

An OKRs adoption story: A powerful question to ask

In 2020, I had the chance to work for a second time with a 60 people tribe. They had switched completely to remote and **the company had decided to implement OKRs** for aligning everyone. The tribe leaders were not happy with this decision, since their tribe was already effectively self-governed before Covid started, however they had to adopt OKRs. And they were struggling with it.

In their words, **teams were not able to understand how OKRs work**. They were just coming with a list of tasks to do during the next quarter. They asked me to please help them educate the teams.

When I observed the OKRs team's presentation, I couldn't agree more with the tribe leaders' opinion: The OKRs were a bunch of tasks and sometimes even maintenance tasks. I also observed how **the leaders were providing again and again the right feedback**: the OKRs should be outcome oriented. And again and again the teams seemed confused.

Then I asked for permission to **ask a simple question: Why were those important to be done now?**

There were three main **team's reactions**:

- Some teams **struggled** to give an answer. This actually enabled a new question (not asked at that moment): Why does the team exist?
- Others talked about **many areas they wanted to improve**, which made visible the team lack of focus (actually OKRs try to solve this issue).
- Finally, there was a team able to give **a concrete, meaningful answer**. They had a clear focus oriented on the outcome, but they struggled to articulate it.

In all cases, there was a clear next step after having changed the approach.



The question **"Why now?"** brought more valuable conversations to the tribe regarding their OKRs. It made them talk about outcomes more effectively than when they were told what they were doing wrong or how they should do it.

When I observe how things are done in a system, rather than sharing my opinion of how those things should be done, I find it more valuable for the system to start with curiosity and to ask about the importance or the purpose of those activities.



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