



Colorado
Charter Chapter

Toward More Powerful Questions Part 3

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Powerful questions are provocative probes that cut through avoidance and confusion. By asking powerful questions, coaches invite clients to move toward clarity, action, and discovery at a whole new level. Powerful questions create greater possibilities for expanded learning and fresh perspectives.

Lyle Schaller, a prolific author and astute organizational consultant, once said, "The most effective way to influence both individual and institutional behavior is to ask questions." In their book *The Appreciative Inquiry Handbook: For Leaders of Change*, authors David Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, and Jacqueline Stavros state, "Change begins the moment you ask the question."

How do you know that you've asked a powerful question? Often there will be moments of significant silence as the client considers the implications of the question. Perhaps the person will say, "Wow! I never thought of it in that way before!"

How does a coach ask powerful questions? Here are some suggestions you may find helpful.

1. Powerful questions generally are open-ended questions.

Open-ended questions are those that cannot be answered with "yes" or "no". Open questions require clients to reflect and to express their thoughts verbally. Jane Vella states, "Open questions are the single sure practice that invites critical thinking and learning."

2. Powerful questions are for the benefit of the client, rather than the coach.

It is tempting for a coach to ask information-gathering questions, thinking that they need more background to help solve the client's problem. At such times, the coach needs to be reminded that it's their job to help the client find their own solution. So before asking a question, ask yourself, "Am I asking this question for my benefit, or for the benefit of my client?"

3. Powerful questions stimulate the client toward clarity, discovery, insight, and action, rather than serving to correct the client.

Coaches make better progress with clients when they choose an accepting, non-judgmental attitude toward clients. Such an attitude precludes the need to correct clients. Instead, questions should be designed to help clients make discoveries and new insights that lead to positive actions.

4. Powerful questions are usually forward-looking, not backward-looking.

Whereas much of counseling dwells on the past, coaching is future-oriented. Coaches help clients arrive at new solutions, envision bigger dreams and arrive at new possibilities. Powerful questions tend to help clients focus on the future, rather than upon the past.

5. Powerful questions arise out of active listening and are based upon the client's agenda.

The best questions are not planned ahead, but are created out of the moment in a coaching session. The coach listens well and formulates questions based upon the context of the discussion and the client's agenda.

6. Powerful questions are "pure" questions that are neutral and come from a non-judgmental heart. Questions that are judgmental or negative tear down and disempower, rather than motivate and inspire. The best questions are "neutral" in that they contain no prejudices, directives or leanings on the part of the coach.

7. Powerful questions are short, simple and to the point.

Sometimes these questions are called "dumb" questions because they are so plain, simple and obvious. However, it's smart to ask "dumb" questions because they drive to the heart of issues. Examples of these questions are:

- What do you want?
- Where are we?
- What's next?
- Where do you want to go?
- What do you see?
- What did you learn?
- What will you do?
- When will you do it?
- What do *you* think?

8. Powerful questions arise out of curiosity.

Curious questions are open-ended with a broad focus that invite consideration of issues not previously thought of, but still leave the client in control. Curious questions are used for the purpose of clarifying an issue and for broadening the scope of the discussion.

9. Powerful questions can come from intuition or a hunch.

Intuitive questions are based upon a hunch or a "sixth sense" as a response to what you may be hearing or seeing. At times when using an intuitive question, you may have the sense of being led by a Higher Power. While an intuitive question sometimes can lead to a breakthrough, the coach should be careful in how the question is worded. Keep in mind these suggestions:

- Do not present your hunch as an absolute fact, but just something to be explored.
- Word it in a soft, tentative way.
- Use phrases such as "I wonder about..." or "I'm curious as to whether..."

10. Powerful questions can be 360 degree questions.

Powerful questions can explore issues from many various angles that help broaden the client's perspective and increase insight. For example:

- *Background*: "Step back for a moment and tell me, what are the underlying issues?"
- *Systemic*: "What other factors are influencing this issue?"
- *Result*: "What result would you like to have from this situation?"
- *Culture*: "In what ways might culture be involved?"
- *Personal growth*: "What inner changes would you like to see for yourself?"
- *Interpersonal*: "What relationship dynamics do you see at work?"
- *Emotional*: "What emotions are coming into play here?"
- *Financial*: "How are concerns over money issues impacting this situation?"
- *Spiritual*: "What spiritual factors might be at work in this situation?"
- *Family*: "How are family dynamics and relationships impacting the issues?"
- *Strategy*: "What are the first steps to take in working on this?"

11. Powerful questions are usually stand-alone questions.

Questions that begin with "And. . ." or "So. . ." indicate a link to previous aspects of the conversation. Powerful questions stand alone. All it takes in a coaching session is one powerful question that totally changes the client's perspective and provides a new outlook on a situation.

12. Powerful questions have a practical orientation, rather than a theoretical bent.

Asking practical oriented questions are especially useful at the beginning of a coaching sequence, such as "What result do you want to take away from our conversation today?" This question will help focus the conversation so that precise action steps are created by the end of the session. When clients approach issues using general or vague theoretical language, it is helpful for coaches to bring them back to precise, measurable situations or specific people and places. Consider the following:

Client: "I can't seem to finish my projects."

Coach: "Can you give a precise example of an ongoing project you would like to finish?"

Client: "I cannot stand indecisive people".

Coach: "Who in your life are you referring to today?"

13. Powerful questions usually start with "What" or "How".

Powerful questions encourage clients to envision future possibilities, and questions starting with "What" or "How" tend to accomplish this best. (For example: "What will you . . . ?" or "How will you go about . . . ?") Once a goal or an action plan has been agreed upon, then using questions that start with "When", "Where" or "Who" help pin down the details of the plan. "Why" questions usually are to be avoided because they come across as judgmental and question motives. In addition, "Why" questions move clients away from a future, solution-oriented mindset, and instead invite them to be analytical in reviewing the past. This is based on the notion that to succeed one must understand why they failed. (Is it important in learning to swim, to analyze why a person almost drowned?) In effect, "Why" questions only let clients meander within their same old limited past frame of reference. The effective coach needs to gently lead them out of this box.

14. Powerful questions have the appropriate linguistic emphasis.

Consider the differences in meaning in the following questions:

- **What** do you want?
- What **do** you want?
- What do **you** want?
- What do you **want**?

Conclusion:

These principles form the foundation for asking powerful questions. Remember that it is not necessary in a coaching session to ask one powerful question after another. Doing so actually dilutes their impact. Rather, one or two powerful questions can change the course of the conversation, enable the client to gain a new perspective, and grasp possibilities previously unseen. A powerful question usually takes clients by surprise and puts them off balance. When faced with a truly powerful question, their immediate reaction often is silence and bewilderment. You'll know that you've asked a powerful question when the client looks stunned and withdraws on an inner quest.

Great coaches use powerful questions. Powerful questions transform lives!



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Walt is married to Dr. Sharon Miles-Hastings, a full-time school counselor and part-time college professor. They have five adult children and five grandchildren. Together they have taught numerous seminars, workshops and university classes, both in Colorado and in Africa. Walt is an avid skier and mountain climber, having summited all 54 of Colorado's "fourteeners." He and Sharon also enjoy camping, travel and cruises.

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