



Colorado
Charter Chapter

Toward More Powerful Questions Part 2

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Imagine having a single tool that would help you produce greater creativity, drive stronger commitment, and get improved results. Would you use it? It's called a question. Voltaire said "Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers." **Henna Inam, CEO of Transformational Leadership Inc.**, declared, "Asking the right questions is the single most important tool I use to help others discover and grow themselves as leaders."

However, not all questions are equal. While some questions lead a client to breakthroughs, other questions fall flat. Worse yet, some questions can injure the bonds of trust between coach and client.

Less-Effective Questions to Avoid Using

Coaches will likely ask more powerful questions by avoiding or using only sparingly the following types of questions.

Closed Questions

Closed questions are those that can be answered with a single word or phrase. Closed questions are less effective because they limit the client's choice or expression. Closed questions tend to shut down conversation, rather than open it up. Questions starting with the following words will invariably end up being closed questions: "Do you... Did you... Could you... Would you... Should you... Can you... Will you... Have you... Are you... Is... " (Just for fun, take this challenge. Try to formulate an open question starting with any of these ten words!) The best questions usually start with "What" or "How", and occasionally "Who" or "When" or "Why".

However, there are some times when asking closed questions are appropriate. First, closed questions are useful when determining procedural matters in a coaching session:

- Are you ready to move on?
- Could I ask you a question on another subject?
- Is it time to create an action plan for this issue?
- Would you be willing to tell me more about that situation?
- Should you act on this now?

Second, closed questions are helpful toward the end of a coaching session in moving to a conclusion or action. At times, it is useful for a coach to help clients limit the scope of their exploration and begin to decide on specific directions. The coach might offer either/or closed coaching questions that invite client decision and action:

- Do you want to decide on some actions right away, or is this still a little early for you?
- Do you prefer option A, option B, or option C?
- Are you going to respond right away, or do you want to let the situation settle down first?

The coach needs to ask closed questions judiciously, making sure that the question is not suggesting a direction or solution that the client has not already surfaced. Nor should the closed question mask the coach's impatience for the client to make a decision and move on.

Better yet, here is a sure-fire way of asking the same thing, but turning it into an open question. Simply insert the phrase "To what extent. . ." at the beginning of the question!

Leading Questions

Leading questions are the kind that lawyers use in cross-examining a witness during a trial. Leading questions are opinion statements disguised as questions. As such, they try to put words in the other person's mouth. Therefore they are manipulative (as well as unsanitary!). Leading questions almost always are closed questions. Here are some examples. Note that the phrase changing it from a statement into a question can be used at either the beginning or the end of the sentence.

- "Isn't it true that..."
- "Wouldn't you say that..."
- "Isn't it right that..."
- "Can't we agree that..."
- "The truth is . . ., isn't that right?"

From the coach's perspective, the purpose of asking a question is to obtain new information or generate new ideas. To do this well, it is important that the wording of the question does not disguise an attempt by the coach to influence, lead or guide the content of the answer in a certain direction. Therefore, leading questions are entirely inappropriate to use in a coaching context.

"Are you angry?" is an example of a more subtle leading question. While the client may indeed be angry, there may be other emotions involved, such as sadness or fear. Drawing attention to that one emotion may be giving it unnecessary weight. A more neutral question would be, "What are you feeling?"

Directive or "Answer-In-the-Question"

This type of question is not quite as blatant as the leading question in trying to push the coach's agenda or solution on the client. However, it does violate the spirit of coaching in that it suggests a solution for the client's problem. Here are some examples.

- How soon will you have a face-to-face talk to resolve this conflict with her?
- Have you thought about firing him?
- Obviously, your finances are in bad shape, so what is your plan to increase your income?
- Since attempts at reconciliation have not worked, how soon do you want to file for a divorce?
- With your health at risk, how fast do you think you could lose 30 pounds?

Coaches who provide clients with suggested solutions risk two things. First, they risk robbing the client of solving their own problem and taking personal responsibility for their own life. Second, the coach risks being blamed if the solution does not work.

Judgment Questions

Judgment questions can be even more subtle than leading questions or directive questions. Judgment questions show a lack of complete acceptance by the coach. They can seriously damage the coaching relationship in that they demonstrate prejudice or negativity on the part of the coach toward the client. Here are some examples.

- How has your negative attitude impacted this situation?
- When are you going to start making some real money?
- How could you be less of a dictator in your leadership style?
- What would it take for you to be more of a team player at work?
- Why are you so lazy?

“Why” questions should be used carefully and sparingly for three reasons. First, they can question a person’s motives and judgments, resulting in the client seeing such questions as a subtle form of punishment. Second, they tend to look at the past, rather than focus on the future. Third, they tend to invite an intellectual analytical response, rather than a response from the heart.

Negative Interrogation

Negative questions focus clients on their blocks and hindrances, such as:

- Why don’t you . . .
- What keeps you from . . .
- What are the things hindering you from completing this action?

Other more positive-oriented coaching questions will help your clients move forward in finding and designing their solutions.

Complicated (Run-On) and Multiple Questions

At times a coach may ask a question, sense that the question was not clear. The coach then attempts to clarify it by adding more and more to the question. Doing so results in a long run-on question that confuses the client. A similar mistake is to fire multiple questions at clients without giving them the chance to answer any of them.

The most powerful questions often are short, simple and to the point. The coach uses words that the client will understand without having to struggle over their meaning. Some of the best questions are stand-alone questions, and the coach allows time for the client to ponder and give a thoughtful response.

Conclusion

The effective coach uses powerful questions to help clients discover and grow. In most cases, the wise coach will avoid using closed questions, leading questions, judgmental question, directive questions, negative and run-on questions. In the third installment of this article, guidelines for asking powerful questions will be examined.

Thus, coaching questions that offer a totally open field for client response are neutral questions. They are considered much more useful to help open client perspectives.

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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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