

6 more of the best Coaching questions that bring about change....

"better questions create better conversations"

When I offered some "great coaching questions" a couple of months back, I also emphasised the importance of timing, tone, and trust. Essentially, even the best questions, without some measure of these 3 attributes, can fall on deaf ears, or worse can inflame a situation and cause damage. Before unpacking another list of key questions, I think it's worth exploring these factors that surround a conversation.

The Winter Olympics have taught us a thing or two about timing. Like when you have it, you can perform the most amazing feats in the air on skis, snowboards, sleds, and skates. And when you don't, you can come crashing down to earth pretty fast. Knowing the right time to do the right thing can be helpful, if not essential, in all sorts of ways at work. When do I ask for a raise?; when do I tackle that performance issue?; when do I give feedback?; when do I push back, or push up, or push forward? It may not just be about time of day, or day of the week - it could come down to the split second. Am I reading the body language of the other person accurately enough to see 'open to talk' signals, or am I too worried about how I'm going to phrase my question? Get it right, and a great conversation can follow. Get it wrong, and the air can be filled with an awkward silence, or else plenty of conversation along the lines you were hoping to avoid.

If timing is important in conversations then tone is even more so. Which is why we can have so much difficulty with email exchanges. It can be hard to communicate tone with the written word - texting is often easier, because we can clarify our tone with an emoji - wink - laugh - cry - clap. But business communications are not so frequently carried out by text. In the room, we are normally quite good at picking up on tone. Which is why it matters so much. When the words are right, but the tone is wrong - too flat, too hard, too soft, too apologetic, too critical - the conversation is less likely to flow. While you might have the chance to point out the discrepancy between tone and possible intent there and then you are more likely, on further thought, to end up having some internal dialogue of your own ("I don't believe this guy", "there's no way I'm joining this project" - "I'm gonna have to replace them" etc etc.)

Which brings us to trust. Essentially, the more trust we have, the more someone will assume a positive intent in our questions. And vice-versa. If I know you, and I have enough experience to know you have my best interests at heart, I'll forgive you the odd clumsy phrasing, or flat tones. I'll be comfortable telling you I'm not ready for "that" conversation and/or I'll be ready to share some of my inner most thoughts and ideas. I may even find myself revealing or exploring ideas, thoughts or emotions, I didn't even know were there myself. And I'll probably trust you more as a result. Without much trust, don't worry about selecting the right question at the right time - it's not going to be a great conversation. But trust can be built and re-built. Making sure you say what you mean and mean what you say is a good start to build a sense of reliability, and in time, credibility with the other person.

6 More Great questions

1) What would it take....? This can be a really helpful way to identify blockages and help someone see what might be needed, to understand something better, to solve a tricky problem, or simply to get back into action. It invites the listener to get beyond the here and now and to imagine themselves finding a solution.

2) Scaling questions... It can be hard to get a sense of scale, whether that's about well-being, project completion, or likelihood of taking a particular action. "On a scale of 1-10, where are you now", can help

someone to pinpoint their experience - using it as a comparator, can also help distinguish between competing options. And it can be combined with the previous question: "What would it take to move from a 5 to an 8 on that scale?"

3) The miracle question? Sometimes we find it hard to imagine even a small improvement in a given situation. So asking what a perfect outcome would be, or "imagine you wake up tomorrow and the situation is miraculously solved" can really help to envision the desired future. You can also step back from miracle to what would be a "reasonable or satisfactory" outcome. It's another way of asking "What does success look like?".

4) Can you put it in one sentence? (aka - the bottom line). Our lives can feel pretty complicated, and so can the issues we face. When we tell our story to someone else, we might not want to leave anything out. And if we're someone who likes to do our thinking out loud, we may have difficulty with focus. Whilst some people may need to be drawn out, others need to be helped to close down, to summarise, or to cut to the chase. Closed questions can help (demanding a single word answer), but putting everything into one sentence can really help to focus the mind.

5) What would your colleague (friend, boss, husband, sister) say? When we can only see an issue from a particular perspective, our understanding and therefore our options can feel quite limited. By introducing other characters, we can switch perspective and see things from another angle. This can be done by using an empty chair and inviting someone to imagine what another key player might say. These insights can free up their own thinking, draw on latent intuition and deepen awareness.

6) Do you know what you need to do now? Although "what are you going to do" can be a great call to action, it's sometimes useful to help someone reflect on what they already know they need to do. We sometimes "know" without being sure how we know. And there might be times when we really don't know - in which case that can also be helpful to surface; this can lead in to "what's stopping you?"

And what else? (known as the best coaching question in the world!)

Given that we started with 3 points, how about clarity of thought, conviction, and courage as 3 more ingredients that can change the world as we know it. What are you waiting for?

Quote Unquote

"The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven't found it yet, keep looking. Don't settle." Steve Jobs

"If you don't act on life, life will act on you" Robin Sharma

"We need to do the thinking future back and outside in. What will you regret in 2 years time not dealing with today. And what will come as a surprise to you in 6 months time, that you half know already?" Peter Hawkins

"If you get tired, learn to rest; not to quit" Banksy.

"So when did we all get so fearful? And now we're finally finding our voices... Just take a chance, come help me sing this I wanna sing, I wanna shout I wanna scream 'til the words dry out..." Emeli Sande (in Read all about it).