- POWERFUL COACHING QUESTIONS

Powerful Coaching Questions and other types of questions in Coaching

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COACHING QUESTIONS

It has frequently been said that professional coaches work with clients by carefully avoiding getting involved in their problems, to propose answers or to offer options and solutions. Probably just as often, it has been also said that coaches accompany their clients to find their own solutions by asking coaching questions.

If these affirmations are relatively true, the second one calls for much more precision both as to the form and the content of coaching questions a professional may ask. Indeed, journalism can also be considered to be the art of asking questions, and so can Nazi Gestapo and Spanish inquisition interrogation processes, not to mention other dismal totalitarian eras of human history. So how is the coaching art of asking questions different from other known questioning processes in other professions?

THE FOCUS OF COACHING QUESTIONS

The coaching process rests on a very specific frame of reference, and all coach behavior and interactions, including coaching questions, should reflect that frame of reference.

According to a coaching frame of reference, all clients are to be considered a priori intelligent and well-informed people. Coaches believe that clients know all there is to know on the technical dimensions of the issues, either to solve their own problem or to achieve much more performing results than those they have in the past.

Consequently during a coaching process and without any exception, each and every client can and must be considered to be an “expert” in his or her field. As a matter of fact, in coaching relationships, each client is perceived as the sole person capable of finding original and appropriate answers to achieve his or her personal or professional objectives.

Given this client expertise, it is futile to think that in the course of any coaching process, coaches will find answers or options that their clients have not already considered and brushed aside. It is almost unimaginable that a coach could find solutions in any specific client’s field of expertise, unless of course, the client is a fool. In which case, be assured that he or she would not seek a coach.

Consequently, it is not a coach’s job to ask numerous questions aimed at finding solutions or original ideas within a mental or emotional environment that the client has already processed backward and forward, to no avail. For a coach, it is necessary to consider that all the ideas and options one could imagine have already been considered by the client, and have been rejected. Consequently, humility is requested in any coaching process, given that clients, by definition, are not fools.

Furthermore, it is not a coach's job to have a pocketful of powerful or very tricky questions that will jolt clients with surprise and gaping with awe at their coach's intelligence. The function of a coaching question is not to demonstrate a coach's supreme creativity or outstanding intelligence, but to really help the client focus on their issues or ambitions with a creatively different perspective. So how does a coach proceed to serve what single pertinent or appropriate question, to what type of client, and when?

COACH FRAME OF REFERENCE

Before learning how to use coaching questions, or any other coaching tool, strategy, technique or attitude, one needs to be aware that all of these are most often determined by the coach's past, habits, personality, upbringing, values, principles, etc. This is the influence of the coach's frame of reference. In a systemic perspective, coaches are indeed totally involved in the coaching relationship, influencing the coach-client process with their own general paradigm, linguistic choices, behavioral patterns, etc.

Consequently when learning coaching skills, one needs to be aware of the type of skills towards which one is naturally attracted. These will most probably reinforce what one already knows, feels, intuits, etc. and influence the skills that may expand, help explore new attitudes, enlarge competencies and make new relational options available. Beyond the choice of coaching questions, this reflection applies to all other coaching skill-sets.

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CLIENT FRAME OF REFERENCE

To be a coach, it is necessary to know that if clients are the first and best experts capable of solving their own problems and achieving their own ambitions, that is precisely the main reason why clients are motivated to call on a coach. When clients bring important issues to a coach, they have already made a complete inventory of their personal or professional issue and of all possible options, to no avail. Clients have already tried working out their issues alone, and have not succeeded.

Coaching clients generally consult coaches after having tried to solve their problems, meet their ambitions or deal with their issues. In spite of this, these clients feel stuck in a rut or up a dead end. Clients have consequently generally well thought out their problems or ambitions, and they perceive no solutions to their issues as they have defined them, no practical way to achieve their goals as they have established them.

This is exactly where the key to most client difficulties lies, and what defines the foundation of the art of coaching. As they have been defined, client problems have no apparent solution. As they have been formulated, client objectives are not attainable. The coach must therefore focus with their coaching listening skills and other specific communication competencies on the outer limits of client definitions and formulations.

Consequently, the professional coach does not focus on problems as they are defined by clients, but rather on their clients' way of defining their problems. The coach does not focus on an ambition as it is considered by a specific client but rather on their clients' way of considering their goals and ambitions.

This original approach proposed by coaching rests on one principle: a well defined problem or issue very easily finds its solution, and conversely, a problem that finds no solution has most probably been defined in a manner that is too restrictive, constrictive, or somehow limiting.

THE FUNCTION OF QUESTIONS

Consequently, when a client does not easily or naturally find answers to issues or solutions to problems, it is useless to search in the same way, place or direction as the client has already done. It is useful however, to help the client "reconfigure" or reboot his or her way of defining the issue, of considering the problem, or of visioning an ambition. Consequently, a coaching approach is to question the client's frame of reference. Coaching questions that are considered to be powerful are precisely those that jolt clients into reconsidering the way they define a problem, perceive an issue or envision an ambition.

To reformulate the specificity of the art of coaching: Coaching questions are not presented to elicit more information from the client but rather to provoke the client to think, feel or react differently about the issue at hand with the information he or she already has.

Consequently, a coach does not focus on the technical details of a client's specific problem at the risk of also becoming a prisoner to the same limiting client frame of reference. Instead, the coach explores the general framework that underlies or structures the way the client considers an issue and the way the client searches for options, in order to help expand those processes.

- In fact, this reconfiguration of client frames of reference or this change of perspective of client goals and issues is precisely what will permit them to suddenly discover totally new approaches to define and solve problems, to achieve ambitions..

This coaching approach is sometimes relatively difficult to implement. Numerous clients feel the imperative need to give coaches a complete inventory of the long painful path that has lead them to their quagmire. Coaches also often seek to acquire useless over detailed information on their client's perception of their problems and environments in order to understand why they are stuck. Clients do not realize that the limit of their perception is the main factor at the origin of their search for a coach. So clients often paradoxically feel or think that their coach must very logically know all the informational details that define their constraining frame of reference.

Paradoxically, the more clients define their issue to a coach or anyone else, the more they reinforce their limiting frame of reference. Note also that coaches who do not know how to ask the right coaching question also tend to elicit more and more useless information from clients with content-oriented questions. They thereby unknowingly help clients reinforce their restraining perspective.

- In this paradoxical relationship with their clients, the more a coach attentively listens to the details of the client issue and the more a coach becomes "in tune" with client emotions, the more that coach will risk getting stuck with the client in the same exit-less client situation

Consequently, a correct coaching "posture" or attitude consists in accompanying the client without ever totally adhering to the underlying frame of reference, without ever completely immersing into client context and mindset. A coach is to help clients question their frames of reference, and perceive their environments from new original angles, their issues under different lights. Powerful coaching questions are those that transform frames of reference and allow the client act differently and grow taller. We will delve into this exceptional type of coach question further below.

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STANDARD COACHING QUESTIONS AND QUESTIONS COACHES NEED TO AVOID

Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions are figures of speech that just seek to elicit public approval so the speaker can go on with a predictable demonstration. Rhetorical questions are not real questions, as they are not really designed to elicit original answers. Needless to say that they are not to be considered very useful coaching questions.

Interestingly many coaches treat many types of questions as if they were rhetorical questions.

When they ask a question, these coaches do not really wait for and listen to the client answer, and they do not react if the client provides a response that has nothing to do with the question. In other words, many coaches do not seem to pay enough attention or give sufficient importance to many of their own questions, nor to the specific answers these should elicit. If a coach is not going to follow up on answers to a given question, when a client ignores or avoids it, then maybe the question was not worth asking in the first place. That question could be considered rhetorical.

Some coaches are also so engrossed in their own strategy that they do not really listen to a client answer. For instance a coach may ask a process question, such as "May I reformulate what I understand here?" and go on with the restatement without giving the client a chance to answer yes or no. That permission question is then purely rhetorical.

