

“The Coach’s Best Tool – The Incredible Power of Questions”

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*“The great man is he who does not lose his child's heart.”
-- Mencius, ancient Confucian philosopher*

Children learn more in the first few years of their lives than during any other time of life. This fact does not surprise anyone who has spent time with children – their curiosity is intense and their questions are incessant! Once we overcome our frustration at not having *all* the answers, their inquisitiveness fascinates us, because it is a trait that we, at one time, shared – but somehow lost along the way.

One trait shared by all of the great men and women who have made or are making a real difference in our world is an insatiable sense of curiosity. They are always asking new questions, looking for answers, and looking for a new or better way. Curiosity is also an essential tool of a great coach, used hand-in-hand with the coach’s most powerful tool – questioning.

Questioning

Questioning is the hallmark of coaching. However, it is nothing without the genuine curiosity that a coach has about his or her client. The curiosity of a great coach is manifest by a natural inquisitiveness about the person’s life; wonderment about her goals and aspirations; concern for her level of balance, satisfaction, and fulfillment. It is exhibited by the coach's compassion for the client's flaws and struggles; questioning of his drives and motives; and active involvement in the client's growth and development.

In the coaching relationship questions have many uses. Questions can invite a person to engage in the conversation at the outset of a coaching conversation ("What's up for you today?"). Questions can help build rapport between two people. Questions can solicit good information, expand concepts, and clarify different perspectives ("What happened when you tried that new tactic, and how is it different from what you usually do?"). Questions can gain agreement and, ultimately, turn an enemy into a friend ("How can we respectfully agree to disagree and move into potential solutions?").

Inquiry – a question that causes the individual to look deep inside himself – taps into the person’s wisdom and insight. With inquiry, you discover what he is thinking, what’s behind his thinking, how he arrived at his current stance, and from what assumptions or data he is operating. He uncovers these insights, too! By using open-ended questions, you can draw out his reasoning, or learn why he is saying what he is. This allows you, as the coach, to listen for a new understanding to emerge.

Imagine the effectiveness and power that come from using this tool of inquiry in the workplace! Team members purposefully use inquiry in discussing issues, or while updating each other on the status of various projects or initiatives. Peers use inquiry with co-workers, when providing or receiving feedback, to be clearer on the details and implications of their actions. Managers use inquiry when coaching a direct report through a new or challenging situation. The most important benefit of inquiry is that it allows us to acquire more information, perspective, and data from which to decide, resolve, or plan, rather than less. Inquiry opens dialogue, rather than closing a conversation and narrowing it to a solution. The results of inquiry can be high-impact: better discussions, problems solved quickly and effectively, and work accomplished with ease.

Ineffective Questions

There are certain types of questions that can backfire; these not only do not accomplish what was intended, but they also can damage the relationship, self-esteem, and morale of the other person. Imagine a boss, reviewing performance on a task with his employee, asking, in a sarcastic tone, "Well, why did you do it that way?" Or, the same boss asking, "Do you really think you did a good job?" The inherent ridicule and shame in these questions is exacerbated by a cavalier tone of sarcasm. This shuts off valuable input from the employee today and in the future, causing him to retreat and possibly driving "creative sabotage" in the future.

Another ineffective question is one that is "loaded" from the beginning; the answer is already assumed, i.e., "Don't you agree?" The built-in bias to that question allows virtually no insight from the other person, as does the question, "Did you do that for X or Y reason?" Other questions that make us wince when we hear them include, "Do you understand what I am saying?" and "Didn't you hear me tell you not to do that?" These are condescending and patronizing, particularly if they are asked with a tone of scolding or an air of importance or authority. These types of questions tend to make us feel small, disrespected, and demoralized.

So, what kinds of questions accomplish great things in the coaching relationship and at the workplace? I learned about the best kind of questions years ago from one of my mentors. While we were working together on a consulting project, he told me he had observed me asking many closed-ended questions. When I asked, "What do you mean?" he replied, "You know, the kind of questions that only evoke a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Questions such as 'do you,' 'are you,' 'will you,' 'can you.'" I was quite taken aback, because I hadn't noticed, nor did I understand the subtle distinction he was making.

