



Toward More Powerful Questions

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Introduction

Asking effective questions is one of the foundational tools of coaching. How can coaches ask more powerful questions? In answering this question, we will consider the following in this three-part article:

- The role that questions play in coaching
- Less-effective questions to avoid using
- How to ask powerful questions

THE ROLE THAT QUESTIONS PLAY IN COACHING

Questions have amazing power. Questions automatically start us looking. Questions can jolt people awake. Questions can stimulate new ideas. Questions can open eyes to see new places and new ways of doing things. Chad Holliday, former chairman of the Board and CEO of Dupont, once said, "I find that when someone engages me in a question, it wakes me up. I'm in a different place."

Unfortunately, not all questions wield the same power. Much depends on who is asking the question and how it is asked, as well as the context in which it is asked. In a coaching context, consider how the use of questions would be different than in these settings:

- Questions a lawyer uses in cross-examining a witness
- Questions a detective uses in interrogating a suspect
- Questions used by an examiner at a Salem witch trial
- Questions used by a physician in ascertaining the illness a patient is suffering
- Questions used by a boss who intends to fire an employee
- Questions used by a reporter in scooping a news story

Questions Should Lead Toward the Coaching Objective

Why does someone work with a coach? Ultimately, it is so that the person can be more successful. Those who are just launching their coaching career often think it is their responsibility to propose answers or to offer options and solutions to their client. More experienced coaches try to help their clients find their own solutions by asking coaching questions. The latter approach calls for much more precision regarding both the form and the content of the coaching questions a coach effectively uses.

The Coach's Frame of Reference

The coach adopts the point of view that every client is intelligent and well-informed. The client knows all there is to know regarding the technical aspects of their issue. The coach considers that the client is an expert in his or her field, and that only the client is capable of finding innovative and fitting answers to accomplish one's personal or professional goals.

Given this perspective, it is fruitless to think that in any coaching conversation the coach will find solutions or options that the client has not already thought of and discarded. It's quite unimaginable that a coach will find answers in the client's field of expertise. Therefore, it is

not the coach's job to ask numerous questions aimed at finding answers to a problem to which the client has already given serious thought without solving.

Furthermore, it is not a coach's job to have a pocketful of powerful or very tricky questions that will blow the client away with surprise and be in awe at the coach's intellect. The function of a coaching question is not to reveal a coach's superlative creativity or unmatched intelligence. Instead, it is to help the client focus on their concerns or aspirations with a totally different perspective. So how does a coach come up with just the right question at the right time?

The Client's Frame of Reference

Why do clients call on coaches? It is because they have already inventoried all possible options to solve their problem, but to no avail. Clients perceive no solutions to their issues *as they have defined them*, and see no practical way to achieve their goals *as they have established them*. Herein is the key to solving the problem, whatever it is. The client's problem has no apparent solution, seen through the eyes of the client. Therefore, the coach must focus *on the outer limits of the client's definitions and formulations*.

Put simply, the professional coach does not focus on problems as defined by the client, but rather on the client's way of defining their problem. Here is the principle: it often is very easy to find a solution to a problem that is well-defined; conversely, a problem that seems to have no solution has very likely been defined in a way that is too restrictive or limiting.

The Function of Powerful Questions

When a client doesn't seem to be able to find answers or solutions, it is useless to search in the same direction that the client already has done. It is useful, however, to help the client reconsider their way of defining the problem. A coaching approach is to question the client's frame of reference. A powerful question is one that jolts the client into reconsidering new ways of looking at an issue.

Summary

Coaching questions are not meant to garner more information from the client, but instead to prompt the client to think, feel or react differently about the issue. A coach who focuses on the technical details of a client's specific problem does so at the risk of becoming a prisoner to the same limiting frame of reference as the client. Instead, the coach explores the general framework that underlies the way the client has looked at an issue and the way the client has searched for solutions. This change of perspective on goals and issues is what will permit the client to suddenly discover totally new approaches to define and solve the problem.

Coaches who do not know how to ask the right coaching question also tend to elicit more and more information from clients with content-oriented questions. In doing so they not only unknowingly help clients reinforce their restrictive perspective, but they themselves risk getting stuck with the client in the same exit-less client situation. Therefore, a correct coaching attitude consists in journeying with the client, but without getting sucked into that person's underlying frame of reference and mindset. A coach helps a client to question their viewpoint and to perceive their situation from a new angle. Powerful coaching questions are those that transform the client's frame of reference and allow them to see things from a new perspective. When we ask a powerful question, the intent is to help a client look deeper and find possible answers from a new perspective, rather than continuing to respond from an old, familiar place.

The next issue will examine how to avoid using less-effective questions.

For additional resource material, see the following:

- *Co-Active Coaching: New Skills for Coaching People Toward Success* by Laura Whitworth, Henry & Karen Kimsey-House and Phillip Sandahl (pp. 69 – 85, 257 – 268)
- *50 Top Tools for Coaching* by Gillian Jones and Ro Gorell (pp. 35 – 40)
- *Coaching Questions: A Coach's Guide to Powerful Asking Skills* by Tony Stolfus
- *Quantum Coaching Questions* by Marilena Municci
- *The Art of Asking: Ask Better Question, Get Better Answers* by Terry Fadem
- *Leading with Questions: How Leaders Find the Right Solutions by Knowing What to Ask* by Michael Marquardt
- *Coaching Questions* by Alain Cardon (an article found on the internet)

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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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