Good coaching questions are not rhetorical questions in the sense that when they are precisely asked, they should be precisely answered, and the coach should demonstrate respect and good listening skills as to the content and form of the client answer. Any client avoidance strategy or any answer that does not really pertain to the object of the question could well be challenged and refocused by a strategic coach.

But then, any question should be well chosen, well formulated and timely put. Consider the following types of questions, quite common to any communication process:

Simple / Complicated Questions

When coaching, it is useful to leave a maximum amount of space for clients to have ample room to deploy their own inner dialogue, explore the outer limits of their frames of reference, and develop their own growth potentials. Consequently, a coach's role is to be present in a relatively light, minimalist and almost transparent manner, except for a few occasional, short, precise and respecting intrusions into the coaching conversation. This minimalist attitude also concerns all coaching questions that should be short, simple and to the point.

- **Caution:** The opposite of a simple question is not a complex question, but a complicated question. Complex questions rest on a systemic frame of reference and could be paradoxical, recursive or strategically designed to create confusion. We will cover these farther below.

When coaches offer too many, too long and too complicated questions, (of which many are invariably problem-focused) they will reveal that they are indirectly or unconsciously trying to process the issue in order to propose solutions, obtain recognition, justify their presence, push to accelerate client problem solving, etc.

Even if these numerous, lengthy and inappropriate questions are motivated by a positive desire to help, they only get in the way of client autonomy. When coaching, fewer, shorter and simple questions are considered most useful and most effective. So as we shall see, coaching questions are often minimalist questions.

One linguistic key is that all coaching questions should be stand-alone interruptions. Coaches that ask questions that begin with "and…" or "so…" may be indicating that these are linked to the preceding conversation. They do not interrupt the flow to open new doors or avenues. These introductions should alert that the coach is getting too involved in the client content.

Neutral / Leading Questions

Another standard distinction between questions concerns their object. Habitually, a question's purpose is to obtain new information or generate new ideas. To really do either well, it is critical that the formulation of the question does not reveal an attempt to influence, lead or direct the content of the answer in any intentional direction.

Thus, coaching questions that offer a totally open field for client response are neutral questions. They are considered much more useful to help open client perspectives. Examples of useful neutral coaching questions as compared to leading questions are:

- **Leading Questions**

«Are you angry?» proposes a specific emotion amongst a host of others and can focus client attention on that specific content.

When asked that question, clients can focus on that emotion and become aware that indeed, they are feeling anger. But client concentration on any emotion can give that emotion accrued importance at the expense of another. Sadness, fear, etc. may also be just as present, but are not mentioned by the coach in the question.

- **Neutral Questions:**

«What do you feel? » presents a more open field for client to define emotions without any specific focus or limitations. Even more open would be "what is your perception?" This question would let the client choose between feeling, thinking, intuiting, or whatever. Obviously coaches well versed in emotional intelligence will invariably choose to ask about client emotions.

The form of the question “are you angry?” does have the merit of being simple rather than complicated. Some leading or directed questions carry so much information that they display the judgments, beliefs and frames of reference of the questioner. These seem to propose that the listener should merely accept and agree with the whole package. Leading and complicated questions formally pretend to be searching for information, but a quick analysis of their content will reveal a contrary effect:

«Don’t you feel mad or at least a form of anger when you are facing this kind of passive environment which in effect is obliging you to take on much more than your share of responsibility?»

«Don’t you believe that when you are in a hierarchical context and in a company culture like yours that seems rather traditional if not military, that you’d better think twice before reacting to…?»

Both the above questions immediately limit the client thought playground by suggesting numerous beliefs and limits. So beware of all negatively formulated questions that start with “Don’t you…”. Consequently, when coaches wish to offer their clients a really free and open space to let them express and grow without hindrance, simple neutral questions are particularly recommended. « What do you think? » or « what do you feel? », etc. are considered much more neutral coaching questions. To conclude, leading questions are not considered very effective coaching questions.

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Negative Interrogation

Notice also that both of the above question examples are negative interrogations. Negative interrogations that start with "why don't you..." or "what keeps you from..." focus clients on their blocks and hindrances. They may also indirectly offer options. Other more positive-oriented coaching question and formulations are advised, in order to help clients move forward towards finding and designing their own solutions. Consequently, negative interrogation questions are not considered very good coaching questions.

Open / Closed Coaching Questions

Among traditional categories of questions, there are also « open questions », which give the client a very large area for expression, and « closed questions », which propose a choice between specific options, or within a defined alternative. Open coaching questions increase the scope of client personal « dialogue », and closed coaching questions direct clients towards the possibility to choose a position or decide on a specific action. Consider the following open questions:

- What do you want to do in the following situation?
- What are your options?
- What could be your next step?
- What deadline you would set for this action?
- What do you feel when facing this type of situation?

When a coach asks open questions, clients are invited to develop whatever they want or express; whatever they think or feel. Nothing in the formulated coaching question suggests that the coach has a specific idea, goal or expectation. This type of coaching question elicits a personal client response that could either be short or long, original or unexpected, assertive or hesitant, etc.

Towards the end of coaching sequences or sessions, however, it is useful for coaches to accompany client dialogues towards a more centered, concentrated focus or conclusion. At times, it is indeed useful for a coach to help clients limit the scope of their personal dialogue and begin to decide on specific directions or actions. The coach would then offer either / or closed coaching questions that invite client decision and action:

- Do you want to decide on a few actions right away, or is this still a little early for you?
- Do you prefer option A, option B, or option C?
- Are you going to react right away or do you want to let the situation mature?
- Are you bothered by this occurrence, or on the contrary, do you feel stimulated by it?

All these coaching questions propose an alternative or a choice. The client is put in a position to choose between two or more options proposed by the coach. Note that the options should be originating from prior client dialogue. In the above examples, if the clients have not yet decided to make a choice, the form of the closed coaching questions may be prematurely suggesting it is time to conclude. The client may feel pushed by the coach, and that may elicit unproductive compliance or a healthier resistance to the coach subtle directivity.

This type of alternative coaching question is useful to confirm that the client has already made an unconscious choice or to confirm that the client is ready to make a choice. Notice that the form of closed coaching questions can direct the client towards a conclusion, without influencing the content of the client’s choice in any way. Indeed, closed coaching questions must not be directed or leading to satisfy coach agendas or impatience.

Professional coaches are very careful with their use of closed questions. If the choice is proposed too early, clients may not be ready to decide. “I don’t know” is the invariably powerless answer that indicates that the question is prematurely offered by the driving coach. Consequently, it is useful to know when to offer a closed coaching question, and when to let the client proceed unhindered.

- A timely closed coaching question can provoke or confirm a decision or a conclusion.
- A premature closed question can reveal coach impatience, or again lack of client readiness to decide.

The coach must be attentive to both situations by learning how to manage their own impatience.

After answering a closed question, clients often expect the coach to keep the coaching initiative and ask another structuring question. Consequently, closed questions tend to create a pause in client responsibility. A judiciously placed linguistic prod or open coaching question will help clients dig deeper into the direction defined by their choice, or will direct them to another coaching sequence or issue: "So...?"

Single / Multiple Questions

An excellent indicator that coaches may be getting too involved in an analytical approach is when they serve a battery of questions, one after the other, hardly providing silences nor letting the client time to think or search for their own answers. Again, good coaching questions are usually stand-alone interventions and elicit ample enough thoughtful client dialogue. They are followed by silence and minimalist linguistic punctuation to let the client keep the initiative of their quests and deepen their internal dialogue.

