



## Powerful Questions

*“If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.”*

The power of questioning is enormous. A great question has the capacity to stop the receiver of the question in their tracks, and get them thinking in a different way that sparks a new awareness.

The ability to ask powerful questions is related more to a coach’s ability to listen actively and stay in the moment than having a list of “guaranteed” powerful questions in your back pocket.

While we never know which questions are going to be the most powerful for a client, a coach has a huge impact on the possible success of a coachee by the thoughtfulness of the question they ask, and the precision of the language they use.

### Breaking the Cycle

As humans we develop a particular way of thinking. This thinking becomes a little inner machine, our internal conversation going on in our mind. It travels around in the same way, thinking in the same way.

Powerful questions can stop the inner conversation from thinking in its usual way and suddenly you are thinking ‘outside’ the realm that you are used to. It is in the new realm that great ideas and thoughts come to you.

When a trail leads to an answer, we can uncover more truths by searching each answer to see if it presents a new set of questions. Eventually, there will come an answer which does not appear to present a new question, or which seems to answer all the previous questions. This becomes the basis of discovering the truth about an issue.

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This question-and-answer methodology for discerning truth is nothing new. It is commonly referred to as the “Socratic method” and derives its name from the ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates. He would continuously pose questions to his listeners to trigger thinking. Questioning continued until the listeners provided the most logical answer to a particular problem and discovery followed.

The Socratic method of questioning led to people finding their underlying beliefs. One of the ways Socrates did this was to answer a question by turning the question into a statement and adding another question. An example of this is if someone asked the question, “Why is the world round?” The Socratic method would be to answer this question with a statement and then a question. “So you think the world is round. Why do you think this? This questioning technique would unlock underlying beliefs as in this case where the person believes the world to be round. It is important to recognise that looking at the beliefs held in a question can be just as important as answering the question.

However, we tend to answer the question referring to our own beliefs instead.

Probing questions ask us to extend our knowledge beyond factual recall, to apply what is known to what is unknown; and to elaborate on what is known. By “peeling the onion” and getting to the heart of a matter, we are more likely to find our own “truths”, to develop goals that align with these truths and to act on these goals. Questions challenge a different part of our brain bringing about a different emotional response. Questions support us in seeing another perspective, in raising our awareness that another perspective exists and is possible.

## Open and Closed Ended Questions

A closed ended question is one in which there are a limited number of acceptable answers, usually, “yes” or “no.” Examples of closed-ended questions are:

- “Did you have a good week?”
- “Did you do your fieldwork?”

An open-ended question is one in which there are many acceptable answers thus providing an opportunity to elaborate. Examples of open-ended questions are:

- “What happened this week?”

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- “What was your experience with the fieldwork?”

Open-ended questions are encouraged in fields as diverse as sales, education and medical practice because they elicit the maximum possible information from the respondent. They literally open up the possibilities for answers to give the client the maximum space in which to respond.

## Statements are Not Questions

Tell me...

Describe....

Help me understand....

When we use the above language, the intent may be to gather information like you would a question, but these are not questions. They are statements that you might call directive, and even demanding.

“Tell me how you are going to make that change” is very different than asking, “How would you go about making that change?” or “How do you believe you can successfully make that change stick?”

“Describe what you would do as the team leader” is very different than asking, “What is your role as the team leader?” or “How would you describe your role as an inspirational team leader?”

“Help me understand how you think this will succeed” is very different than asking, “What are your thoughts on how you’ll succeed?” or “How would you need to think differently in order to be wildly successful?”

## Thinking Time

Unless we leave sufficient wait time after a person ceases speaking, then we are not listening effectively. Similarly, if we do not allow enough time between asking a question and expecting an answer, then we are not effectively questioning, and the quality of the information we get back will reflect that.

In 1972, an educational researcher, Mary Budd Rowe, conducted research in high schools on the amount of wait time that teachers typically allowed after asking a question of their students. She found that most teachers average wait time was less than 1.5 seconds. What she also found was that when these periods of silence lasted at least 3 seconds, many positive things happened for the students. The number of “I don’t knows” and no answer responses decreased, the length and correctness of responses increased and most dramatically of all, the scores of students in academic achievement tests increased. (Rowe 1972)

Although Rowe’s research focused on teachers and students, the application of the concept of “think time” is clear: if we want a thoughtful response, we must provide enough time to think!

Unfortunately the teachers in Rowe’s study are not alone in not providing people with sufficient time to respond to questions. As a result, many of us are conditioned into giving a quick rather than a thoughtful response to questions or risk not being listened to at all! Questioning is really an extension of listening. Questioning only occurs in response to what someone is saying.

