

# On Forward Thinking

By Nilofer Merchant



## No, Really, How Are You?



**R**emember, in the early days of the pandemic, when the question “How are you?” seemed to take on new meaning? At times it sounded just plain ridiculous. But we didn’t ignore that awkwardness.

Instead, we repeated the question with clearer intention, asking, “How are you?” Or “How *are* you?” Or even “How are *youuu*?”

And our coworkers, bosses, and clients told us things. Tough things, real things, vulnerable things. And we related.

Yet as some of us have returned to working on-site together, rather than asking the question as a way of genuinely gauging how our colleagues are doing, many of us have reverted to using it as merely a routine pleasantry. While we’re all anxious and even enthusiastically ready to reestablish some of the routines of “normal,” pre-COVID work life, there’s a case to be made that we keep the emphasis on this three-syllable inquiry—because how we relate affects what we create.

Meaningful work, after all, is a by-product of relationships. When we relate genuinely, we share our take, which is the basis of new and rich ideas. It makes it easier to trust others to turn that flicker of potential into a flare of ingenuity. And it’s less scary to admit when something isn’t working. If a global pandemic has reminded us of one thing, it is that the future is not created; it’s cocreated.

So let me ask: How are you? I mean really. How are you?

After decades of working around the world, in many industries and even more capacities, I’ve found that most of us have no idea. In fact, we’ve been conditioned to believe it doesn’t matter. What matters is that we are focused, efficient, productive. That may seem on the surface like a selfless stance. But it presumes that the source of innovation is ourselves, and that each of us is capable of great work all on our own.

In truth, expressing angst about an upcoming project or frustration with a team member offers clues as to what’s not working. Our feelings and our needs are a valuable source of clarity. They’re how we know what matters. This

Portrait illustration: Studio Nippoldt, Astrid Nippoldt

internal knowingness is fundamental to healthy relationships and productive workplaces. When I ask the question, I want to know, of course. But I also want *you* to know. It isn’t an easy question to answer. I often hand out a list of feelings for people to reference. And guess what words are

a German word I hadn’t heard of before: *Weltschmerz*, which translates to “world-weariness” (*Welt* meaning “world” and *Schmerz* meaning “pain”). The word, I learned, originated in the 1820s. According to recent articles, the romance writer Jean Paul used it in the novel *Selina* to describe Lord

---

**If we don’t know the answer to what we’re feeling at the moment, we aren’t able to identify what we need to fully thrive at work.**

---

not on it? “Good.” “OK.” “Eh.” Yet those are the most common responses people give.

Strategy is the process of going from *here* to *there*. If we don’t know the answer to what we’re feeling at the moment, we aren’t able to identify what we need to fully thrive at work. This is why answering this question matters as much as asking it. It’s a chance to hear your own *here*.

And then I want you to ask someone else, “How are *you*?”

For a stretch during the lockdowns my response was that I was feeling tired. But I discovered it was more than that. As I talked with a friend about my fatigue, she shared with me

Byron’s discontent, capturing an overall sadness about life. *Weltschmerz* has since been described as an experience of personal inadequacy that reflects the world’s inadequacy. And that was it, exactly what I was feeling.

Sharing my state-of-the-self helped me to pinpoint my *here*. And from there, I was able to make my next move, which meant postponing some work, prioritizing other things, and making sure that those I worked with knew that any signs of fatigue were not due to them. “How are you?” was the mechanism that enabled me to relate—first to myself, and then to everyone else. ▮

Getty Images / Nadia Bormotova

Merchant is a former Silicon Valley tech executive and the author of the best-selling business books *The Power of Onlyness*, *11 Rules of Creating Value in the Social Era*, and *The New How*.