Practical oriented questions

When clients approach general or vague theoretical issues, it is useful for coaches to ask them if they can focus on precise occurrences, measurable situations or specific people and places. Coaching can indeed accompany clients to solve issues and accomplish important results if clients focus on real situations and well defined areas of their lives. Pragmatic questions can help the client focus on specific situations to achieve their goals. Consider the following:

_Client: " I can’t seem to finish my projects _Coach: "Can you give a precise example of an ongoing project you would like to finish?"

_Client: "I cannot stand indecisive people ". _Coach: "Who in your life are you referring to today?”

_Client: "JI would like to improve the relationships with my employees”. _Coach: "Starting with which employee, if you were to focus on a practical example?”

On the one hand, the objective is obviously to proceed in a practical fashion. On the other, the principle is to help the client center on developing a specific problem-solving process that could then be enlarged to other situations. This is completely in keeping with the systemic principle that if analysis can be global, action needs to be local. As coaching is action-oriented rather than a purely analytical approach, ask this type of question to have clients focus on a practical learning situation. Learned options can then be progressively applied to other similar contexts.

Asking practical oriented questions are very useful at the beginning of a coaching sequence. They will help focus the coaching process on concrete solutions and action plans at the end of the session.

Active Questions / Analytic Questions

Another distinction between types of questions differentiates those centered on eliciting an analytical response from those centered on eliciting future orientation towards action. Analytical questions generally elicit responses that describe client past experiences, acquired client frames of reference and limiting client contexts. They are questions focused on eliciting more information or explanations, if not justifications.

By asking analytical questions, coaches help clients center on understanding their motivations, context, environmental support, limits, etc. Clients will then explain historical and contextual contexts, problems or ambitions, sometimes with excruciating details. Consequently, coaches who want to help clients focus on future actions and solutions will not favor the use of any type of analytical questions.

Indeed, if coaching is a process to accompany client centered on action and results, useful questions are intently focused on active, future-oriented change and on implementing solutions that help drive client solutions and success.

Why?

The first practical consequence of having a future and solution-oriented coaching strategy is to avoid asking « why », at all costs. Almost every time this question is asked, the answer that follows is a detailed client elaboration of a historical frame of reference that limits their mental agility or emotional mobility.

To follow up on this logic, all questions centered on understanding client problems, client history, client difficulties, client unsuccessful past options, client context, etc. could be considered as relatively useless. “Why” questions rests on the popular belief that « to succeed, one should understand how one has failed ». In other words, to learn how to swim, one must carefully analyze how one has almost drowned. In effect, why questions only let clients meander within their same-old limited past frame of reference. A good coaching process needs to gently lead the client out of that box.

There are of course some rare exceptions to this affirmation. A coach may ask “why?” to better listen to how a client is limiting the development of personal potentials. If that coach avoids listening to the obvious information and tries instead to catch the client’s limiting world-view, basic assumptions, behavior patterns, etc., then the client answer to “why” can be very rich to enhance future coaching work. We suggest, however, that coaches help their clients spend much more energy exploring on future possibilities.

Consequently if ever a coach asks a client a “why?” question, it should be less to hear the content of the answer in its specific relevance to a given situation, and more to listen to the general form of the client’s way of thinking, emoting, intuiting, etc. The answer then gives numerous indications of the inherent limits of client frame of reference.

More often than not, however, the why question reveals that coaches are completely caught up in the client issue, uselessly trying to understand the origins of the client context. Generally speaking, intellectual or mental coaches who fall in the trap of trying to be experts ask way too many why questions. These may often take other subtle forms that don’t start with a clear why, such as “what keeps you from…” or “what makes you think that…”, or again "what is the origin of...?" “ can you explain..;?” etc. How?

Coaching questions centered on action have the merit of urging clients to envision creating future possibilities. These questions generally start with "how can you…?", or "how will you…?" Most coaching questions which begin with "how are you going to…?" are considered better solution-oriented coaching questions. Depending on the work previously achieved by clients, this form of open future-oriented coaching question can be either neutral or subtly directed.

"How are you going to..." questions are asked to clients who are perceived to be ready to move into action. These coaching questions suggest it is now time to reflect on future strategy, tactics, or active behavior. This assumption should have been confirmed by work preceding the coaching question, in which case the question is considered “neutral”. If however, a client has not given any indication of readiness to start moving into action, this coaching question may direct the client towards defining specific action a little bit too early. Consequently, if it is prematurely asked, the question "how to…?” can be considered rather directive, and can therefore be inappropriate. For example, consider the two following questions:

"Do you plan to explain your point of view to your boss? ".

The question is simple, analytical and neutral and aims for a yes/no answer. "Do you plan to…?" suggests the client consider the opportunity to implement action, or not. It may elicit client dialogue on the advantages and disadvantages of an action, which in effect temporarily postpones the decision to act. That could be opportune, if the client is not ready to envision action, or unfortunate if the client finds comfort in postponing decisions.

“How can you appropriately explain your point of view to your boss?”

This question is considered simple, active and subtly directed. Starting with “how”, the question presumes there is going to be an explanation. The question is focused on how the client will explain. The coaching question suggests the client should prepare to implement action. In effect, the decision to act is already made. If the client is not ready to move forward, the coach may be prematurely “pushy”. If however, the client is ready to move on, then the opportune coaching question suggests it is time to define effective strategies and behavior.

In general coaching questions that help focus clients on elaborating future action plans and implementing solutions are considered more useful, than those that center the client on analysis and understanding present or past occurrences.

Action plan coaching questions

Similar to the practical "how" question above, are practical coaching questions, such as those that start with “What will you...” to elicit precision or details, “When will you…” , “With whom will you…”, “Where will you?” Typically these coaching questions really find their place towards the second half of a coaching sequence, when the client has sufficiently explored the issue or subject to discover new perspectives and is ready to move on to action.

When/where

Impatient coaches often ask the "when" question much too early in the coaching process. They aim for rapid action plans to satisfy their own need to be useful and end the session with measurable results. More subtle coaches will replace "when will you do this" by "where is the best place to do this", thus indirectly using the concept of time-space to bring a practical conclusion. Indeed, when a client decides where to do something, an appropriate time will usually come up along with the chosen location. This illustrates that even the most apparently banal and practical coaching question can become much more effective if it is strategically proposed, that is at the most appropriate time in the client’s work.

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HOW TO FORMULATE APPROPRIATE COACHING QUESTIONS

Beyond being attentive to choosing the right type of coaching question, the above text illustrates that coaches also need to pay particular attention to how their coaching questions are formulated.

This attention concerns the linguistic content of coaching questions. Consider, for example, one of the first coaching questions a coach can ask clients at the start of a coaching session, in order to suggest that clients focus on the desired results of the work at hand:

- “How can I help you?”
- “Well?” …Followed by a long silence.
- “On what issues do you want to work today?” or
- “What brings you here today? » or
- “What do you want to achieve by the end of this session?”
- “What do you expect from me today?”
- “Where do you stand with your issues now?”
- “What shall we talk about today?”
- Etc.

The first coach question at the beginning of a coaching session or sequence should be considered a privileged way to “set the stage” for the coaching work. It could help the client immediately become results-oriented. The above examples illustrate how that essential first question is too often asked in a very routinely way. In some ways, these examples may all look alike but they do not have the same effect. Most are relatively open and focused on the future. All also suggest that clients take responsibility and actively lead the beginning coaching process.

- A closer examination of the linguistic formulation of each question, however, reveals that they are all relatively different. Each subtly suggests a distinct coach frame of reference.

If some of the questions propose that the client be active and responsible, two of them suggest the client formulate demands on the coach or that the coach be active and helpful. If one of the questions offers a totally open and non-directive context, another suggests that the client evaluate present situation, and another yet immediately focuses on defining client objectives.

All these ways of introducing a coaching session or sequence are fundamentally different and can provoke radically different client responses and results. This illustrates that all coach questions merit reflection as to their precise formulation focused on achieving a specific objective. Consequently, all coach formulations, interventions and questions need careful wording to convey a particular coaching process or intention.

