

# Questions – the key to unlocking potential

The power of questions cannot be overstated, explain **Nick Austin** and **Richard Churches** in the third part of their SLT series on the art of coaching



Supposing someone asked you: “What would you do if you could not fail?” Where would your attention go? What answers might you come up with? Just how creative could you be and just how exciting would that be?

Have you ever been asked a question that makes you stop, think... and then think some more? Then to come up with insights or thoughts that you have never had before? In coaching it is often said that insightful questions ignite the mind. So if someone could ask you a question right now about your own skills in developing others, what would that question be?

For most questions that a coach asks, there is no right or wrong answer, for that would imply the coach adopting a judgemental position. Rather, when coaching we seek to ask challenging and powerful questions which unlock issues for the supported person, and prompt new thinking.

Next to listening, questioning may be the most important skill for a coach. Effective questioning requires curiosity and a genuine interest in the person you are coaching and their development. It presupposes that the person you are coaching has all the internal resources they need to resolve the issues that they have, and that if they are guided through the skilful use of questions they will unearth their own solutions. The essence of coaching is therefore to support someone’s thought process: take them forward from their current situation to a preferred future, and from their real self to an ideal self.

There are two broad categories of question that coaches will employ. Closed questions often start with questioning words like ‘when’, ‘who’ and ‘where’. They elicit short responses designed to close down possibilities. These are particularly useful towards the end of a coaching session when the focus is on getting someone to commit to undertaking actions, make definite plans and take decisions. Typically the final commitment part of the session will use questions such as these:

- So of the many ideas you have, which one or ones are you going to do?
- Which one will you do first?
- When will you do this?
- Specifically, on what and day and at what time will you start?
- With whom will you do this?
- Where will you do this?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how committed are you to doing this?
- When will you know you have been successful?
- What will this give you when you have done it?

Each of these questions is designed to cut down the possibility of inaction, ensuring that the coaching session is not unfocused and without consequences.

## Open questions

Open questions fall into two main categories: those that

elicit information, and those that challenge and stimulate creative thinking. Both will be used in a coaching setting, although possibly at different stages of the process. (Figure 1 gives more information about open and closed questions.)



Initially the coach will ask questions to elicit information about the situation or issue that the supported person is facing. One of the common occurrences at the information gathering stage is the propensity for a ‘coachee’ to omit key pieces of the jigsaw – because they either don’t remember them, or do not consider them to be relevant. Through effective questioning the coach can ensure that the person is not ignoring something important. Alongside this, the coach needs to do enough questioning to ensure that they have a clear understanding of the situation in order to support further thinking. The sort of questions that are typically asked include:

- What is the current situation?
- What is that like for you?
- How often ...?
- And...?
- Tell me more about that.
- What are you thinking at the moment?

These types of open question encourage the speaker to divulge more detail, elaborate on the situation and how they currently view it. While this process is going on, the coach can begin to gain an understanding of how the coachee thinks, what is important for them, and their personality preferences in dealing with issues. Curiosity is a great attribute to have, although avoid being too interrogational in your questioning – the coachee is not in the witness box and you are not running a trial!

At the next level, questioning moves to being more probing, trying to uncover those things that the coachee has omitted. Asking questions that get the person to consider a scenario from different perspectives often elicits new information. For example, you might ask: “What would another person say about this situation?” or “How else could that behaviour be interpreted?”

If the coachee starts to use words such as ‘always’ or ‘never’ the coach can challenge these generalisations. Consider the following exchange.

Coachee: "She's always rude to me whenever she sees me."  
 Coach: "What, always?"  
 Coachee: "Perhaps not always but nearly always."  
 Coach: "Can you recall a time when she wasn't? What happened then?"  
 Coachee: "Well, she wanted me to do something for her then."  
 Coach: "So there are times when she isn't rude. How could you get her to be more amenable more of the time?"  
 Coachee: "Well, I suppose if I offered to help more often. That might help."  
 Coach: "So what might you be able to offer next time that you know she would want your support for?"  
 Coachee: "I know she's looking for helpers with the children's disco next Friday."  
 Coach: "So tell me more about that..."

In the above conversation, challenging the word 'always' led to more positive thinking, and helped the coachee to consider behaving in a way that might encourage a different reaction.

Questions that promote thinking about what someone really wants – their preferred future – are motivating and can bring surprising results. Often, what someone thought they wanted is changed during discussion and good questioning, as they find that actually they want something completely different.

A third level of questioning is aimed at encouraging much wider thought processing – where more imagination and creativity is encouraged. Hypothetical questions such as "What if...?" invite the imagination to expand, helping the coachee to throw off the shackles of their current problem-focused thinking. In a way this is the heart of effective coaching – supporting someone to move from problem-thinking to solutions-thinking while ensuring that the coachee keeps ownership for the problem and therefore the motivation and commitment to solve it. This is where coaching skills can not only enhance contexts such as performance reviews but also ensure that shared and distributed leadership is effective and has impact.

