

## **The Coaching Habit:**

### **Say Less, Ask More & Change the Way You Lead Forever**

**– Michael Bungay Stanier**

*"Coaching is an art and it's far easier said than done. It takes courage to ask a question rather than offer up advice, provide an answer, or unleash a solution. Giving another person the opportunity to find their own way, make their own mistakes, and create their own wisdom is both brave and vulnerable."*

This book is based around **Seven essential coaching questions** to demonstrate how-by saying less and asking more, we can develop coaching methods that produce great results for our clients:

- \* Get straight to the point in any conversation with **The Kickstart Question**
- \* Stay on track during any interaction with **The Awe Question**
- \* Save hours of time for yourself with **The Lazy Question**, and hours of time for others with **The Strategic Question**
- \* Get to the heart of any interpersonal or external challenge with **The Focus Question** and **The Foundation Question**
- \* Finally ensure others find your coaching as beneficial as you do with **The Learning Question**

## **Two types of Coaching:**

- **Coaching for Performance** - addressing and fixing a specific problem or challenge. It's putting out the fire or building up the fire - it is everyday stuff, important and necessary.
- **Coaching for Development** - turning the focus from the issue to the person dealing with the issue, it's rare, significantly more powerful and means the focus is on calling your client forward to learn, improve and grow rather than on just getting the problem sorted out for them. The seven essential questions will encourage coaching for Development.

## **The 3P Model:**

- This is a framework for choosing what to focus on in a coaching conversation – for deciding which aspect of a challenge might be at the heart of a difficulty that the client is working through.
- The 3Ps refer to **Projects, People and Patterns**
  - The **Project** side refers to challenges around the actual content. What projects do you need to abandon or postpone? What meetings will you no longer attend?
  - The **People** side refers to issues with team members, colleagues, customers or clients. What expectations do you need to manage? What relationships will you let go?
  - The **Patterns** refers to if there is a way that you are getting in your own way and not showing up in the best possible way, where should we start. What habits do you need to break? What old stories or dated ambitions do you need to update? What beliefs about yourself do you need to change? This is the most common and most effective aspect to focus on when **coaching for development**.

### **1. The Kickstart Question: "What's on your mind? "**

The question is focused, it's not an invitation to tell you anything or everything. It's encouragement to go right away to what is exciting what is all consuming? What's waking them up at 4 am.

- A question that says **let's talk about the thing that matters most**.
- What the client is holding in their mind will unconsciously influence what they can notice and focus on.

- Whatever the client is thinking about, can also influence the choices they make, so they might not, in fact, make the optimal choice.
- This question releases the challenge from where it may well be rattling around in a slightly uninformed and unclear way that is, unbeknownst to the client, narrowing the way they are seeing the world.
- Asking the Kickstart question works as a little pressure release valve and helps make explicit something that might be unduly influencing the way you work.

**Tip:** *If you know what question to ask, get to the point and ask it. Sometimes having a lead in phrase can lessen the heaviness of a question and make it easier to ask and answer. The best way to do this is to use “out of curiosity”.*

## **2. The Awe Question: “And what else?”**

With seemingly no effort, this question creates more wisdom, more insights, more self-awareness and more possibilities out of thin air. It is the quickest and easiest way to uncover and create new possibilities.

- Asking “What else” will lead to more options and often better options. Better options lead to better decisions and better decisions lead to better success.
- The first answer a client gives you is almost never the only answer and it’s rarely the best answer.
- It is the simplest way to stay lazy and stay curious.
- You could ask this question at least three times until the client says “there is nothing else” - then you can move on to the next question.
- If you have got 3-5 answers to the question – “What else” – you have made good progress.
- **TAME YOUR ADVICE MONSTER!** “Tell less and ask more. Your advice is not as good as you think it is.”
- We’ve all got a deeply ingrained habit of slipping into the advice, giver/expert/answer it/solve it/fix it mode
- Often giving advice, even if it’s the wrong advice feels more comfortable than the ambiguity of asking a question
- This is your Advice Monster – we have the best of intentions to stay curious and ask a few good questions, but **the advice monster leaps out of the darkness and hijacks the conversation.**
- There is a place for giving advice, but it’s an overused and often ineffective response. In short, even though we don’t really know what the issue is, or what’s going on for the client, we are quite sure we’ve got the answer that they need.
- By using “and what else?” it breaks that cycle. It’s a self-management tool to keep your advice monster under restraints.
- This question can also act as a way to buy yourself some time if you need some extra time to figure something out.