Linguistic Emphasis

Consider the fundamental difference that is conveyed when a coach emphasizes a word to stress its importance. For example, measure the fundamental difference between three apparently similar following questions:

"**What** du you want?" or "What do **you** want?", or "What do you **want**?"

These three questions can indeed be felt as totally different. Powerful coach comments and questions mostly convey power through tone modulations, changes in pace, coach expression and gestures. Heed that it is the coaching intention that conveys power, not aligned words served in a monotone way. . So coaching interventions are neither powerful nor banal in themselves. It is the way they are served by the coach that may convey power intensity, a sense of urgency, or a more laid-back, intellectual or routine level of energy. Coaches need to remember that the power is not in the linguitic makeup of the question or comment. Linguitics is just a vehicle for a powerful change of paradigm embodied by the coach's intention.

To Empower the Client

Careful coaching question formulation can also help coaches regularly remind themselves and their clients that the latter are responsible to pilot their own work. The more a coach remembers to put clients at the center of the coaching process, the more clients will develop autonomy and focus on achieving their personal goals and ambitions. Coaches do this by regularly formulating coaching questions and comments that linguistically suggest that their clients be active and make their own decisions as to the content and the process of their own work. ,Consider the different coaching question formulations below:

- « What results do *you* wish to accomplish today?»
- « How do *you* want to begin this work? »
- « Where do *you* stand now? »
- « What can be *your* next step?»
- « What do *you* want to do with *your* remaining time? »
- « How do *you* prefer concluding this session? »
- « What do *you* plan to implement, back on *your* job, before *your* next coaching session? »

Calling on clients directly with “you” and emphasizing the word is a much more active and empowering approach than attempts to “protect” clients with more indirect or impersonal formulations. Professional coaches consequently avoid such wording as “we” or “one” or "us", or coaching question

formulations centered on the coach using “I”. These direct attention away from the client, towards the coach.

To Respect Client Space: Permission questions

Useful coaching questions sometimes ask the client for a specific permission. Considering that some clients often only answer these with “yes”, they can sometimes be consider pure formalities. Beyond this first social level, “permission” questions help coaches regularly remember, and remind clients, that the coaching space belongs to the latter. Consequently, before intruding into the private client space, professional coaches regularly manifest respect by asking their clients for permission to enter:

- “Can I interrupt?”
- “Can I ask you a question?”
- “May I offer you a restatement here?”
- “Can I share a perception of how you are progressing?”
- “May I share a feeling?”
- Etc.

Obviously, some of these coaching questions are completely paradoxical. To ask if one can interrupt is already an interruption, and to ask if one can ask a question is already a question. However note that those coaching questions clearly express coach respect of client “coaching space”. They are the equivalent of knocking on a door before entering a private room. They also are a subtle way to get client complete attention prior to a coach intervention. When clients give coaches the permission to intervene within their personal inner dialogue, there is a much higher chance that they will intently listen to whatever the coach will offer.

As a conclusion to the above practical questions and as we present the different types of more strategic or more powerful questions below, it is useful to remember that no question is powerful in itself. Its powerful effect on the client generally depends on how the question is formulated, on how it is appropriately and respectfully served in the course of a coaching process, on how much personal energy and intention the coach puts into the question, on how the time is appropriate for the client, etc.

POWERFUL AND STRATEGIC COACH QUESTIONS

More « strategic » or powerful coaching questions propose that clients switch to an original, unexpected, more creative type of personal quest. These powerful coaching questions are tailored to invite clients to think or emote differently, take some « critical » distance from their issues, problems or goals, try other « indirect » approaches, use intuition, get out of their boxes, etc.

- Strategic or powerful or coaching questions aim to surprise clients or put them “off balance” in order to provoke the emergence of new perspectives on their problems, objectives, issues and ambitions.

When asking powerful coaching questions, coaches take initiatives, “play”, in order to help open client inner dialogue and exploratory processes. With this type of coaching questions, coaches formulate work proposals that help client redirect their focus, at minimum by provoking a surprising angle or point of view. Obviously, for best coaching results, it is necessary that clients be ready and willing to “play the game” and work into those unexpected avenues.

Consequently, the strategy for asking the powerful types of coaching questions presented below rests on a solid coach-client relationship. The prerequisite for asking “strategic” or powerful questions is that a strong coaching alliance already exists between the coach and the client. Powerful questions aim to help clients change perspectives, and to be useful, this needs to be implicitly or explicitly accepted by the client. Considering these preliminary precautions, strategic or powerful coaching questions can fall into different categories based either on their form or their content.

Another word of caution before we present a short list of powerful types of coaching questions: an unknowing or beginning coach may take the following examples as a form of methodology and feel that memorizing them and systematically serving them to clients will bring excellent results,

only to find out that is not the case. A truly powerful coaching question most often emerges in a coaching relationship spontaneously, almost surprising the coach who has formulated it. For this magic to happen, a strong client-coach relationship must already be established, resting on coaching silence and presence, deep listening, and an intuitive perception of the client frame of reference. With that in mind, the following types of powerful questions may emerge into the coach's awareness.

Indicators of Effectively Powerful Questions

Whenever clients are faced with a truly powerful question, their immediate reaction is silence, bewilderment, and an obvious plunge into their inner quest. Consequently, if a client immediately responds to a coach question, the latter cannot be considered to be truly powerful. A poor question may be off the subject, be considered as informative or superficial, have been improperly formulated, be served at the wrong time or without the necessary emphasis, or again without securing preliminary client attention.

- Truly powerful coach questions elicit client deep silence.

Even when clients say "Wow, that is a good question!" the response could be considered to be a social buffer that allows the client to avoid really plunging into their inner search.

- Powerful questions stand alone.

In the course of a coaching sequence on a specific client issue, one truly powerful question served in the proper way and at the right time should be more than enough to help a client really swerve, totally change perspectives and find a host of new avenues to achieve success. Consequently, a coach doesn't need to assail clients with a battery of questions. The more a coach serves questions in the course of a work sequence, the less powerful each of the questions are. When one question truly allows fundamental client progress, all that needs to follow is a gradual focus on options, actions, deadlines, measures of results, and celebration. These preliminary precautions being shared, we can now consider a partial inventory of theoretically powerful questions.

Hypothetical Coaching Questions

This is a major category of powerful coaching questions. The content of this type of question may widely vary, but its form can easily be recognized. To be effective, this type of question is generally served in two if/then parts. It first suggests a fictitious situation or context by which the clients are first asked to change perspectives. After the clients have considered the new suggested point of view, they are asked to consider a question centered on action.
Example:

1. If this professional situation was taking place in your family context, how would you describe it?”
2. Then (after a client description): Coming back to your professional issue, what are some new options you could consider?

If a coach mixes the two questions, there is a high risk that these strategies become simple rhetorical questions.

- **Example:** “If this situation was happening in your family what options could you apply that could also be implemented at work?”

Consequently in hypothetical questions, coaches need to give clients ample time to change perspectives with a detailed description. Only then can clients move on to answer a more solution-oriented question. The more a client can really elaborate on the new perspective, in this case, a move into a more private sphere, the more a coach can ask practical questions on what can be done considering the new client vision. If, as in the above example, the client does not have ample time to elaborate the new proposed context, he or she will manifest difficulties in modifying their frame of reference to envision new possibilities.

Consequently, hypothetical questions gain in effectiveness when they are really separated into two clearly separated coach interventions.

Example:

1. “If you were a 6-year-old child, how would you perceive the situation?”
2. (LATER) “What can you do tomorrow considering this very simple and clear perception?”

To illustrate a less effective hypothetical question, consider the following: "If you were ten years older and had moved on to other challenges, how would you have solved this issue? Served in this rhetorical way, the client is not given an opportunity to really move on and consider what life would be like beyond the present challenge. The client has consequently not really changed perspective, and still doesn't know what to do tomorrow.

