teams and organisations. We take our experiences and create guidance.

Our Method is always to ask the right question in the right way at the right time – the right question is usually the hard question. All our guidance is framed around the same three questions – What? So What? Now What? It can't be simplified further.

Experience tells us where to go to ask the questions. Our guidance comes from three sources: our own and others' professional insights, reliable and proven evidence and authentic examples. We filter out what's irrelevant, so you don't need to.

Our work with high performing individuals, teams and organisations throws up themes. The same themes recur. They cluster around leadership, management and decision-making. So, we organise our offer around these. Once we have a theme, we apply our questions and ThreeWhats it -

*"Source it, Slow it, Simplify and Shorten it, Share it.."*

'Sourcing it' involves finding out more about the issue, what is distinctive about it and what is its significance. We then 'Slow it' which means we untangle it, revisit it and try to make sure we fully appreciate what lies behind. Having sorted what we need to know we then 'Simplify and Shorten it' and this is perhaps the hardest part of our work. We put effort into capturing what's relevant and then 'Share it' with you.

In addition to Playbooks which offer pure, simple summary guidance we also have worked hard to provide summary infographics we call Sketchbooks, longer and more detailed evidence with further case studies in what we call Storybooks, simple slide decks for you to use in your own work called Slidebooks and reviews of all the books we recommend.

That's it – ThreeWhats.

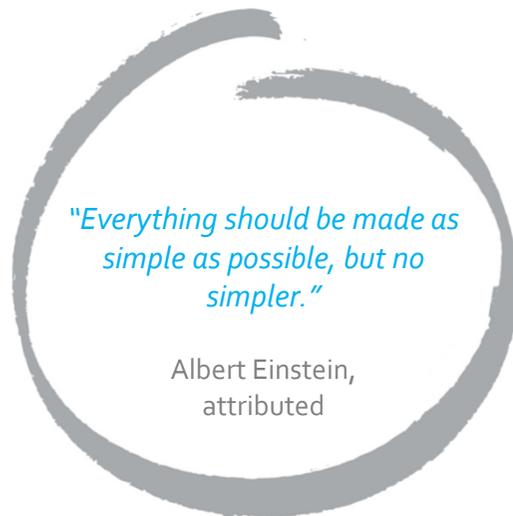


## What?

Start with What. Keep it simple. Ask the question. What is your challenge, your dilemma, your opportunity, your offer? These questions are intended to be descriptive.

### What Questions

**Our Method is to be direct.** By asking 'what' you get to the nub of the issue straight away. The response to the question has to be sharpened to a single point – 'what is your challenge, your dilemma, your opportunity, your offer?' This directs you to the essentials and establishing questions such as these allow further questions to flow. If you start with 'why?' as Simon Sinek and others suggest, it leads to justification, then off the point explanations and anecdotes. In other words, licence to waffle!



There are, in our experience, problems with problems. It's as though they're hidden in the middle of dense fog. You know they're there but hidden from view. You have to ask what questions to get to the problem. Once you get there its often ill-defined and vague and, in some instances, arise from a feeling, an instinct, an emotional response or a bias.

In order to solve a problem, you need to begin by defining the problem. By attempting to define the problem or have the other person define the problem, you often find there is no problem.

**What questions are looseners.** They loosen people up. They encourage whoever is being asked to take their time and gradually establish if it really is a problem or perhaps an issue of perception. To this end, asking about evidence helps. What's the source or sources of evidence? How independent are they? How reliable? How authoritative? What also helps is to find out if the person is sitting on a solution. Teasing out models of what 'great' might look and feel like is liberating.

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**What questions are also agitators.** They deliberately provoke. They force you to switch constantly between problem and solution. It's painstaking at first but eventually the fog lifts so that by the time the 'What' questions are asked and answered there's a clearer all-round picture of the problem and some possible solutions.

**What questions declutter.** They get to the real intent. By examining what the individual is prepared to sacrifice in order to resolve their issue we find out how significant it actually is. Projecting forward also helps at the 'What' stage - If it won't matter in three years' time how much does it matter now?

When we ask 'What' questions of an individual it's different to asking the same question of a team or an organisation. Asking an individual requires a greater degree of psychological safety. The better you know the person the more likely they are to value your questions. You don't have to be their friend you just have to be trusted with what, after all is important to them, their vulnerability.

