

The Art of Asking Great Questions

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Published in *The International Journal of Mentoring & Coaching*, Vol. IV Issue 2 (September 2006)

Introduction

There is a spectrum in the coaching conversational repertoire from telling, through advising and suggesting, to questioning. Asking questions is one of the core capabilities of coaching. This is true for any coaching - be it executive coaching, life coaching or strategic coaching. Questioning is a process – each question builds in some way on the preceding answer, in a way that demonstrates good listening and a good sense of where awareness can be usefully placed. Questioning is at the heart of any coach's toolkit.

As questioning is so crucial to the outcome and the results we achieve as coaches, this article aims to reflect on the art of asking questions. To improve coaching practice further we believe it is critical to stop and ask ourselves:

- What are we listening for when our client is speaking?
- How do we ask questions?
- How can we achieve a greater impact with our questioning?
- What impact do different questioning styles have on our clients?

In this article we will contrast questions from a 'problem' perspective with questions from a 'solutions' perspective. We will also share with readers an approach we use called the Solutions Focus Methodology, and offer our insights into how the methodology might help coaches of any genre to enhance their own coaching practice and achieve a greater impact with their clients.

Different types of questions

Questions come in many guises within the coaching context. Some are simply to understand the client's situation from his perspective and to gather information for example "*How long have you worked there?*" or "*How many people report to you directly?*"

Some are leading questions or disguised advice, for example "*Do you think that the Marketing Department has a role to play here?*" or "*Have you thought of doing x?*" Some are probing, often in pursuit of some theory or hypothesis, for example "*Mmmm – is your boss an introvert?*" or "*It sounds as if she's quite a bully?*"

Some questions are there to further explore patterns and relationships i.e. "*How come John is stressed about the deadline for the project?*" Other questions are more strategic in their nature and serve to open up new options for the client for example "*What happens when you talk directly with a member of the board?*" Yet other questions invite reflection about actual behaviour and the impact of that behaviour on others "*How do you think Jane felt when you challenged her in the meeting?... What reaction did you get when you got up and left the room?*" These strategic questions tend to be more challenging in their nature and coaches are encouraged to use them sparingly.

The kind of questions recommended as best coaching practice are described as awareness raising. We have a choice about what we are helping our clients to be come more aware of: are we shining our metaphorical torches on what's wrong and on deficits and barriers to progress - or on what would be right for the client and the strengths and resources that will help him/her move in the right direction?

When we analysed transcripts of coaching sessions, talked to colleagues and listened carefully during group supervision sessions, it seemed that current questioning practice often hones in on the former. Attention is drawn to what's hindering or stopping progress, be it the client's beliefs, attitudes or lack of skill. The idea seems to be that by making the client observe his/her behaviour and the impact it has on others, the client becomes more aware of his/her own role in problematic situations and therefore more willing to do something about it.

In his book *Principles of Psychology*, William James, the father of modern psychology, said "*The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.*" The Solutions Focus methodology favours overlooking information about what makes things difficult in favour of shining the torch on what makes things easier – on the strengths and resources that will help the client achieve what's wanted.

The Solutions Focus Methodology

The Solutions Focus approach has its roots in the therapeutic world. The ideas have found applications in many other fields, including education, social welfare, prison and probation services and, most recently organisational Solutions Focus is a part of a wider development including strengths-based positive psychology, positive deviance and appreciative inquiry – all part of the new wave of change methodologies seeking direct routes to progress

Classically, we are taught to see the present problematic situation on a straight line connecting the origins of the problem through the present to an undesirable future. We call this the Problem axis. The theory is that the problem has intriguing roots in the past and, if things continue unchecked, it will lead to dire consequences in the future. Much time and intellectual energy is devoted to analysing both the roots of problems and just how bad things might become. Diagnosing the problem and investigating the causes of the problem are seen as an essential part of addressing the problem.

People working using the Solutions Focus Methodology operate on a very different axis – the Solution axis. They are interested in what the client wants (not what they don't want) and what is already happening which is pushing them in the desired direction. They use their analytic skills to explore the desired future (sometimes called the Future Perfect), to pile up and investigate examples of the Future Perfect happening already and to draw attention to the skills and resources involved in that achievement.

Solutions Focused Awareness-raising

Solutions Focused coaches shine their torch on

- What the client really wants
- The resources the client has available

To illuminate these, the coach will ask for concrete descriptions of the Future Perfect, for examples of some aspects of the Future Perfect happening already and details about these. We ask pre-suppositional questions implying competence and resources.

What the client really wants

Coaches using the methodology ask their clients to suppose they are fast-tracked forward into an ideal world – a future where the issue they are grappling with has vanished, as if by a magic wand. They ask them to describe this ideal world in detail. *“What would be the first thing you noticed that tells you that a transformation has happened?”* They ask for concrete evidence rather than about hidden processes like motivation or feelings for example. Further to this, coaches ask for detailed descriptions from different perspectives for example *“What would your boss/colleagues/customers notice?”*

The resources he/she has available

After getting a full description of the Future Perfect, attention turns to examples and instances of some or all aspects of the Future Perfect happening, albeit briefly. Coaches may use a scaling question: *“On a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 is the Future Perfect you just described and 0 means that absolutely none of that is happening – ever, where would you say you are now?”* Nearly everyone gives an answer somewhere between 0 and 10 – and wherever the answer lies, it contains two important pieces of information: that something is happening that is taking the client in the right direction and that there is still a way to go. All the time, coaches are listening carefully to what the client says - using our torch to find strengths, resources, coping mechanisms and strategies for making progress. The questioning presupposes competence (see below) and each question is based on the previous answer.