In the course of the following presentation, a number of hypothetical questions will be covered. To make them effective, professional coaches will always remember to serve the "if" question as a separate piece of work from the following action-oriented "how" questions that should follow after a complete client answer.

Ideal Solution Coaching Questions

To help clients think out of the box, simple coaching questions can suggest they dare to formulate ultimately positive outcomes to i issues , problems and goals. Consequently, coaches can very directly suggest that clients need to aim “strong”, “high” and “beautiful”. Some of these examples fall in the category of hypothetical questions.

- "What is your ideal outcome?"

- "What is your best possible scenario?"
- "If you really dared to formulate your deepest hopes, what would you say?"
- "What is your ultimate possible goal?"

- "In the best of all possible worlds, what would be your ultimate wish?"
- "If the situation were perfect, what would it look like?"

- "What is your highest possible goal? The one you wouldn't even dare share with me."

- Etc.

Magical Coaching Questions

A similar type of approach, also falling into the hypothetical-question strategy described above, involves using magical, mythical, hero, or super powers:

- "What would you if you had magic wand?"

- "If you had a « genie » that could grant you three wishes, how would you go about solving this issue to perfection?"
- "What would your favorite hero (role-model, guru, etc.) do in this situation?"
- "What would you do to make things right, if you had unlimited super powers?"

- "If you consulted the old wizard (good witch) in yourself, what would he (she) say?"

- "What would your best childhood friend suggest you could do?"
- "What does your guardian angel (Jiminy Cricket, etc.) say about this?"

Some means-oriented clients may argue that they do not have the magic wand or superpowers. That needs to be supported by the coach. "Of course. I know! I'm saying IF you had that means, what result would you want to achieve with it?"

This illustrates that this type of question suggests that clients focus on their desired results before looking for the means to achieve them. Many clients put too much energy into means, or the lack of means, when they have not really clearly defined a very motivating goal.

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TIME-SPACE TRAVEL QUESTIONS

As the above title indicates, many coach questions simply propose that clients mentally and emotionally relocate in space or in time just long enough to envision their situation from a different angle. The next step, of course, is to bring them back here and now in order to ask them what they could do, considering their newly acquired perspective.

Zero Base Coaching Questions

This hypothetical approach consists in getting the client to erase history and personal involvement, in order to reconsider a situation, a relationship or an issue as completely new and fresh. This approach could be considered a reboot type of process.

- If you started this project today, knowing what you know, what would you do differently?
- If you just met the person now and wanted to ensure a totally different foundation for your relationship, how would you start it today?
- If you could erase all the history in this project and get off to a fresh start, how would you go about it?

The coaching process following this initial question will consist in integrating the options to correct the actual situation. Indeed, it is never too late to put things right, by setting better foundations.

Future Projection Coaching Questions:

Another creative hypothetical approach consists in asking clients to project themselves into the future and imagine having totally solved their issue or achieved their goal. By this projection, coaches first ask clients to describe the ideally solved situation or ambition achieved beyond reasonable hopes, or totally successful outcome, or happily developed, relationship etc. Once clients have finished sharing the details of this description, THEN the coach could ask how they got there. This will serve to elaborate an action plan

- If you project yourself several years forward and imagine the problem is totally solved. Can you describe it. (THEN) What have you done to reach that satisfactory outcome?

- Imagine yourself in five years when everything is exactly as you wish. How have you changed from what you are today? (or) Can you describe your environment? (or) can you make an inventory of your successes ?, (THEN) How have you achieved this?
- Pretend that you have solved your issue in the most satisfactory possible way, what is the final result?(or) Can you describe how you feel ? (THEN.) What did you do to get there?

Of course the subtlety consists in choosing an appropriate future date for the issue at hand. If the client is concerned with a meeting next week, suggesting a projection a few days after that event in order to evaluate its positive outcome is quite pertinent. If, however, the client is considering a major career change, suggesting a projection into a more distant future, such as ten years from today, will provide a more appropriate longer-term perspective.

In some cases, a future projection will serve to help the client look forward, farther in the future, to consider other more important goals or ambitions.

1. Imagine that you are six months down the road and that this problem is totally solved. It is out of your hair and you are now free from all its consequences. Can you describe the situation?
2. (LATER) "Great! So from this place onwards, what do you want to do with your next future?"

This strategy consists in helping clients focus on other more important ambitions or deeper personal yearnings than the one they are focusing on, on the shorter term.

Here and Now Projection

Imagine that a client mentions having difficulty expressing an issue to a third party in their personal or professional environment. The coach could immediately get the descriptive client into a more active mode by saying:

- ”If this person was here right now, what would you say?”

- "Here, the person is on the phone. What do you want to tell her?"
- "The conference starts now. What do you say to begin it?"

Sometimes this strategy can be implemented by having the client address an empty chair in the coaching environment, as if the third party were in that chair.

Sometimes, without inviting the absentee into the present, the coach could simply ask: “what do you want to tell that person?” in order to trick the client into immediately formulating what he or she claims is difficult to formulate. When the client is done expressing the words, the coach can then say: “You just said what you want very clearly. It seems that you know exactly how to formulate what you have to say.”

Inside out/ Outside in Coaching Questions

sResting on the perception principle that there is no "out there" out there, this questioning approach consists in proposing that the client integrate what they perceive as external, or externalize what they perceive as inside them.

- “You say you are totally confused. Imagine you are actually very clear about the confusion that is widespread in your environment, what is it like.” (THEN) “Considering your clarity on your environment’s confusion, what do you need to do?”
- “You have just described a truly wonderful place that seems to bring you so much peace, and helps you really center. What if this place is actually inside of you, and you always had access to it, where is it in you? (THEN) “Wherever you are, how would you remember to access it?”

Coaching Questions to Change Client Contexts

Based on the principle that clients could have similar behavioral patterns in different contexts, this questioning approach consists in proposing that clients envision how the issue could be approached in a really different environment.

- What if this situation was not happening in your office setting, but at home, how would you deal with it?
- If this was not a personal finance issue, but a corporate problem. How would you solve it?
- If this person were not a work colleague but your best personal friend, how would you tell her?
- If rather than in work, this was happening in a sports team, what could be a very effective solution for you?

Space/Volume Mobility Coaching Questions

Similar to almost all of the above time-space types of questions, coaches can also suggest that clients get up and/or physically move to consider i issues from a different angle or point of view. This is the equivalent of suggesting a bird’s-eye view. It is possible to ask clients to get up, take some distance and then look at “themselves” in their empty seat from afar. The coach can then ask:

- “What is your perception of « her » problem?”

- “What really original advice would you give” yourself?”
- “What resource do you think « he » could use?”
- “What obvious potential outcome is « she » not even considering”?”
- “If you were “his” personal counselor, what would you say to help “him” out?”
- Etc.

One active potential inherent in this type of geographical move is to get the client into action to find new perspectives. This can be particularly useful for clients who appear to be "stuck" or paralyzed in a situation from which they feel there are no "exit". Following this geographic maneuver, coaches can also ask clients to resume to their original position on the empty seat and offer conclusions to whatever perceptions or options were proposed, and then close in on suitable action plans and deadlines.

This outside protection strategy can also be done with original, creative or humorous slants using personal or ad hoc objects in the environment:

- “What is your favorite book? Where is it? Now, what does that book think you should do?”
- Your dog really pays good attention to you. From his “dog” position and if he could talk, what would he say that you haven’t even considered?”
- “If you were a fly on the ceiling looking at the situation, what strikes you as really surprising /funny?”

CLIENT RESOURCE INVENTORY

Coaching Questions on Past Strategies

In case of intense stress, confusion or despair, clients sometimes feel completely helpless, forgetting how to use their own resources, usually available in more normal situations. A simple question can allow these clients to refocus on their own known capacities and skills, thereby taking some distance from the issue at hand.