Asking 'What' questions of a team are difficult because of role. This being your role, your authority and status in relation to the team and each of its members and their role and how they see themselves as contributing to the team. Harvard researchers Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey wrote in their work on deliberately developmental organisations that there was no greater waste of resources than the energy '*spent to hide our weaknesses and manage others' favourable impressions of us.*' Team members do not readily discuss their flaws in a public forum.

Second guessing your intent is a problem anyone asking questions of a team will face. If you are a leader, manager, trainer, consultant or curious colleague avoid the problem of others 'second guessing' your intent by applying the ThreeWhats questions to your own role beforehand: what is your contribution? If you do it well what do you add? How will you go about it? Front up your answers.

Asking 'What' questions of a team are difficult because of unique contributions within a team. You can't ask a generic question of a group of people, leave it hanging and hope someone will emerge with an 'agreed' response. Team questions are framed differently. Team questions ought to be designed to generate authentic responses. They need introducing and time for discussion. In nearly every instance this is best done by the team.



*It's painstaking at first but eventually the fog lifts so that by the time the 'What' questions are asked and answered there's a clearer all-round picture of the problem and some possible solutions.*

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Designing provocative questions to allow teams to engage in authentic conversations is a top skill. One of the most powerful tools is when you embed your provocative questions into a case study or studies of team with similar issues and then ask them to work on the case study and come up with recommendations to 'solve' the issues. At ThreeWhats we do this a lot!



Organisations where there is a culture of openness, where risk is expected and considered part of becoming better, where there's a solution focus embedded throughout provide their own form of psychological safety.

The sorts of 'What' questions asked of any organisation at this stage cluster around defining core purpose. This is the starting place. If a workforce is demotivated, how do they see themselves as contributing or otherwise to success? If they don't know, or don't believe, how they fit in then there's a disconnect. If there is a disconnect – whether real or imagined – then demotivation follows.

All of the high performing individuals, teams and organisations we have worked with or know of have been energised and emboldened by clarity of purpose.

It might be an individual like Captain Sir Thomas Moore who in the run up to his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday during the Covid pandemic lapped his house using a frame in order to raise money for charity. His 100 steps raised over £33m for the UK NHS. Each step had a purpose.

Teams like those who are part of Medecins San Frontieres working in emergency zones are made up of individuals like Nurse Trish Newport who describes how she was motivated by experiences in a war zone to join MSF. She says, *"It was a very powerful time for me. I wasn't sure in what direction I wanted to take my life with MSF, but I knew I needed it to be challenging all the time. This is how I decided to join the E-Team."* People who have a clear purpose to which they can align can put themselves in peril to fulfil it.

There was a clear and globally recognised purpose for an organisation like NASA and the various teams behind the 1969 moon landing. Tens of thousands of people contributed to a single moment of success. Years later management consultants and presenter still tell the story of the cleaner at NASA describing his job as 'putting a man on the moon.'

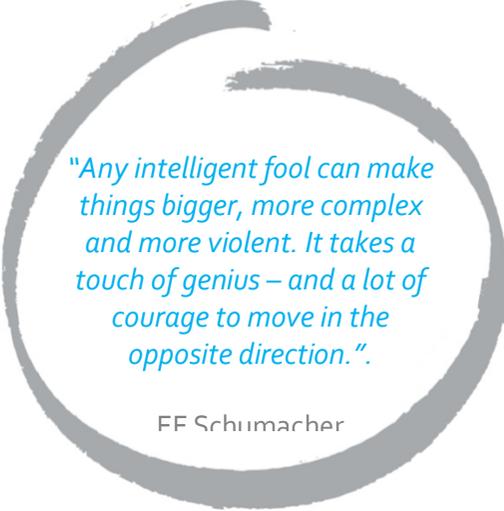
## So What?

Ask So What? By following a definition of the problem with an examination of the consequence you create an agenda for action. These questions are intended to be reflective.

### So What Questions

**So what - is a great question.** It can be seen in your mind's eye straight away. It comes with a slight sneer and a shrug of the shoulders. Its disdainful, potentially threatening. It's a question with attitude and it can be exactly the right question, asked in the right way at the right time. So, ask it, we do!

So What? As you move from defining the problem to examining the possible consequences the conversation becomes more precise. The questions diminish in number. They become more succinct and focused on the issue. It may be now that flaws in logic become more apparent. What at first seemed like an objective appraisal of a performance is in fact an emotional hijacking. It happens to most of us!



