

INSIGHT GUIDE #20

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

How can I ask better questions?

Great questions make someone think. They derail expected trains of thought, opening up new tracks to follow – typically by taking different perspectives. The task of creating powerful questions is not just the coach's. Very often, the most impactful questions arise from within the coachee. All the coach does is open a window that lets the light shine in. Generating

such questions is a collaborative act between coach and coachee, built upon intense and compassionate listening. The harder you try to create a powerful question, the less likely you are to succeed. The better you listen, the more naturally the right questions will occur of their own accord.



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What makes an impactful question?

In their early training, coaches are taught a number of questions that have the potential to help coachees think. In practice, these rapidly lose their impact, because:

- the coachee has already encountered them before, in other contexts, so they lose the surprise factor
- they encourage lazy questioning, where the coach automatically falls back on faithful standbys
- they encourage lazy answering, because the coachee has developed a formulaic response (which they are often unaware of)

A question is only powerful or impactful if it causes the coachee to step outside of their normal narrative or self-discourse.

From analysing hundreds of coaching questions, it is possible to identify the core characteristics of an impactful question.

These are:

- **Personal:** the coachee feels that this question is specifically crafted or chosen for them and the situation they are in. (Example: In what ways is this your responsibility alone?)
- **Resonant:** in addition to any rational perspective, it carries a substantial emotional essence. (Example: How do you reward yourself?)
- **Acute and incisive:** it gets right to the point. (Example: What would it be like to care just enough?)
- **Reverberant:** it is not easy to answer once and for all. Any initial response is just a first take, subject to further reflection hours, months or even years later. (Example: What is the contribution you want to make to the world?)
- **Innocent:** it has none of your agendas – overt or hidden – within it. (Example: What is the question you are avoiding asking yourself about this?)
- **Explicit:** it is very simply expressed, as opposed to long and convoluted. (Example: What can you forgive yourself for?)

A consistent observation is that the more the coach focuses on managing the coaching conversation, the fewer really impactful questions they ask!

A good starting point is to build your portfolio of powerful questions. When a question works, note it in your journal and store it for another occasion.

Five motives for questions

We suggest there are five question styles, based upon the reason for asking them.

These are:

1. Questions to demonstrate superiority. (Examples are: Who do you think you are? You don't think that's going to work, do you?)
2. Questions for information sharing – swapping data with someone else. (Example: So what's different about working in this industry?)
3. Questions for self-curiosity – i.e. information you are interested in for your own purposes and in relation to how you make sense of the world. (Example: How does that work?)
4. Questions for other-curiosity – how the other person makes sense of the world. (Example: What values drive how you approach these decisions?)
5. Questions that lead to better questions. This is about recognising that impactful questions are stimulated by great questions, which derive from good questions, which derive from (you get the picture!). (No example here: it is the gradual emergence that is key!)

Table 1: Examples of questions in each perspective:

| | Stepping in | Stepping out |
|-----------|--|--|
| Emotional | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you feel? • What values are you applying? • Did that make you uncomfortable? • What would that mean for you? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think the other person felt? • How might your colleague feel if you handled it this way? • What could you do to reduce their fears? |
| Rational | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What (really) happened? • What do you want to achieve? • What's the impact on your job? • What choices do you have? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you look at it from another perspective? • How would you advise someone else? • What prevents you? • What outcome do you think they would want? |

Should you use *why* questions?

Standard textbooks say no, because *why* can put people on the defensive and because *what, where, who, when, which* and *how* tend to lead to more open responses. Experienced coaches often say yes, but suggest using them sparingly and in context, because defensiveness can't be dealt with unless it is brought out into the open. The more comfortable you feel about challenging your coachees, the more useful *why* can be. Just don't overuse it and always consider first other ways of expressing the same thing – so 'What causes you to...?' rather than 'Why do you?'

Taiichi Ohno (1988) advocated the value of 'five whys' – each probing a little deeper into the coachee's reasoning and rationalisations. Another way to make questions more challenging is to ask the same question multiple times, with different emphases. Here's an example, sticking with *why*:

- Why do you care? (no emphasis)
- Why *do* you care?
- Why *do you* care?
- Why do you *care*?

Four perspectives of questioning

Observation of dozens of coaches and mentors a couple of decades ago found that they were constantly shifting perspective. If someone is viewing an issue only from the perspective of their immediate response, they are unlikely to achieve any significant insights until they shift perspective. These shifts can be described on to spectra – rational to emotional, and stepping in (seeing things from your own perspective) to stepping out (seeing things from the perspective of other people).

When a coach realises the coachee is stuck in one perspective, they first explore that perspective, using questions like those in Table 1, then help them gradually move into another perspective.

Sometimes the coach also uses bridging questions, such as 'How do you want to feel about this?'

You can also shift perspective by using questions that address the coachee's mood. Laughter and smiling have a strong, positive effect on creativity of thinking. So, questions such as 'What's the most ridiculous part of this situation?' can redirect their mental energy along more beneficial paths.

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With questions, less is more

Observing highly effective and less effective coaches reveals that the former ask far fewer questions than the latter, but the impact of the questions they do ask is much greater. Two practical techniques can help develop the habit of asking fewer but better questions:

- Before you ask any question, count to three. The coachee will often continue with their own thinking, which you might otherwise have interrupted. As you gain confidence, extend the count to five, seven, ten, or just wait for the coachee to give you a firm signal they want you to take the lead.
- When you think of a good question, first ask yourself, 'For whose benefit am I asking this?' If you still think it is useful to ask, hold onto it and encourage the coachee to continue. Do this at least twice. By the third opportunity to pose the question, either it will have matured and become more powerful, the coachee will have come up with the same question on their own, or you will have found a better question.

Dos and don'ts

- Don't waste time worrying whether you will have a question when it is needed – that will get in the way of your listening.
- Do trust your intuition to express curiosity. 'I'm curious about what is going on for you at the moment' doesn't carry a question mark, but it implies a deeply compassionate level of questioning.
- Avoid 'queggestions': these are suggestions disguised as questions, such as 'Have you considered...?'
- When questions you ask do have an impact, reflect upon why.
- Remember that you are not the judge of whether a question was impactful or not – experienced coaches frequently find that coachees value and are stirred most by apparently ordinary questions and that 'clever' questions often have little impact at all!

Henley Centre for Coaching

The Henley Centre for Coaching is a global leader in coaching research and coach training. We are the only triple-accredited coaching provider in the world offering both postgraduate university qualifications in coaching and accreditation from the Association for Coaching (AC), the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC).

The Centre provides formal accredited coach training through our *Professional Certificate in Coaching* and *MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change*, and accredited supervision training through our *Professional Certificate in Supervision*. These programmes are delivered in the UK at our Greenlands campus, and at venues across the world.

The Centre provides continuous professional development for coaching professionals through masterclasses, webinars, conferences, and via online access to journals, ebooks and coaching research. These are all delivered through our online learning platform, meaning coaches can connect from anywhere in the world to engage in professional development.

The Henley coaching team consists of leading practitioners and academics who have shaped the coaching profession since the late 1990s. They have written many of the most popular coaching books and they continue to publish in leading management journals and to contribute at conferences worldwide. Their writing, thinking and research informs our teaching and ensures our programmes are at the cutting edge of coaching practice.

The Centre offers annual membership to all professional coaches, providing a virtual-learning environment where the members shape research and practice in coaching. Check out our website for details on how we can help you and your business come to life.



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References

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