

# 6 of the Best Coaching Questions.

13th Dec 2017

## ***Including the best coaching question in the world (probably)***

### **How can you help a colleague, friend or family member progress...**

Christmas holidays give many people the perfect opportunity to find and release their inner coach. Whether its peeling the sprouts on Christmas Eve, bracing a brisk walk on Boxing day, or waiting for the chimes of New Year's Eve, our friends and family will often want to chat about their work (their plans, their hopes, their fears). "How's it going?" is probably our stock question and may not yield much more than the typical "its fine" response - the look on the face may be conveying the subtext "I dont think you really want to know and I dont think I really want to tell you". At the other end of the spectrum, we find that someone's work is a disaster zone and our friend, colleague or family member really wants some help, or at the least someone to talk to about it, and yet how do we direct their monologue and offer them more than a listening ear? (though sometimes that might be just what they need)

### **We need to find the right questions**

Anyone who has had a small child in the house will know how persistently they manage to ask all manner of questions. Who, What, How, When and of course, the absolute favourite for a few years "Why!" Note the exclamation mark as "why" can often have a bit of a challenging tone to it (try "what is the reason you...." and you might get a more thoughtful, less emotional answer). Psychologists tell us that when children get to around 8 or 9, they ask fewer questions and their languages changes to definitive statements and answers: "Because" starts to feature more than "Why". 'Its because of this or that", or "thats the way it is, beacause...." Part of our development involves finding solutions, making our little world a simpler place, and focussing on answers more than questions.

Warren Berger has written a great little book "A more beautiful question", carrying the intriguing subtitle "the power of inquiry to spark breakthrough ideas". Here, he champions the question, over the answer, and reminds us that "in the beginners mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few". It was E.E Cummings who famously said, "Always the beautiful answer / who asks a more beautiful question."

So here are a few of my favourite coaching questions, (whilst accepting no liability for the conversations that might follow!)

### **What do you really want?**

I find that much or the time, many of us don't really know what we want. We can find it easier to be clear about what we don't want than what we really do. This question also invites us to look into the future and get some energy from describing how we want things to be different from the way they are. Being more specific about what we want can really help us decide how to handle things today.

### **What is really going on?**

Sometimes, we don't realise that there is a background conversation or situation that is having a big influence on what is going on. If we take time, and take a few steps back, we can often identify something in the bigger picture. Our intuition is often pretty accurate, if only we would take the time to listen to it.

### **What matters most?**

From time to time we are stuck because we have lost sight of what is most important to us. This question gets at our values and helps us to sift through all the different possibilities. Or else it helps to focus the conversation, and figure out where we want to start, or where we want to go next. It helps us with the question of priorities and also can help us see what we have most desire or energy for.

### **What if....**

We make a lot of assumptions about what is or isn't possible and it's surprising how quickly our world narrows down. The "What if" questions can really help to free up our thinking - what if you couldn't afford to fail? what if you had more courage?; what if you could start again?; what if you had more support?; what if you had to resolve it this week? etc etc. What if is a way to generate many more options.

### **What are you going to do?**

This is a good way to turn a "passing the time" conversation into something with a bit of purpose. When we are invited to describe a plan of action, we are getting ourselves committed to a way forward. and sometimes, the reason we wanted to have the conversation is because we were stuck. "What's the next step" can be a softer way of asking the same question, and it also encourages movement. once we have taken the first couple of steps, the rest of the way can often become a lot clearer.

The best coaching question in the world (according to Michael Bungay Stanier in *The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More.....*)

### **And What Else? (AWE)**

There is nearly always something else - something not yet thought of, articulated, felt, or expressed. The first few answers to a question are often not the most significant. Giving someone time to consider "what else" invites them to get more of their story out and encourage them to extend their thoughts feelings or options. Of course, it may not be appropriate to get someone to say more than they were originally planning, so this and all other questions should be used with care. AWE is so simple and yet often, so profound.

Finally, remember that as with all conversations, the questions themselves are not enough (otherwise we wouldn't need coaches, or anybody else!). The tone, timing and implicit trust within the question will have a huge impact on the extent to which it helps.