## Self Application

Powerful questions need to come from outside of self. Asking the right question is the key to powerful questioning. To ask the ‘right’ question, complete and total focus must be placed on listening to what is being said, not trying to work out the answer to what is being said. When someone is speaking it is very easy to hear a word or concept and then for your mind to go off racing, thinking all about this concept. However the moment this happens you have stopped listening. There is nothing quite so embarrassing as being asked a question or hearing a pause in what someone has just finished saying and you realise that you haven’t heard a word of what they said.

When intense focus is occurring in a conversation, you will not have to think hard for a great question. The question will become apparent. You will be present and in the flow of the thinking of the other person and you will know what the next question needs to be. Asking questions is like drilling down, to get to the gold below. The gold being the gem of information that will support you or the person you are speaking to.

The very nature of great questioning strengthens learning. Imagine if we stopped to ask a question in the middle of an argument rather than trying to voice an opinion. The very nature of asking questions shifts the energy around a conversation to a more positive realm. However this is only the case if the questioning is not about trying to apply blame or guilt or dis-empowerment. If you are also trying to prove that you are right about something and ask leading questions to create this then you will achieve your outcome. You will know you are right. But you may have lost the trust or respect of a friend, colleague or loved one. Proving that you are right through questioning is about controlling a conversation, not about learning from a conversation.

## Creating a World of Questions

Creating a world where you ask empowering questions can enthuse and energize your conversations. Questions sharpen strategy, vision and values, building the capacity for change.

“The usefulness of the knowledge we acquire and the effectiveness of the actions we take depend on the quality of the questions we ask. Questions open the door to dialogue and discovery. They are an invitation to creativity and breakthrough thinking. Questions can lead to movement and action on key issues; by generating creative in-sights, they can ignite change.” (Vogt et al, 2003, pp1.)

Now imagine creating a questioning culture in your workplace. Creating a culture of discovery empowers people, stimulates creativity, surfaces underlying beliefs and supports change. Wow! Wouldn't we all love to work in a place like this.

## Reflection

1. Having an awareness of questioning can change the way you have a conversation.  
After your next conversation, reflect on the type of questions you asked.
2. What questions do you have about questioning?
3. What values do you think are aligned with creating a culture of questioning?

## Coaching Application

The power of any question comes from it's ability to create an awareness or eye opening moment for clients, enabling them to re-frame the challenge, issue or problem, and see it in

a new way. The shift in perception and thinking brings with it the opportunity for new and more options for possible solutions and actions that the client may not have thought of before.

The art of powerful questioning lives within the art of coaching. Coaching is all about discovery, learning and change. Powerful questions also increase the acceptance of change. However the attitude, mindset, pace and timing all effect the impact of asking questions. (Marquardt, 2005) A coach must be conscious of these things at all times. In the coaching experience, a coach may feel some pressure to find the answer for their client. This however is not coaching. This is consulting. It is imperative that a coach feels relaxed and not pressured to be right or to know the answer.

It is important in asking questions to check in with any assumptions that may be made when an answer is given to a question. It is important to ensure that the meaning of an answer to a question is clearly understood and so further questioning can support this. The language we use tells who we are. We make assumptions when we answer questions. Listen for the assumptions as well as the answers to the question.

The flow and depth of questions can only happen if there is no judgement from the coach. Many conversations can be quite emotional and it may be challenging to not be caught up in the emotion. However, it is imperative to the coaching experience that all questions asked must not have any judgement in them. There must be no guilt or judgement in any part of a question.

So let's review the steps to creating powerful questions

1. Create a space where you are not distracted or not able to focus completely;
2. Commit to creating a culture of questioning, through valuing learning and discovery;
3. Listen carefully to what is being said, the assumptions made, the words used, the information given;
4. Allow for a couple of seconds to reflect – this will mean a silence;
5. Ask a question to gain greater meaning or for clarity;
6. Ensure there is no judgement or any assumptions being made in the coaching questions;
7. Do not just accept what you hear as a truth or wrong or right, just accept what you hear as language, a person's perspective; and
8. Consider how you will answer a question or range of questions being asked by a client, where they are seeking solutions from you.

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## Reflection

1. Make a list of powerful questions.
2. Check what assumptions you make in your list of powerful questions. Are they questions or statements? Do they begin with WHAT or HOW?
3. Categorize your questions in subject headings. i.e. Questions about change, questions for awareness, questions for discovery etc.
4. How will you work with a client who asks you not to ask lots of questions?
5. When talking to a potential client how will you position the use of questions in coaching?