Affirmation is a key tool in the Methodology toolbox and one we use freely – always being specific in naming the strengths and resources we have spotted: *“I’m really impressed by the extent to which you planned that project”* *“You did well to spot that opportunity and seize it.”* *“I admire the way you motivated your colleagues by doing that.”*

We have observed that when people are stuck in a problematic situation, it is often because they are paralysed by the enormity of the task. So coaches using the methodology encourage clients to take really small steps, perhaps by way of experiment, to take them just a point or a fraction of a point up the scale and move things on. *“What can you do or say in your meeting tomorrow to take you just one step closer to the ideal relationship with John that you just described? What would tell him that things have improved? How would your other colleagues know that things were better?”*

Pre-suppositional questions implying competence and resources

Let’s examine a typical Solution Focus question, one which might be an early question in a new coaching assignment:

“Of all the things you’re doing in meetings at the moment, what would you say you were most pleased with?”

“Of all the things” recognises the multi-faceted nature of the client’s activities in meetings, and that many things are going on at the same time. *“Most”* implies that there are indeed many aspects which are pleasing. Note how different the question feels without the word *“most”* in it. *“Pleased with”* is not the same as *“good at”* and is therefore less loaded.

As an opening question, this kind of formulation serves many purposes:

- It's a gentle way to start a conversation – problem-free talk helps relax both parties.
- It gives the coach information about what the client enjoys about his/her work.
- It tells the coach something about what motivates and enthuses the client.
- It gives some ideas about the client's strengths and resources.

Coaches using the Methodology ask lots of pre-suppositional questions implying competence and resources in our clients. Some examples are set out in Box 1.

Box 1: Solution-orientated questions	
<i>How did you do that?</i>	Presupposes agency – that the client had an influence on the outcome.
<i>How did you know to do that?</i>	Presupposes knowledge.
<i>How did that make a difference?</i>	Presupposes awareness and observational skills.
<i>What did you learn from that?</i>	Presupposes reflection.
<i>What helped?</i>	Presupposes something was helpful!
<i>What else?</i>	Presupposes that the client could say more.
<i>What might you do differently next time?</i>	Presupposes choice and decision making ability.

These can be contrasted to questions about the Problem axis which hone in on difficulties and offer less hope – see Box 2.

Box 2: Problem-orientated questions	
<i>What's causing this problem?</i>	Presupposes a cause (linear), rather than a series of interactions (systemic)
<i>What's stopping you/what's the barrier?</i>	Presupposes difficulties
<i>Why did you do that?</i>	Asks about motivation and can provoke defensiveness
<i>Anything else?</i>	Invites premature closure.

What's different about coaching using the Methodology?

Coaches using the Solutions Focus Methodology espouse the core competencies of coaching, as promulgated by organisations such as the EMCC.. These include providing a good environment for co-creating the a relationship based on respect and trust, setting a clear contractual understanding of the joint project, active listening and facilitating learning. At first glance, one might not be able to spot an coach using the methodology from one with any other training, but we think that questioning is subtly different from current mainstream coaching practice and has a different impact on the client. We have synthesised our view of the most critical differences in the following table:

Main stream practice	Solutions Focus Methodology practice
Looks for difficulties and barriers.	Builds on what works for the client and on personal resources and strengths.
Needs to understand and diagnose the problem.	Concentrates on recognising what the client wants.
Uses this information to address the problem.	Finds elements of what the client wants happening already.
General emphasis on insight.	Emphasis on concrete detail and tangible evidence.

What does the research say about the Methodology?

We are not aware of any formal research into the outcome of coaching using the methodology and would encourage any researcher or student readers to consider this as a research topic. However, there is a growing body of research into more traditional applications of the Solutions Focus Methodology, including mental health, recidivism in criminals, parenting and couples therapy and counselling in schools. In those settings 17 out of 18 studies, clients reported improvement. In 7 out of 11 studies comparing treatments using the methodology to other treatments, we understand that SF treatment achieved better results.

Conclusion

We believe that in current coaching practice there is too much focus on the past, deficits, gaps and barriers. Both client and coach can be demoralised by this – the phenomena of client resistance and coach burn-out bear witness to this. The solutions focus methodology

overlooks details of problems (except of course to the extent that the client introduces them to the conversation), preferring to ask questions evoke awareness about available resources and what is already working well for the client. By integrating the methodology into their practice, coaches can achieve better results with their clients and further improve the effectiveness of their coaching.

About the authors

Jenny Clarke, is an independent consultant with wide functional experience in industry. She is a solutions focused facilitator and trainer, helping people who want to change what they do or how they do it. She works with large organisations who are adapting to change, and as a personal coach to managers and directors. You can find out more about the methodology at www.thesolutionsfocus.com.

Dr. Sabine Dembkowski, is Founder and Director of The Coaching Centre in London and Cologne www.thecoachingcentre.com. Together with her Associates she serves members of boards, executives and high potentials in DAX 30, FTSE 100 and Fortune 500 organisations as well as leading professional service firms. Before founding The Coaching Centre she worked as a Top-Management Consultant for A.T. Kearney and Monitor Company in London.