

THE WHAT, SO WHAT, NOW WHAT FRAMEWORK

A SIMPLE FRAMEWORK TO ACHIEVE MORE WITH LESS EFFORT

In the experience of my colleagues and me, senior leaders will only adopt and apply frameworks when they possess the rigor required for credibility, with the simplicity required for action. The 'What, So What, Now What' (WSN) framework is one such framework. This deceptively simple concept, using language familiar to us all, can dramatically increase the effectiveness of any leader, team or organization – quickly.

You can employ this framework in big moments and small, from one-one-one interactions to large and complex meetings. You can use it to help others be more productive, to increase the impact of your communication and to raise the level of your influence. In short, it's a simple framework with a potentially huge impact.

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About the Author

For 25 years, Dr. Peter Fuda has been a Sherpa to leaders, teams and organizations across the globe as a consultant, coach, speaker, researcher, teacher and author.

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IT'S NEVER BEEN MORE DIFFICULT TO LEAD

Leaders must deliver on their agreed results, no matter the context they inherit or face; excuses are not tolerated for long by demanding stakeholders. As a result, leaders come under enormous pressure to perform, with limited resources and restricted time. Compounding this pressure is the increasingly complex and ambiguous world we live in. Leaders are expected to make more decisions, more quickly, from more inputs than at any time in history.

These pressures can manifest themselves in many symptoms. Here are some of those that we frequently observe:

- Leaders are exhausted. Middle managers are idle.
- People have elaborate, detailed and compelling stories about why they are where they are. They have no story about what should happen next.
- Everyone agrees that we need to change. No one agrees that I need to change.
- Meetings are for updates. Corridors are for decisions.
- More and more people attend meetings. Less and less decisions are made.
- The outcome of a meeting is to have another meeting.
- The key action item is to form a committee.
- Diaries are full, but little gets done.
- Some leaders have lost the will to live.

If any of these symptoms sound vaguely familiar, then chances are you can benefit from the WSN framework, which we explain in the following pages.

THE WSN FRAMEWORK IN A NUTSHELL

The 'what' simply refers to the situation, issue at hand or baseline facts. At this stage, we are simply answering; what is the situation? What do we all need to know?

The 'so what' refers to the meaning and consequences we ascribe to the situation. It involves judgment and exploration. At this stage, the questions we are answering include; what are our insights? What are the potential consequences and implications? What could this mean? Why do we care? What's at stake?

The 'now what' refers to the next actions we will take. At this stage, we are answering; what is the best outcome from here? What are the 3-5 actions key actions we will take? Who is accountable?

If you were to observe a highly ineffective interaction, you would notice the participants spend the bulk of their time (approximately 70%) in the 'what', lost in the issue. They spend almost no time in the 'so what' exploring the meaning of that issue. As a consequence, they spend too much time in the 'now what' (approximately 30%), because they are anxious and overwhelmed, coming up with long lists of actions and initiatives.

Conversely, if you were to observe a highly effective interaction, you would notice the participants spend very little time (approximately 10-15%) in the 'what'. They spend the bulk of their time in the 'so what' (approximately 70-80%) exploring the meaning, consequences, risks and opportunities of the issue. As a consequence, they spend very little time (approximately 10-15%) in the 'now what', because the next steps will usually be clear and few.

"In a highly effective interaction, the bulk of time is spent in the 'so what'; exploring the meaning, consequences, risks and opportunities of the issue."

ANYONE CAN BENEFIT FROM THE WSN FRAMEWORK

A highly intelligent and well regarded CEO was under enormous pressure from his parent company to create a turnaround in business performance. Personally, he was exhausted; he had a long history of leading from the front and making all of the key decisions, and this was taking its toll.

His team members were also frustrated. They felt their CEO prevented them from demonstrating initiative and personal ownership. Meetings were consumed by team members describing the problems and issues preventing them from achieving their goals. Long lists of potential solutions, ideas and initiatives followed, which, in turn, created confusion and anxiety throughout the organization. Everybody was consumed with “chasing shadows” and something had to give.

When we introduced the WSN framework to the CEO, he instantly saw his organization reflected in it. He decided then and there to make changes.