**Tip:** *Stop offering advice with a question mark attached. If you’ve got an idea, wait. Ask, “and what else? And you’ll often find that the client comes up with that very idea that’s burning a hole in your brain. If the client doesn’t, then you can offer your idea as an idea not disguised as a fake question.*

## **3. The Focus Question: “What is the real challenge here for you?”**

This is the question that will help slow down the rush to action, so you spend time solving the real problem and not the first problem.

- Three sets of questions bring out different perspectives: What's the challenge? What's the real challenge here? **What's the real challenge here for you?**
- This one pins the question to the client. It keeps the question personal and makes the client think more deeply about what they need to figure out.
- If the client talks of many challenges – asking the question “if you had to pick up one of these to focus on, which one would be the real challenge for you?” would do the trick.
- **Stick to questions stating with ‘What’**
- If you are trying to fix things, you don't need the backstory. Stick to questions starting with “What” and **avoid questions starting with “Why”** (it puts the client on the defensive)
- It is better to reframe the questions starting with “why” to starting with “what”. E.g., why did you do that? Can be reframed as What were you hoping for there? Or What made you chose this course of action? What's important for you here?

**Tip:** Stick to questions starting with ‘What’ and avoid questions starting with ‘Why’.

#### **4. The Foundation Question: “What do you want?”**

This can be a very difficult question to answer. We often don't know what we “actually” want. Even if that question is answered, “What do you really want” would typically stop the client in their tracks.

- Even if you know what you want and are courageous enough to ask for what you want, it is often hard to say it in a way that is clearly heard and understood.
- According to GB Shaw “the single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place”
- A distinction should be drawn around wants and needs. Want – I'd like to have this. Need – I must have this
- There are nine self-explanatory universal needs – Affection, Creation, Recreation, Freedom, Identity, Understanding, Participation, Protection and Subsistence
- When you ask a client “What do you want?” - listen to see the need that likely lies behind their request. For example, when someone says “I want you to help me lose weight” it is about protection. “I want to leave early today” it is about understanding “I want you do a new version of the report” may be about freedom or identity.
- **The fundamental organisation principle of the brain is the risk and reward response.** Five times a second, at an unconscious level, your brain is scanning the environment around you and asking itself, **“Is it safe here? Or is it dangerous?”**
- There are four primary drivers that influence how the brain reads any situation. **Our job as a coach is to increase the TERA quotient whenever we can.** TERA stands for:  
**T – Tribe:** The brain is asking “Are you with me or are you against me”. If you are on its side, your TERA quotient goes up.  
**E – Expectation:** This is about “Do I know the future or don't I? If what is going to happen next is clear, the situation feels safe.  
**R – Rank:** Are you more important or less important than I am? It is about how a formal title or on how power is being played out at the moment.  
**A – Autonomy:** Based on Dan Pink's Drive. “Do I get a say or don't I”. That is the question the brain is asking as it gauges the degree of autonomy you have in any situation
- Therapists talk of a miracle question: **“Suppose that tonight while you are sleeping a miracle happens. When you get up in the morning tomorrow, how will you know that things have suddenly got better?”**
- The miracle question helps clients to courageously **imagine what better really looks like**
- The Foundation question **“What do you want”** is direct and has the same effect of **pulling clients to the outcome and once they see the destination, the journey becomes clearer.**

**Tip:** *Get comfortable with silence. When you ask a client one of the seven questions, sometimes what can follow is silence. It may be that the client you are coaching is the type of needs a moment to formulate the answer in their head before speaking. Bite your tongue and don't fill the silence. Silence means the client is thinking, searching for the answer, creating new neural pathways and in doing so literally increasing their potential and capacity.*

## **5. The Lazy Question: "How can I help?"**

You're a good person and you're doing your very best to help clients thrive. You want to add value and be useful. However, there's being helpful and then there's being 'helpful', as in stepping in and taking over. Your good intentions often end up contributing to a relentless cycle of exhaustion, frustration and ironically, reduced impact.

