

“My greatest strength as a consultant is to be ignorant and ask a few questions.”

– Peter Drucker (one of the pioneers of organizational development)

Skillful questions are an important tool in all forms of coaching.

Good questions:

- help coachees engage more deeply in a discovery process
- provide new perspectives
- stimulate creativity
- challenge limiting points of view and beliefs
- focus attention on what’s most important
- generate energy
- evoke even more questions

However, questioning all too often ends up impeding the coaching process.

Unskillful questioning can:

- interrupt the coachees’s train of thought
- focus the coachee on perspectives or tangents that interest the coach, but are not necessarily helpful to the client
- place control of the process with the coach rather than the client

Asking Good Questions

1. The intent is to support the coachee’s learning.

Our questions are tools to serve the coachee, not the coach. All too often, we ask questions for our own information. We may be operating out of the mistaken sense that we must really understand their situation – presumably so that we can offer them wise advice or a solution. The purpose of your questions is *not* to elicit more information. It’s to stimulate the other to think and feel differently about their situation. You want to ask a very pertinent and timely question then allow the client space to really work with it.

2. Open vs. closed questions

Closed Questions direct the speaker to give specific (and often short) responses. They force the speaker to respond within the categories or options defined by the questioner.

Open-ended Questions invite the speaker to explore for themselves, free from any constraint created by the questioner’s frames or concepts.

Here are examples of closed vs. open-ended questions:

(closed) *Were you satisfied with the outcome of the meeting?*
(open-ended) *How did you feel about the outcome of the meeting?*

- (closed) *Do you think the team might be concerned about the impact on their budget?*
- (open-ended) *What do you think the team might be concerned about?*
- (closed) *Don't you think this will put too much work-load on John?*
- (open-ended) *What are the implications of this for John and his role?*

Answering a closed question creates an expectation that the coach will offer another closed question. If you are getting short answers to your questions, and the conversation starts to feel like a series of back & forth questions and short answers, you are probably using closed questions. (This is called a “shoot and reload” conversation.)

Open questions help keep responsibility and ownership of the coaching with the coachee – which is where it belongs.

3. Ask transformational questions

Transformational questions invite the coachee to break out of their existing paradigm into new possibilities. They challenge the coachee to come into a different relationship with the situations they face. We ask provocative questions that surface and challenge basic assumptions, stimulate new and creative thinking, raise energy, and evoke even more questions. Here are some examples of transformational questions:

- What else might this experience mean?
- How else could this experience be described? Is there a more positive story you could tell about this same set of events?
- What is the opportunity here?
- What would a real breakthrough look like?
- If you really dared to formulate your deepest hopes, what would you say?
- If you felt completely free to do what you want, what would you do?
- What haven't you admitted out loud yet?
- Are you absolutely sure that the meaning you have made of this is completely true?
- If you had a magic wand, how would you transform this situation?

4. When ready, ask questions that move to action

Usually towards the latter part of a coaching session, we want to help the coachee move to closure and often some kind of action. We use more *pointer questions*: questions that start with How, What, Who, Where and When. Here are some examples of pointer questions that help move to action:

- What are the takeaways for you from our time together?
- What options do you see?
- How do you want to move forward on this?

- What will be your next action step?
- By when will you complete this?
- What obstacles might arise in trying to accomplish this?
- What support do you need and from whom?
- How else might you think about this?
- Who needs to be included in this?
- Where will you find those resources?

The Test of a Good Question

You usually can know instantly if your question was helpful or not. After a skillful question, energy is raised, the other readily engages with the question, and either things appear to move forward or the coachee is triggered into creative pondering.

If, after asking a question, the other becomes hesitant, goes off on a tangent, or seems less interested, your question probably took them off track.

If so, retract your question. Invite the coachee to ignore it.

You might want to invite them back into the driver's seat with questions like:

"Where would you like to focus?"

or

"What would be most helpful now?"

The Heart of Questioning

We advise or tell someone what to do when we believe we know something they don't.

Questioning is an expression of the coach's trust in the coachee. We ask questions because we believe that the coachee either already has the answers within them, or has the capacity to sort things out and create the solutions they need. A good question is a gift, and questioning is a partner dance of discovery that is inherently empowering.

"A vital question, a creative question, rivets our attention. All the creative power of our minds are focused on the question. Knowledge emerges in response to these compelling questions. They open new worlds."

– Verna Allee, The Knowledge Revolution