Obviously, for more reserved or down to earth clients reluctant to let loose on their “free wheeling” imagination, classical time-travel questions aim to make an inventory of strengths or strategies that were successfully implemented in client pasts. Much in the same way as with the above hypothetical questions, coaches will first ask that clients search within their past personal or professional experience to dig up resources that were not perceived or considered useful to solve the issue at hand.

1. “Have you already faced similar situations (problems, types of people, apparently unattainable goals, etc.) in your past ?
2. "(THEN) How did you go about implementing a successful outcome?”

With this type of question, coaches need to be attentive that their clients do not start giving lengthy descriptions of their past issues, nor answer beside the question to justify their feelings of incompetency by explaining that the past was fundamentally different.

If the client can only think of another equally negative situation which had a dramatically undesirable outcome, the coach can then say: "Good, considering your negative experience, what do you want to change in what you did, in order to achieve a much more satisfactory outcome today?"

Resources perceived by the client environment

Another type of inquiry can concern client resources usually recognized by client friends and family. A second, subsequent question can then bring the client to focus back onto their issue, with less stress and more conscious of their intrinsic competencies that can allow positive outcomes.

- “What are the qualities that your environment has always recognized you have?”
- “What are the five main kills that people you know usually see in you?”

Once these qualities have been listed and detailed, the coach can ask the client: "How can you use each of these qualities/skills in your current issue". This strategy to first help the clients refocus on their intrinsic or recognized capacities and skills can help them self-validate their own inner power to solve their problems and achieve their goals. In this way, clients often very simply realize that they do have qualities that can help them pull through.

Resources self-perceived by the client

A slightly different and more direct approach for clients that undervalue themselves is to ask them for their five main qualities. When each is named, the coach can ask for details and have the client underline his of her own worth. The follow-up question is the same: “How can you apply your qualities to succeed in you current situation?”

This is particularly useful approach for clients that tend to disqualify their capacities or under-evaluate their worth.

Resources perceived by the coach

These questions concern resources perceived or intuited by the coach. This can even be done with a humorous slant, knowing that any change in the

client state will help provoke a change of perspective. If the coach can get their clients to smile or laugh during the coaching process, they will change their focus when they come back to consider their issue.

“How can you use your legendary: wry sense of humor/ ferociously feline reactivity/ seductively feminine intuition (said to a man)/ obstinately knuckle-headed resilience/ in this situation?”

This strategy obviously rests on a strong coach-client prior relationship that can allow the coach to perceive very real and useful client skills or resources. Note again here that the use of humor can help change a client’s state of mind during the coaching process, and therefore in the subsequent search for new options.

LOGICAL STRATEGY QUESTIONS

In general, if a client is already very logical and linear in approach, a typical list maker of sorts, this approach may just reinforce an already acquired skill. The following strategies could however be very useful with clients that seem to proceed more emotionally, lack method, be overactive rather than analytical, etc.

Mapping & Network Coaching Questions

When clients are covering complex issues including a number of people, places, elements or items, having them map out or symbolically draw these and their interconnections on a flip chart or paper often does wonders. At some point, it is useful for the coach to ask the client to conclude the drawing, take some distance from it and get a different perspective from a distance or different angles. Coach questions concerning the relationships between the items, relevance of positioning, significance of sizes, shapes and colors can often help the client discover new dimensions to an apparently well-known situation.

- In your team, who is the most reactive - the slowest? The most supportive - the most resistant? The most stable - the risk taker? The most creative - the most predictable? The closest to you - the most distant? The most rational - the most emotional? The most anchored in the past - the most open to the future? Can you draw a map that positions all this information and other pertinent criteria that you perceive illustrates the team’s full potential
- (THEN) How can all these very diverse skills be used to help the team achieve great results?

Priority and Ordering Coaching Questions

Questions that ask the client to rank pertinent elements on a continuum, in a more linear fashion than a mapping strategy. These questions are not necessarily creative, but can help a client get more structure, order, or clarity. The ranking can be from the easiest to the most difficult, or from the closest to the farthest, or from the most supportive to the most resistant, or again from the riskiest to the safest or from the first to the last, etc. This type of ranking applied to priorities or time management concerns can offer clients food for thought, insights and allow them to design more order or structure in a project, program, management issue, etc.

One banal linear question consists in asking a progressing client: "On a scale from one to ten, where do you perceive you stand today?" If the client should answer "Four", then the coach says, "Well, how can you get to eight?". Very creative! How about asking "how can you get to fifteen? or how can you get to a rainbow?... etc. Remember that powerful coaches are not just glorified project managers!

Coaches could consider that these linear or structuring questions are not really very powerful when served when clients are actions planning. They are useful only in that they are practical. They could be much more fundamental when served to very confused or overwhelmed clients who need to get more clarity in a situation they have difficulty handling. This gets us to powerful questions focused on client emotions.

Neither nor Questions

Beware, however of linear thinking patterns. Many clients get stuck into thinking that the universe is determined by black or white dynamics, stuck between either or, all or nothing. When they try to evolve out of it, they choose to go for grey, for a halfway watered-down stance. Understandably, those options are never very exciting. Useful coaching questions can propel the client into more realistically complex thinking patterns. Consider the following:

- "You seem to think in terms of black and white. What would be a Technicolor view of your situation’s options?”
- “I perceive you as playing heads or tails between two options. If you rolled a dice instead, what could be options corresponding to the six different faces of your dice?

More simply in simple logical terms, in all either-or situations, one can add both, or neither, or all of the above, plus some more paradoxical questions, evoked further below.

QUESTIONS TO FOCUS ON ENERGY AND EMOTIONS

Coaching Questions to Refocus client Concerns

A coach can also test the principle that a train can always conceal another one, or that in coaching a surface problem or issue could mainly serve the purpose of hiding another deeper and more motivating concern. In this case a coach can ask questions to refocus client attention or energy on completely different issues:

- “If this apparent problem didn’t use up all your time and energy, what do you really want to do with yourself and your life?”
- “If you knew that this team situation was only there to divert your vital attention, towards what really motivating collective goal would you direct all your team's energy?“
- “If you didn’t spend so much time banging your head on the wall in front of you, where is the door or window that opens towards your future?”
- “Beyond all this information on a current issue, can you tell me, in one short sentence, what your really fundamental life objective is,?”

Metaphorical Questions

This approach is kin to changing client contexts from home to office or from office to sports. Whenever there is a possibility to change perspectives with a synthetic, creative or humoristic metaphorical question, these can help change client energy and open new perspectives. In many cases, these can also have a hypothetical question format:

- "If your story was a comic strip, what hero are you portraying here?"
- (THEN) "What would this character do in your situation today?

- "If your office team was playing a theatrical or Broadway show, what is its title and theme?"
- (THEN) "What winning lessons can you take from that show, to apply in your issue?"

In some cases, a coach perception could be thrown in to offer the client a more personal coach input:

- "If I may, I perceive you much like a Columbo character, very progressively, and indirectly preparing a grand finale. What if you surprised yourself by immediately proceeding to that finale?

Emotions are to be considered as essential in most coaching situations and relationships. Emotions energize. They are the fuel for motivation and motion. Of course all powerful coach questions indirectly aim to increase client commitment to move forward with their lives, grow, act, develop, etc. Some of the following illustrate more specific work to revive, activate and direct some of this fundamental energy.

Poetic Coaching Questions

Depending on the client's fields of interest and capacity to visualize, some coaching questions can appeal to other senses to create a very effective break in client frame of reference and strategy. Consider the following examples:

- "It feels as if you are stubbornly struggling uphill hardly making any progress. How can you change your process to make it a smooth and very enjoyable downhill ride, like on a ski slope?"
- "I have the impression your progression is like wading waist-deep in a muddy marsh. What would you do if you were a butterfly dancing in the clouds?"
- "Your reactive strategy sounds as subtle as that of an impatient rhinoceros. How would you go about doing this if you were as light as a feather?"