- Stephen Karpman has come out with a Drama Triangle, where he says we are dancing between three archetypal roles – the **Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer** – each of which are unhelpful and dysfunctional as the other.
- **Victim:** Core Belief "My life is hard, my life is unfair", "Poor me" The Dynamic "it is not my fault" (it is theirs) Benefits of playing the role – You have no responsibility for fixing anything, you get to complain, you attract Rescuers. Price paid - **You have no sense of being able to change anything**
- **Persecutor:** Core Belief "I am surrounded by fools, idiots, or just people less good than me" The Dynamic "it is not my fault" (it is yours). Benefits of playing the role – You feel superior and have a sense of power and control. Price paid - **You end up being responsible for everything.**
- **Rescuer:** Core Belief "Don't fight, don't worry, let me jump in and take it on and fix it" The Dynamic "It is my fault" (not yours) Benefits of playing the role – You feel morally superior, you believe you are indispensable. Price paid - **People reject your help. You create victims and perpetuate the Drama Triangle.**
- These three labels are not descriptions of who you are, they are descriptions of how you are behaving in a given situation. No one is inherently a Victim / Persecutor / Rescuer. These are roles we end up playing when we have been triggered and, in that state, find a less than effective version of ourselves playing out.
- **The question "How can I help?" forces the client to make a direct and clear request. Also, it stops you from thinking that you know how best to help and leaping into action.**

**Tip:** *Actually listen to the answer! One of the most compelling things you can do after asking a question, is to genuinely listen to the answer. Stay curious.*

## **6. The Strategic Question: "If you are saying Yes to this, what are you saying No to?"**

This strategic question asking clients to be clear and committed to their Yes. Too often we half-heartedly agree on something, or more likely there is a clear misunderstanding in the room as to what has been agreed upon.

- A **Yes** is a nothing without the **No** that gives it boundaries and form
- What exactly are you saying Yes to – brings the commitment out of the shadows. And asking, **"What could be being fully committed to the idea look like"** brings things into sharper focus.
- Saying Yes more slowly means being willing to stay curious before committing. Which means asking more questions.

**Examples:** What am I willing to give up on to get the results I want? Who do I need to stop going out to the pub with? If I can't do all of this at once, what part would I be willing to focus on first? If they are stressed at work, we could encourage them to apply this kind of thinking to their

workload and it could be something like - What do you want me to take off my plate so that I can do this piece of work? Before committing to more and becoming more stressed as a result.

- Asking this strategic question, shines a light on what we are holding on to, so we might better **weigh up what's worth keeping and what might need to be set free.**

**Tip:** Acknowledge the answers you get. You don't need to say much. This isn't about judging people; it's about encouraging them and letting them know that you listened and heard what they said.

## **7. The Learning Question: "What was most useful for you?"**

People don't really learn when you tell them something – they don't really learn when they do something. They start learning, start creating neural pathways only when they have a chance to recall and reflect on what just happened.

- Chris Argyris coined the term **"double loop learning"** – in the first loop, you are trying to fix a problem and the second loop is about creating a learning moment about the issue at hand. It is in the second loop where people **pull back and find the insight**
- A question that drives the double loop learning is "What was most useful for you?"
- Adding **"for you"** to the question takes it from the abstract to the **personal**, from the objective to the subjective. Also, it will give you as the coach, guidance on what to do more of next time and it will reassure you that you are being useful even when you are not giving advice but are asking questions instead.
- When we take time and effort to generate knowledge and find an answer rather than just reading it, our memory retention is increased. If we as coaches ask our clients a question and they generate an answer themselves, the odds of their retention / doing it greatly increases.
- The first major tactic is harnessing the impact of information retrieval. "What is essential is to **interrupt the process of forgetting**"
- Questions such as "What did you learn", "What was the key insight" "What was important to capture" is to drive the **retrieval process and embed the learning.**
- These Seven Essential questions are part of your coaching style and everyday conversations, you will work less hard and you will have far more impact.

**Tip:** Use every channel to ask a question. Questions work just as well typed as they do spoken.

**The real secret sauce is to build a habit of curiosity - finding your own questions, find your own voice and build your own coaching habit.**

**Stay curious, tame the advice monster and help clients quickly figure out their own paths, all whilst sharing your own advice and wisdom in the right dosage and at the right time.**