For any leadership interaction; one-on-one, small group, or team meeting, he asked team members to provide the context, issue or problem in advance. If this was not possible, it needed to be summarized in the first few minutes of the interaction – no long stories or justifications.

He focused the bulk of available time discussing the potential implications, consequences and meaning of the issues at hand. All participants needed to come ready with their insights. Finally, every interaction concluded with an agreement on a maximum of three next actions, owned by someone other than the CEO.

In the following months, the CEO stopped doing the work of his subordinates, redefined his role, and cleaned out his diary. His team demonstrated far greater ownership and initiative. Meetings became far more productive, and the organization’s priorities were narrowed down to just a few key initiatives. This provided the focus and space the organization needed to get back to winning ways.

WHY THE WSN FRAMEWORK WORKS

Key meetings, in particular, are carriers of organizational culture. The WSN framework encourages leaders to shift cultural norms from frenzied activity and helplessness, to norms based on purpose, meaning and focused actions.

Purposeful interactions rely on insight, consequences, and shared meaning as a basis for action. Innovation and creativity also emerge from the same place. This is the focus of ‘so what’.

Interactions are less productive when the primary emphasis is on sharing data and ‘updating each other’. The WSN framework encourages everyone to come to interactions with a solid understanding of the situation, and to offer their insights about the potential consequences and opportunities they see present in the issue.

Of course, there is a place for meetings and interactions that are simply about connecting with others and exchanging information. In our experience, however, these kinds of interactions dominate leadership diaries at the expense of those interactions that aim to increase collective insight and achieve concrete decisions. When ‘update meetings’ dominate, leaders will often walk away after spending hours together and say “that was a waste of time.”

Diligent application of the WSN framework discourages and ultimately eliminates ‘upward delegation’; the process whereby leaders end up doing the work and making the decisions of their subordinates.

IMPLEMENTING THE WSN FRAMEWORK

Over the page, you will find a simple ‘cheat sheet’ to help you implement the WSN framework quickly and effectively.

“Purposeful interactions rely on insight, consequences, and shared meaning as a basis for action.”

WSN CHEAT SHEET

PHASE	WHAT	SO WHAT	NOW WHAT
DEFINITION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The situation, problem, issue or challenge at hand. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The insights, meaning, potential implications and shared learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The proposed actions and next steps.
DESCRIPTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is the <i>description</i> of the context, the issue for discussion and the desired outcome. The aim is to raise awareness of the situation, develop a common view of relevant facts and assumptions, and to have a clear outcome agreed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is the deep and thorough <i>exploration</i> of the situation. The aim is to arrive at a shared view of the meaning, consequences and implications, and to achieve a higher level of insight than was present at the start of the interaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is the focus on precise <i>action</i>. The aim is to arrive at a small number of initiatives, actions or next steps that the protagonists agree will directly address the situation and its potential implications.
EMPHASIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 70% in an ineffective interaction. 15% in an effective interaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0% in an ineffective interaction. 70% in an effective interaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 30% in an ineffective interaction. 15% in an effective interaction.
KEY QUESTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What does success look like in this conversation? What are the critical things we must all know? What are relevant facts? In summary, what is the situation? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are our insights? What are the potential consequences and implications? What could this mean? Why do we care and what's at stake? What is the opportunity here? How could we realize the opportunity? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the best outcome from here? What are the 3-5 actions or initiatives that will get us the outcome? Who is accountable? What is the very next step? What will we stop doing?
COMMENTARY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ideally, the 'what' should be distributed in advance of the interaction in the form of an email, report or slide deck. In a 60 minute meeting, no more than 10 minutes should be spent here. If someone can't describe the 'what' in that time, then they may not know the situation well enough, or may not want to take responsibility for it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The move from 'what' to 'so what' is at the heart of increased effectiveness – we shift from 'describing the news' to 'plotting and planning the next chapter'. The 'so what' is where we are forced to think, reflect and learn. It's also where we can exchange insights with others, and reach a higher level of collective insight. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A long list of actions or initiatives usually stems from a lack of focus or an attempt to do the job of someone else. A lack of focus usually stems from too much time in the 'what', and not enough time in the 'so what' making sense of the situation and creating shared meaning and insight. With shared insight, the key actions are usually fairly narrow and obvious.

“Application of the WSN framework discourages and ultimately eliminates ‘upward delegation’.”