When this type of question is served to unsuspecting linear and methodic clients, they can create wonders, opening completely different fields of awareness.

Essential Motivation-focused Coach Questions

In the same direction, a very simple question focused on revealing client fundamental motivations can help them re-center their energy on deeper aspirations. These are too often dimmed by more superficial everyday preoccupations. Asking the same question a number of times may also get the client to delve deeper to find a more personal answer.

- “What do you *really-really* want?

A coach may ask this twice or three times, no matter the answer, emphasizing a different word: “What do *you* really-really want?” or “*What* do you really-really want?” or “What do you really-really *want*?” With such different emphasis, this question is actually very different!

- “What are your deepest hopes for your longer-term future?”
- “What are your most fundamental motivations in life?”

As mentioned above, when this type of question is really considered by clients, they usually tend to be silent for a long time. Obviously, the coach should not interrupt that silence.

Coaching Questions on the Positive Dimensions of Emotions

Based on the principle that all emotions are useful in that they each serve to awaken positive strategies, these questions help client go beyond just feeling so-called negative emotions. They help client focus back to movement, solutions and actions.

- “If your anger or rage was actually excellent fuel to get you moving in this situation, what would be the most effective way to direct its energy to achieve your goal?”
- “If your fear was just there to make sure you stayed aware of possible risks. If it served to make you very cautious or vigilant, so you stayed on your toes, how can you use it as a very useful indicator to proceed very carefully and safely?”
- “If your sadness was an excellent indicator that it is high time you really took care of yourself and of your own personal needs, what do you need to do to really take care of yourself? And that is a very high priority!”

Start Small Coaching Questions

With some fear-stricken or paralyzed clients who perceive their goals or issues to be insurmountable or much too « huge » to face, reassuring strategic questions can suggest that the client cut the « problem pie » into much smaller chunks. Likewise, when great fear limits a client's capacity to act, focusing on initiating very small immediate actions can also be much easier to consider.

This coaching strategy amounts to suggesting a very progressive approach, one very little step at time, made up of much smaller, easier and manageable sequences that cannot fail. The fundamental objective of this strategy is actually to get the client moving out of paralysis and get some momentum.

- «What can be your first smallest step in the right direction? »
- « What is a first easy act that can get you started down the right path? »
- « Now if you cut up your challenge up into ten equal pieces, what first obvious chunk can you could consider facing right away?»
- « What is the first smallest possible immediate change for you?»

This type of first-small-step strategy can also be quite salutary with all-or-nothing clients that tend to set themselves unrealistic goals in order to rapidly get dissatisfied with their dismal results. Starting slowly and surely can help them build more solit foundations from which they can then grow taller.

Obviously, this is not to be used a habitual or ritual strategy to serve to all clients, as some very protective coaches may think. Many clients are actually ready to go much faster than one very small step at a time.

Worst Scenario Coaching Questions

In some rare coaching situations, a relatively paradoxical and somewhat surprising questioning strategy consists in asking clients to proceed with an approach opposite to one that would normally be considered coaching “common sense”. With this type approach, some overwhelmed clients sometimes come to the awareness that their worst possible scenario is already at hand and that things can only get better. Sometimes, also, by considering really “negative” options, new positive or constructive strategies suddenly come to mind.

- “What is your most catastrophic option?”
- “If the situation became as dramatic as possible, what would it be like?”
- “If you wanted to fail every inch of the way, how would you go about it?”
- "If it was your goal, how would you go about provoking your whole team to turn against you?”

In some cases, it may seem that some clients are almost working against their best interests. When that is perceived, similar apparently negative questions can help these client become aware of their own very active self-defeating strategies:

- "What would you do differently if you really didn't want to solve your issue?"
- "Suppose you spent all your energy to compile a list of useless options, what have you left out so far?"
- "If you really wanted to prove that nothing could be done, how would you waste your coaching time with me?"

Of course, these questions could be quite confronting for a client. They need to be served with a true supportive and protective attitude in order to effectively bring the client to wwork in a more productive fashion.

Note also that although having clients imagine their most negative scenarios may sound very creative to some coaches, good coaching would directly proceed towards positive, constructive, motivating and useful steps to implement solutions, in order to immediately work on success strategies. In effect, the worst possible scenario approach can be considered useful only if the coach is rather convinced that the client is already there, and that nothing could possibly go worse.

Weakest Link Questions

This type of question is particularly useful when clients are done elaborating an apparently solid action plan. In order to help them review their plan to double-check for possible dangers and build in secure options. This weakest link question is also often useful when the client has some extra time to

make sure all is solid:

- If one person/team/department in this program could need a little more attention than the others, to make sure that there are no hitches, who or where would that be?
- If your proposal was to fail because of one apparently minor detail on which you could focus a little more, which one would that be?
- If one wanted to block this project at the most appropriate time, when would be the best period?

Obviously, these questions set the stage for some follow up with a plan to make sure the weak link becomes as strong as all the others segments of the planned actions or programs. Obviously also, the weak link is not tailored to focus the client on possible scapegoats, but rather to allow the client to consolidate possible weak areas.

Another article to read about the systemic dimensions of coaching

PARADOXICAL QUESTIONS AND STRATEGIES

The following questions rest on much less common logic. They are particularly useful to serve to linear, logical or Cartesian clients in order to help them embrace the more subtle complexities of life. These questions rest on such philosophical stances as nothing is either good or bad, positive or negative, difficult or easy, either or, etc. everything can be both. The is no Yin without Yang!

Reverse Client Affirmations

This questioning strategy suggests that all apparent « problems » are in fact great opportunities. And all apparent crisis situations introduce healthy necessary change, all apparent problem partners in one's life also offer opportunities for growth or learning challenges all that creates disorder and disruption in a well-planned life is the result of a very positive life force that one has not yet recognized. Etc.

Consider the following coaching questions:

- "What would you do if this apparently difficult problem was really an opportunity for you to start considering very important changes in your life?"
- "How could you react to this apparently « negative situation » if it was really a solution to a lot of your problems?"
- "What do you need to start changing in yourself to welcome this apparently disruptive event, in the positive way it really deserves?"
- "If this problem was actually an opportunity for you to grow, what would you start changing in yourself?"
- "How is this problem person offering you an opportunity to learn something very important about yourself?"
- "How is this fault also a very useful quality?"
- "How could this setback actually be a blessing?"
- "Can you list all the advantages of being in this difficult situation?"
- "Can you make an inventory of this problem-person's obvious qualities?"

Paradoxical Coach Questions

Some strategic questions can be thrown out just simply to create confusion or to completely reshuffle apparent client certainties. This rests on the principle that real creativity comes out of confusion, or that no really innovative answer can come out of any very neatly organized context. Consequently these questions serve to provoke new client mental patterns by initiating a form of temporarily chaos:

- "What is the obvious common denominator in all your apparently different options?"
- "What is the complete opposite of all your mutually exclusive options?"
- "How are all your different alternatives really very similar in essence?"

Note that when coaches ask this type of questions, they may not have any precise idea as to the client response that may follow. By serving those questions, the coach is often attempting to interrupt too linear or too logical a client process. These questions serve to provoke mental disruption and send the client spinning in a different, stranger orbit, away from obvious certitudes.

Consequently, if following one of these questions, a client suddenly changes expressions, the coach can simply stay silent until a new perspective takes shape up and is offered as an option for exploration.

On a different level, paradoxical questions also challenge a client's thinking patterns. Very often, for instance, all of one client's options do have a common denominator. That client could very well start wondering what could be the opposite of some of his or her basic assumptions. So paradoxical questions very often help clients open themselves wider, to embrace totally new perspectives.

Questions to Prescribe Client Symptoms

These are obviously paradoxical strategies, focused on increasing observed apparently ineffective client behavior. Their originality lies in the fact that

common sense could expect coaches to accompany such behaviors in the opposite direction, towards an established social standard. Doing the exact opposite leaves the client more responsible about what they want to do with their own behavioral evolution.