*"Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex and more violent. It takes a touch of genius – and a lot of courage to move in the opposite direction."*

FF Schumacher

**So What questions interrogate consequences.** They ask what might happen as a result of action and inaction. This has the effect of painting scenarios. It is useful to do it in a structured conversation because it is going to happen anyway! For some individuals it's a form of catastrophising, in other words imagining disasters. For others optimism bias kicks in and it's a rosy future.

A question like *'If your performance remains the same what is the consequence for you and others?'* is intended to frame the challenge from a different perspective. Similarly, *'If your performance improves what are the benefits for you and others?'* is a question intended to test the worth of the extra effort involved.

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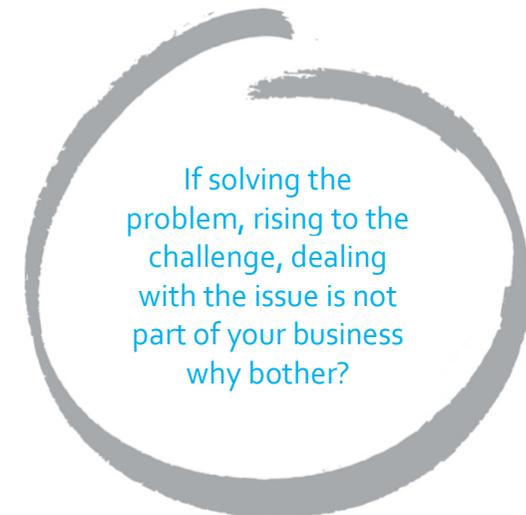
Another way of testing the worth of the extra effort involved is to project forward: "*In a years' time what would it look like if it were successful?*" Often this is done by scenario painting through '*if-then*' projections: 'if this happens then what does it mean for ...' On a more formal scale, the technique of 'future basing' where a 'base' in the future is agreed and time is then spent describing in detail what success looks and feels like for that agreed future, is used in organisational planning. It also works very well with individuals and teams.

**So What questions identify who's affected.** They track through to who it would involve. If you're stood by the river watching the debris float by don't spend your days wading in, pulling it all out and dragging it to the banks, go upstream and find out what's causing it. The right questions probe the likely impact downstream. It's a helpful consideration. It may change the upstream attitudes and behaviours.

**So What questions test commitment.** They ask what can be sacrificed. Meaningful things don't happen without some sort of sacrifice. By asking 'if you wish this to happen what would you be prepared to give up?' you are entering a point where engagement bites. Up to this point in any discussion it can remain abstract and inconsequential. Beyond here the heart rate rises. Your likely response is '*I'd give everything!*' and when you probe this you help reframe the whole issue. What '*I'd give everything!*' actually means is that the person has not yet thought in any depth about it and would really like someone else to take the problem away.

**So What questions relate back to core purpose.** If solving the problem, rising to the challenge, dealing with the issue is not part of your business why bother? Well, there may be 101 good reasons to bother, none of which relate to your core purpose or your business - but as a means of locating why it's important for others it's a great question.

**Finally, So What questions evaluate impact.** They ask what the impact of action or inaction might be. Every meeting has an opportunity cost. The opportunity costs can be measured. It's two things. It's the cost of all the salaries in the room divided up for every hour of the meeting. It's also all the things everyone in the room could be doing as an alternative. Lastly, it's the time and emotional fall out multiplied up if it's an unsatisfactory experience. When we hear words and phrases like *collaborate, co-act, cooperate, work alongside, team up or get together with* we ask, 'So what?' and frankly so should you. Meeting together has to have a purpose, an outcome, a consequence or what's the point! Collaboration can be a shared conspiracy to do nothing. It's not an end in itself but is often treated as such. The So What question takes you to a place where it's legitimate to question the worth of an activity if it has no purposeful outcome.



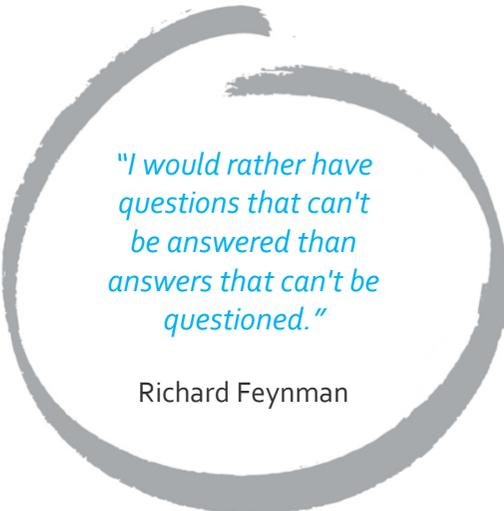
## Now What?