Effective Questions

That is when he taught me about open-ended questions – the ones that start with "who," "what," "when," "why," "where," and "how." I also learned that open-ended questions are not the easiest questions to ask, because most of us have not developed good habits about using questions that draw people out. It's not surprising, since our indoctrination into close-ended questions began in the American school system, as early as grade school, when our teachers would fire questions in the classroom, one after the other, expecting a quick "yes" or "no"

answer. Closed-ended questions are effective for determining if others have the “right” answers – but not for determining if they can think!

As we grew up and moved into the working world, we continued the pattern, "interrogating" employees with quick, closed-ended questions that elicit speedy "yes" or "no" answers, a time-effective but information-deprived process, when we are under the gun with deadlines and pressures. "Did you finish that report I asked for?" "Can you coordinate with the marketing department about that product release?" "Are you going to be able to meet the timeline for submitting the new client proposal?" For how fast and furiously these are delivered, the individual being asked might as well be under a bare light bulb, with a rubber hose being smacked against the palm of a nearby hand!

My mentor gave me a great challenge. He suggested I write down, on a 3 X 5 card, the six most important questions I could ask at the workplace – "Who?" "What?" "When?" "Where?" "Why?" "How?" He encouraged me to take the little card with me everywhere I went – in my planner, in my kitchen, at my desk – everywhere! He said, "Pay attention! Watch the kinds of questions you are asking. Stop yourself when you discover that you are asking closed-ended questions. In that moment, look at your card, and substitute an open-ended question instead."

Later that week, while I was working as the producer on a television project, I checked in with the production crew: "Andy, are those tapes being transferred?" "Sheila, did you line up the guest speaker for tomorrow?" "Erik, can you get the permissions we need to shoot on location?" That's when I saw it. My mentor had been right – I was asking loads of closed-ended questions, and only getting monosyllabic answers (along with the frightened looks from my associates!). So, I said to the group, "Hold on!" I got out my little card, and began asking the same questions, only differently. "Andy, when will those tapes be transferred?" "Sheila, who is tomorrow's guest speaker, and what's the theme?" "Erik, what will it take to get the permissions set for our shoot?" I must admit, I stumbled a bit. It wasn't easy. I stammered, and it took a while to put together the right words to make the questions good. But, I did it, to the astonishment of my crew! What was even more astonishing were the results I achieved from asking my new breed of question. I received information from my associates that was far more thorough and informative. I heard perspectives from people I worked with who had important knowledge to share, which resulted in better decisions. Most important, over time, the people I worked with opened up to me because we were communicating much more effectively. This simple and powerful tool allowed me to build better relationships with my colleagues. Open questions continue to serve me well to this day.

Since then, I have taught this approach to hundreds of clients, friends, associates, and family members. In a small way, these important people in my life are developing their own set of coaching skills by using this tool. I tell them it is not easy to "watch" the way we ask questions, but it is doable if we genuinely wish to improve our communication. In fact, one image is my favorite... It's that famous scene between Bacall and Bogart in *To Have and Have Not*. "You know how to whistle don't you," Bacall cooed in the classic film, to her off-screen husband. "Just put your lips together, and blow." Whenever in doubt, form your mouth into a circle and blow. That's the formation needed to speak the words "Who," "What," "When," "Where," "Why," or "How"!

I can honestly say that I have been working on open-ended questions for over twenty years, and have reached the point where I actually find it difficult to ask *closed* questions any more. Don't get me wrong – closed questions do have their place, when information is needed quickly and succinctly. However, close-ended questions don't get us nearly the results in terms of quality of information and the opportunity to build relationships as do open-ended questions.

So, as a coach, I challenge you to create your 3 X 5 card and keep it near you during the day, every day! You will be amazed at the difference it can make, and, in no time, you will have developed the habit of asking effective questions – while at the same time building better relationships with your co-workers and staff!