



## Fulcrum Search Science Inc. Coaching with Questions:

# The Right Question, at the Right Time, with the Right Intent

Coaching happens primarily in conversations. One of the essential skills required for effective coaching conversations is Powerful Questioning. Questioning is relevant to every aspect of coaching: establishing a coaching relationship and negotiating a coaching agreement, setting stretch goals, creating action plans, engaging motivation, reflecting on learning, and structuring accountability.

Mastering effective questioning in coaching requires a specific mindset, as well as skillfulness in wording questions. Here are five key aspects of the art of effective questioning in coaching, with some concrete examples to illustrate the point.

### **1. Asking questions with the primary intention of supporting the coachee's learning**

Helping others learn is at the heart of effective coaching. And this affects our intention when asking questions. Questions are usually motivated by our need for information, information that we need to make choices and decisions. From a coaching stance, though, the primary intent for a question is often to stimulate the hearer's thinking and to deepen their understanding.

Viewed from this perspective, the success of a powerful question depends on what the coachee learns from it, and not on what we as the speaker learn from it. This does not mean that as coaches we do not pay careful attention to the response from our coachee. But it does mean that we see ourselves and our questions as tools that serve the coachee's progress.

Examples:

- What aspects of the situation bother you?
- What about this excites you?
- What do you see as the critical variables here?
- What would be the cost of not pursuing x?
- How does this fit in with your current priorities?

### **2. Asking questions with an open form to invite exploration by the coachee**

Questions range from 'closed' to 'open', depending on the scope of the possible answer. On one end of the scale are simple 'yes-no' questions - 'Are you willing to do that?' 'Have you checked that out?' - that have only two possible answers: Yes, or no.

On the other end of the scale are open questions that require scanning both wide and deep among the set of facts, assumptions, beliefs, and memories that we have stored in our minds. The most powerful questions are those which send the coachee to explore and discover connections and associations that he/she was not aware of before. Once a new connection is raised to awareness, the context in which the coachee interprets and responds has changed. This opens up the possibility for creative new ideas and choices.

Examples:

- What would that give you?
- What stands out?
- How would you frame the underlying problem?
- How would you define the task?
- How else can you look at this situation?

### **3. Asking questions that invite the coachee to look beyond problems and obstacles to possibilities and future outcomes**

When someone is entangled in a problem, a question that shifts the perspective from the problem (how things are now) to the solution (how your listener would want things to be) can be very powerful. Such visionary, forward thinking questions are the first step toward setting goals. They have us tap into imagination and dreams. They are

good tools for determining and defining objectives, even when the means of achieving these objectives are as yet unclear. Also, exploring visionary questions help create enthusiasm and motivation.

Examples:

- What do you want?
- What would it look like in y weeks, months, years from now?
- What would be the ideal way to set this up?
- What would be a fulfilling means to get there?
- What would that give you?

#### **4. Asking questions that invite a personal response to truly engage the coachee**

Coaching is about results, and about the people who will create the results. The skillful coach learns to ask questions that engage the coachee by inviting a personal response. 'What is it about delegation that makes it so difficult for people?' allows the hearer to answer in an abstract, at-a-distance kind of a way. The more personal question 'What will you gain if you could delegate more effectively?' has the hearer explore the issue from their personal perspective, in a more concrete way, with greater potential for learning and insight.

Feeling questions ask for an emotional response to a situation or event. When someone feels stuck in a problem situation and unable to make a choice or decision, an exploration of their emotional response may provide them with valuable information that could help them move forward.

Examples:

- What is it about this that concerns you/motivates you?
- What makes this important to you right now?
- How do you feel about this?
- How much control do you have over the situation?
- At your best, what qualities, attributes, capabilities, do you bring to this situation?

#### **5. Asking questions that will move the coachee towards commitment and action**

Powerful coaching that creates results moves the coachee towards choice, commitment and action. Again, questions are a powerful tool for the coach. Questions for commitment and action are less open than those that invite exploration (see point 2 above). These questions are intended to narrow the scope and to put the coachee in the position where they have to choose.

Having committed to action, the coachee also becomes accountable. Again questions - very specific, narrow-focused questions that probe the extent to which the coachee had actually done what they had committed to do - form a key part of the coach's skill set.

Examples:

- What option or options do you choose to take action on?
- When precisely are you going to start and finish each action step?
- What could arise to hinder you in taking these steps or meeting this goal?
- What will you do to eliminate these external and internal factors?
- What support do you need and from whom?

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