Finish with Now What? You've defined the problem; you've examined the consequences and now you need to act going forward. These questions are intended to be speculative.

### Now What Questions

Now what questions are the sort of movie characters ask when they find themselves in a pickle. In movies they come at the point where all other obvious alternatives have been exhausted. Think Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid escaping by jumping off a cliff "*Why won't you jump? I can't swim*" or Chief Brody saying "*You're gonna need a bigger boat*" from Jaws or "*Houston we have a problem*" from Apollo 13. Now what signals the moment when decisive action begins. In dialogue with individuals, teams and organisations we have found that focussing on desirable outcomes and locating those in the future works. If you know your destination the choice of route is easier. Seems simple. It is. Starting with the clutter loses you in the clutter.

**Now What questions engage with solutions.** It's a piece of magic to suspend all the reasons for not doing what's needed in order to free thinking about what is actually needed. The envisaged solution needn't be perfect at this stage. It needs to a. exist, b. be a focal point for thinking, and c. come from whoever you are in dialogue with. Solution focused thinking clears the clutter and if you like the clutter you can have it back later!



*"I would rather have questions that can't be answered than answers that can't be questioned."*

Richard Feynman

**Now What questions landmark the journey.** If our agreed destination is a to have solution at some time in the future then dwelling on the solution – what it looks like, what it costs, who is involved, what resources are needed – helps define how you get to the solution.

**Now What questions anticipate and position likely impediments.** The key words here are 'anticipate' and 'position'. Anticipating a difficulty is part of planning to overcome it. Positioning a difficulty – '*we'll cross that bridge when we come to it*' is keeping things in perspective and not allowing potential problems to overwhelm you. Finally, Now What questions initiate the journey. They ask about next steps.

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To recap. Our Method is always to ask the right question in the right way at the right time – the right question is usually the hard question. All our guidance is framed around the same three questions – What? So What? Now What? It can't be simplified further. We work with high performing individuals, teams and organisations. For example

The individual who was disappointed about a performance  
*"I'm unhappy about my performance."*

### What

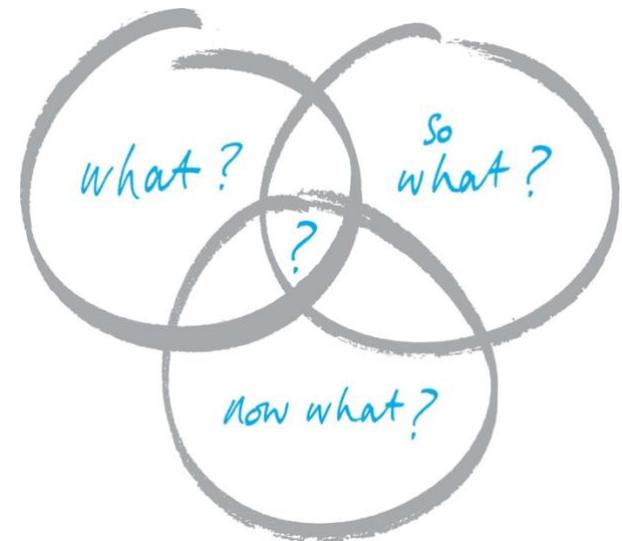
- What is it about your performance which is making you unhappy?
- What is the evidence for your judgement?
- What past performances of your own can you compare with?
- What for you would a really great performance look like?
- What would you give up to have this?

### So What?

- If your performance remains the same what is the consequence for you and others?
- If your performance improves what are the benefits for you and others?
- What might you need to know more of, or do more of, to improve your performance?
- What are you prepared to do to achieve the performance you want?

### Now What?

- What is the next step to achieve the performance you want?
- What might prevent the next step to achieve the performance you want?
- What are you prepared to do to overcome barriers towards the next step?