Other 'what if' questions to challenge and change assumptions could include:

- What would you do if...?
- How might you react if...?
- Given the choice what might you do?
- What is it that you really want?
- How could you feel about that?

Looking across the levels of questioning the process looks something like the model seen in figure 2.

### Things to avoid

One type of question to avoid in coaching (and in the classroom for that matter) is the leading question. By a leading question we mean one in which the direction of a person's thinking or the answer is implied within the question. We can all be guilty of asking leading questions

### The three levels of effective questioning

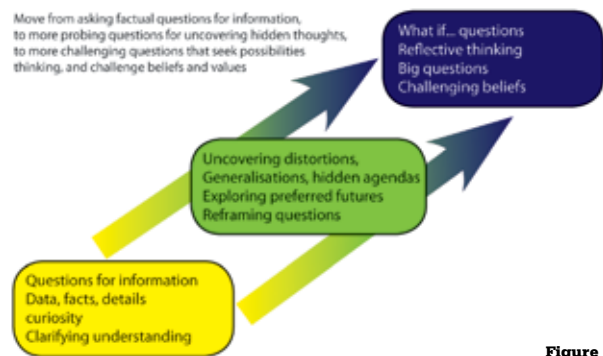


Figure 2

on occasion – after all, we may think we know the right solution to someone's problem, mightn't we? We may use phrases such as "Don't you agree that...?", "It would be better if... wouldn't it?" or "Have you ever thought...?" In coaching terms, we need to clear our minds of finding solutions to the issues for the coachee, but help them to form their own, unprompted ideas for themselves. The leading question can have the effect of taking responsibility and ownership of the problem away from the coachee, whose problem it is and where it should remain.

A better way to deal with situations where the coachee 'doesn't know what they don't know' is to ask permission to offer several possible solutions or to offer your observation as a hypothesis. You might say: "Can I make a few suggestions?" Remember to offer several possibilities for the coachee to choose from. Or "Can I offer you a hypothesis about what I think might be happening?" Both these options still allow the coachee choice and leave ownership with the coachee, as they can always reject your hypothesis or your options.

We should also address the 'why' question here. We need to be cautious about using this questioning word in the coaching arena. Although it is a fabulous question for prompting critical thinking (in, for example, a science lesson) it is rarely received well when applied to behaviour or in a personal development context – and often results in defensiveness and 'push-back'. When someone is asked why they have done something, they have to go back into their past to consider their response, and then justify their reasons for having done it. 'Why' can certainly bring an element of challenge to the conversation, but the coach needs to ensure that there is enough rapport and trust in the coaching relationship for this to work successfully.

This is a decision that only the coach can make in the context and the moment, being aware of the potential outcome. One possible alternative is to ask the question in a different way – for example, "What were your intentions when you did this?", perhaps adding an evaluative "To what extent were your intentions met, and what costs were there?" This less aggressive and challenging form of words can produce a more objective and honest answer without risking defensiveness.

It is often the negative language that people use about a problem that shapes their perception of the problem. One useful type of question to tackle this is known as the reframing question. This type of questioning challenges the person to think about their issue from a different perspective. In essence you listen out for the process of people's thinking rather than just the content of what they are saying. For example, you might notice that your coachee's responses are all about themselves. Therefore, you may want to ask them a question about other people and what they think. Or you may notice the person being dominated by thoughts about the task without any reference to the people involved. In which case you would look to bring the 'people' aspects to the table.

### Summarising questions

Throughout the coaching session you will want to ensure that you have accurately understood where the coachee is coming from and what they have agreed to do in their own mind. This is where summarising questions can be really helpful. These are used to ensure that understanding is clear on both sides and that the coachee feels that they have been listened to and accepted. It also allows the coachee to explain further and perhaps add more details. Questions such as "It sounds as if you are going to...?", "Would I be right in thinking...?", "Can I just run past you what I think you are

saying?" and "So is the following what you are planning to do...?" not only challenge the coachee to be clear and commit their thoughts out loud – they also help to ensure reflection and make sure that the coaching session stays on track and avoids slipping into a cosy chat.

It is important when summarising to use the same words that the coachee uses as these are the words and definitions that have specific mean to and for the coachee. You should also pay attention to the way in which you use your tone of voice to emphasise how you want the coachee to think. For example, you might repeat more or less exactly what a coachee had said but inflect what you mirror back using a voice tone that is more like a question. Finally, always make sure that your coachee finishes a coaching session with clear goals and next steps – it is a good idea to have some sort of structure to this stage including possibly the writing down explicitly of the next steps and actions.

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