

# Untangling your whats and your hows

Charlotte Housden is a Chartered Coaching and Occupational Psychologist with a consulting practice where she manages coaching and leadership development programmes for international organisations, as well as coaching senior executives and people at crossroads in their careers.

By Charlotte Housden



This article is part of a series I've been writing on navigating change. Back in 2019/2020 I ran a research project interviewing 100+ people who were making shifts in their lives – from changing careers, moving to a new city, building a business, or getting fit. I turned the results into a book called *Swim Jump Fly: A Guide to Changing Your Life*, condensing all the lessons these people had learned along the way. I'll be sharing hints and tips from the book over the next few weeks.

If you haven't seen the last two articles you can find them [here](#) and [here](#). In the previous posts, we covered being clear about why you want to make a shift and where you want to end up. Then we discussed the fit between the size of your change project and how you deal with change – whether you're risk averse or more comfortable with big shifts.

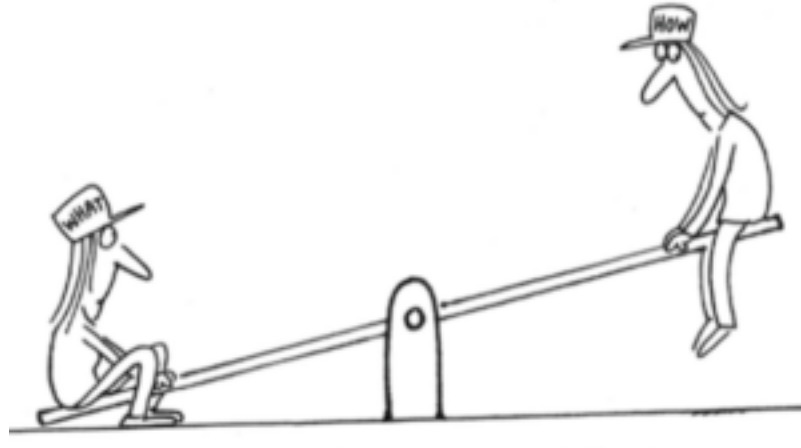
In this post, I'll turn to the 'what' of your change, the 'how' of your change, and why it's useful to understand the difference between them both. To bring them to life I'll start with a story from one of the participants. I'll call him Nico.

Nico had always dreamt of being a journalist. But by his mid-30's he felt quite down. Despite achieving a life-long goal of working for a number of well-known news outlets, he thought he was "doing the wrong thing entirely." He had often wondered what it would be like to be an entrepreneur, so started speaking to small business owners. However, after many conversations he still wasn't making any progress in this new direction.

Later on Nico met some other people who were also working on their career change. Whilst he was chatting to them, he had an epiphany. "They described what they were passionate about and their jobs. These two things were completely different. When I spoke about what I was passionate about as a child, what I'm passionate about now, my job, well... all of them aligned." He realised that it "wasn't that I was in the wrong line of work at all. I was just doing it wrong."

As I listened to Nico, I realised the difference between the 'what' and the 'how' of his unhappiness. He was focused on changing the 'what', but actually it was the 'how' that needed shifting. As I continued interviewing more people for my research, this topic started to show up more and more often.

Other interviewees were also focusing too much on the 'what' and not on the 'how'. They were pursuing big shifts thinking this would make them happy but didn't check whether it was the 'how' that would make the difference. Being clear about which one needs to shift can save us a lot of time and effort otherwise they'll be out of balance.



Let's expand on the 'how' a bit more, continuing with the example of work. Perhaps you're not enjoying your role anymore. You're chained to a desk all day, but would rather be doing something outside, that's physical. Or maybe you're an introvert but have to work in an open-plan office. Would you rather be working from home? Maybe it's the endless meetings that's the issue.

Or if we take another topic, perhaps you're trying to improve your fitness, but you just don't like the type of exercise you're doing. You find it hard to keep going because you're sociable. Yet you end up working out alone. What you'd really like is to join a boxing class to learn with others.

Why not try this exercise as it could help you to focus more on your 'hows':

1) First, think about your life and the areas you'd like to shift. Reflect on all the 'whats' that you'd like to change – these could be your relationships, friendships, work, income, health, wellbeing, sleep... or whatever you think needs adjustment. Write them all down without judgement.

2) Now pick one that seems manageable. Something you can experiment with, which doesn't feel too big a project to work on.

3) Write a heading called **Whats** and another called **Hows**. Reflect on what isn't working for you. Every time you think of something, allocate it to one or the other. Here are some examples for work:

## What

Sales

Report writing

Presenting

## How

Being in the office 5 days a week

The long commute

Too many meetings

4) Let's imagine it's the sales process that's bothering you. If we were working together, I'd invite you to dig into it to identify what it is you dislike. Perhaps it's not so much selling, rather the way you are selling e.g. via large groups, whereas you'd be more comfortable doing this with individuals. If this is the case, then perhaps you could find a way around your current discomfort by changing the 'how' of your sales process.

It took him some time but eventually Nico worked this out. He came to realise that he still loved journalism and the shift he needed wasn't a whole new career, it was just addressing the way he did his work. His focus had always been on perfection – ensuring every article was flawless and that everything on his list was always done. It meant very long hours, no time at home, and over time, a steep increase in stress until he couldn't cope any more.

Where Nico had been going wrong was that he'd forgotten about the people around him. His focus had been getting everything right, but he made no effort to build relationships with his colleagues or his manager. He just threw himself into never making a mistake.

Nowadays, he focuses more on relationship building and less on perfection. As he's built-up better relationships, he can manage expectations about delivery times. He has also dropped the tasks that make no difference and accepted that nothing will ever be perfect. Nico now finds his job much more enjoyable and has a better work-life balance too.

In the next article, I'll be focusing on experimenting with new directions and taking small steps to test things out.

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*Cartoons and illustrations by Private Eye cartoonist Simon Pearsall who created 100 original images for the book.*

## Discussion

What would you like to say?