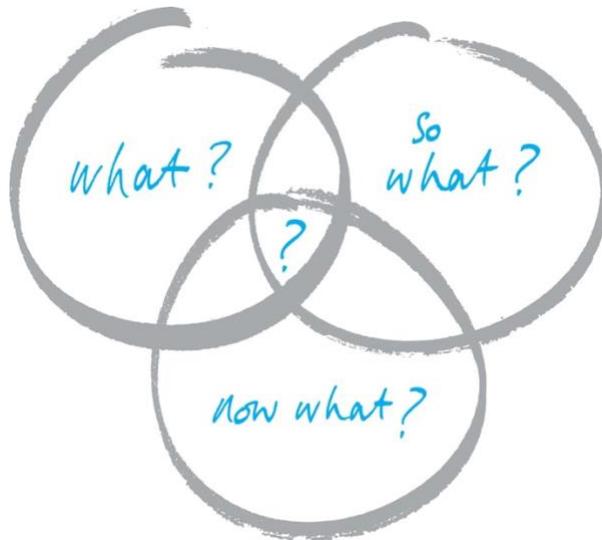


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The team which lacked cohesion  
*"Our team don't get along."*



### What

- What for you are the characteristics of a cohesive team?
- What for you is important about team cohesion?
- What does your team do which frustrates you?
- What is the evidence for your judgement?
- What ought your team do to improve?

### So What?

- If nothing changes what are the consequences?
- What do your team members say about cohesiveness?
- What might help the team become more cohesive?
- What would you and team members give up to be more cohesive?

### Now What?

- What is the next step to becoming more cohesive?
- What barriers might prevent this next step?
- What would you and team members do to overcome these barriers?

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The organisation whose workforce was demotivated

*"Our workforce is demotivated."*

### What

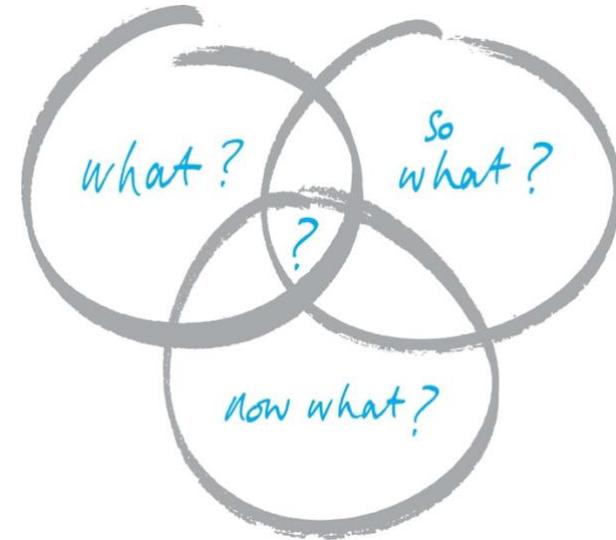
- What behaviours persuade you that your workforce is demotivated?
- What is the evidence for your judgement?
- What would your workforce be like if it were motivated?
- What is there about your workforce which suggest they can be motivated?
- What might have to change for your workforce to be motivated?

### So What?

- If nothing changes what are the consequences?
- What do the workforce say about their motivation?
- If the workforce were more motivated what would that look like?
- What are you prepared to do more of, or less of, to achieve what you want?

### Now What?

- What is the next step in helping your workforce to be motivated?
- What barriers might prevent this next step?
- What would you and your workforce do to overcome these barriers?



All high performing individuals, teams and organisations have similarities in how they mobilise for success. The operational realities may differ, the systems and structures will differ, the contexts will always differ, but the intentions and sentiments remain clear. ThreeWhats is no different.

We are driven by a very clear core purpose. Our intent drives our everyday behaviours. Our sentiments are embodied in our values, again these values frame how we approach relationships – with each other, with others and with the content which we source. And so ...

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# Finally,

### Our ThreeWhats core purpose

To generate valuable insights and guidance by asking the only questions which matter. To bring knowledge and experience of high performers to leaders, managers and decision-makers.

### Our ThreeWhats values

Our values are what we bring to our work how we build and sustain relationships and how we support our crew.

- Curiosity – curiosity allows to be open minded about ideas and opportunities
- Diversity – diversity, not only in people we support and value, but in how we think
- Simplicity – simplicity ensures accessibility which in turn drives inclusivity

### Our ThreeWhats behaviours

We work with, for, and around, high performers - individuals, teams and organisations. We take our experiences and create guidance. To do so we follow a formula

*"Source it, Slow it, Simplify and Shorten it, Share it.."*

Source – we scan the environment and try and find inspirational practice

Slow – we take time to scrutinise what we find

Simplify and Shorten – we simplify what can be complex and make it easy to access

Share -we share what we do though a variety of channels

All our ThreeWhats Playbooks, Storybooks, Sketchbooks, Slidebooks and Reviews can be found with details of how you can part of our crew at [www.threewhats.com](http://www.threewhats.com)

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