- For a slow client: "Have you considered progressing very slowly, as a general strategy?"
- For a very stressed client: "How would you behave if you were stressed in everything you do?"
- For an obviously angry client: "Have you considered becoming irritated about the situation, and expressing it?"
- For a rebellious client: "Have you considered what it would be like to be totally non compliant in your situation?"

Coach Questions to Support Client Interactive Strategies

When clients seem to be passive, very slow, with low energy or at a standstill, many coaches may take on the responsibility to pull the client, push, urge, offer questions, accelerate, or motivate. A paradoxical strategy could consist in asking:

- "What if it was really urgent for you to do nothing and wait it out?" or

- "Suppose that you change nothing for the next five years, how do think the situation will evolve, all by itself?"

Proposing passivity and inaction to a slow moving client may indeed be an effective option. The client is left with the responsibility to decide to wake up and act, or to decide to let go, build a plan to adapt to an unchanging situation, and then and go on to other issues and projects. This strategy is very useful for some coaches that tend to feel the urge to carry client responsibility for what the coach considers to be a good outcome.

This type of paradoxical strategy can also very useful during a coaching session:

- "It's great if you say nothing" to a silent client
- "It's important for you to take your time" to a slow client
- "You can voice your anger as much as you want here" to an enraged client

Etc.

If nothing else, this will help remind the coach to accept the client as he or she is.

Coach Questions To Eliminate The Problem

The objective of this approach is to help clients focus on fundamental objectives or deeper motivations, rather than waste time solving more superficial issues. The underlying principle is that the more one focuses on issues, difficulties and problems to solve, the more these seem to appear in order to occupy one, full time. The more one focuses on motivating projects, ambitions and enlightening experiences the more these seem to start filling one's life. It is a matter of choice as to where clients (and their coaches) want to put their energy.

- "If this situation were to disappear out of your life, just by magic, towards what fulfilling project/ambition/adventure would you put all of your vital energy?"
- "If this problem just evaporated into thin air, what would you really want to do with your life?"

If some clients did not indeed have problems to keep them occupied full time, day in and day out, what great ambition would they want to set out to achieve?

SYSTEMIC COACHING QUESTIONS

These are sometimes called "circular" questions in reference to the principle of circularity in systems or also reflexive or recursive questions for their indirect effect on the client environment or on others present in the same room. These questions are powerful if successfully asked when coaching within structured systems such as within families, within teams or networks.

The powerful nature of circular questions rests on their capacity both to provoke an awareness of complex collective interactions and to stimulate the transformation of formal systems. To be effective, these questions

- Are often put to one precise person in the presence of all the other members of a system, and
- Concern information or behaviors that one person perceives concerning another or the rest of the team or family members.

Examples:

- "Bob, can you tell me what would be the indirect or collateral objectives of this team coaching process if they were formulated by Jim, your leader here?"
- "Michael, when your team leader manifests impatience during your team meetings, who do you perceive is the first team member to acknowledge that and offer support?"

When your executive assistant expresses personal stress due work overload within the team, which team is the first team member to express understanding? Which team member will first help to look for solutions?"

- "Brenda, when it is time for the team to get focused on a new project, who are the usual three most motivated volunteers?"
- "Susan, who are the two team members most likely to disagree with each other during meetings, no matter the issue or the subject at hand?"
- "David, who do you think benefits most from this collective focus on George as the designated team scapegoat?"

This type of systemic question can be asked to any one member of a team, in a collective setting. They can also be put to an individual client during a one-on-one coaching sequence. In this case, the question would have less of a "circular" effect on the surrounding system. Similar to the Mapping Questions mentioned above, these could still be asked to help individual clients better perceive their environment's influence when focusing on problem resolution or when achieving objectives.

- In your family environment, who is the person who will support you most actively and unconditionally during this coming personal transition?"
- When your Operational VP focuses on obtaining better results, what exactly does your financial VP do to support that effort?"
- On whom can you count most for support in the external environment of your team, when you are experiencing internal difficulties?"

Numerous sub-categories of such circular or systemic questions take into account some of the criteria exposed earlier in this article. They can be centered on problems or on solutions, on the past or on the future, on behaviors or on values, be neutral or directed, etc. Their powerful nature principally resides in their capacity to center the individual or collective client on developing an awareness of potential interfaces between all the actors within a precise system or in the larger general environment.

Coaching Questions to Help Face the Coach-Client Relationship

Note that if clients often serve their coaches with problems or issues originating from their personal or professional lives, the coach-client relationship also offers numerous indicators on the quality of relationships and processes that these client implement within those other environments. To be more precise, in the relationship with their coaches, clients unknowingly or unconsciously “transfer” relational reflexes and behaviors habitually implemented in their “other” personal and professional environments. To add to this phenomenon, coaches also participate in those client patterns.

To offer some common examples,

- Clients who have emotional issues with sadness, anger or fear for example, will display these same emotions in their relationship with their coach.
- Clients who wish to work out « time management » issues will often play out the same behavior with their coaches, coming or calling late to coaching meetings, or rescheduling numerous meetings for invariably « urgent » reasons. Their coaches may also have the same or very complementary time management issues.
- Clients who have little respect for the needs of others in their work or home environments often consider that their coaches should be available ‘round the clock', or at a needle’s drop. Their coaches may also be facing the same i issues elsewhere, having difficulty to set limits.
- Clients who spend time catering to other people's needs, fearing negative judgment or rejection may implement similar relational processes with their coaches, for the same reasons. And their coaches may fit in very well with very complementary pleasing behaviors.

Some questions suggest that clients make parallels between their work issue and real occurrences that have taken place within the coach-client relationship. These questions may accelerate work on a central issues by helping both coach and client focus on the “real” relationship in which they are both participating.

- “Are you conscious that this issue has also occurred between us, and that I have played into it?”
- “How can your description of your boss also apply to me and to what I may occasionally do with you or say to you?”
- “How could our relationship be somewhat similar to the one you seem to have with this professional partner?

A brief word of caution: if the coach-client relationship does not rest on a solid alliance or a high level of complicity, this direct or somewhat “confronting” approach may jolt the client and provoke defensive reactions. This is especially the case if the coach does not underline his or her own responsibility in the process. It is consequently useful to formulate these questions in a way to underline that the responsibility for the occurrences are totally shared both by coach and client. This may call for some coach humility and transparency. But then, people often say that is what coaching is about.

CONCLUSIONS

We hope that this article demonstrates that questioning skills in general and powerful questions in particular deserve much more critical attention than they usually get. Through appropriate and pertinent questions, coach objectives aime for nothing less than to provoke clients to step forward and come to their own extraordinarily new and challenging personal and professional solutions.

- In proper professional hands, powerful questions are both simple, and can be as precise as surgical tools.
- With very *few powerful* questions, a coach can allow clients to deploy unexpected potentials. This done by providing an almost magical change of perspective.
- Appropriately formulated powerful question can open unlimited horizons for client development and growth.
- Deep presence and listening in order to let emerge and then precisely serve simple, strategic and powerful questions can make the difference between professional coaching and true coaching mastery.

This introductory and very partial inventory only begins to open the rich and creative field of question structures and contents that coaches can deliver to their clients. We hope that this presentation illustrates how appropriate and well formulated questions can provoke original work or exploration on the outside edge of a given client frame of reference, in order to help them better solve their own problems to achieve much greater ambitions.

We will underline again, that the questions above are just illustrations of the one question that could be appropriately served to one client, at an appropriate time in a coaching sequence. They are in no way a set or procedure of questions to systematically test with all clients, without careful listening and discrimination. True coaching is the art of asking the one pertinent question, and then giving the client all the necessary space and time to work with it, all the way to achieve complete and very practical, measurable client success.

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