

DCS 506 - Seven Questions for Successful Coaching

Question 1: "What's on your mind?"

A good opening line can make all the difference (just ask Charles Dickens, the Star Wars franchise, or any guy in a bar). This “kickstart question” starts fast and gets to the heart of the matter quickly. It cuts to what's important while sidestepping stale agendas and small talk.

Question 2: "And what else?"

The AWE question keeps the flame of curiosity burning. "And what else?" may seem like three small words, but it's actually the best coaching question in the world. That's because someone's first answer is never the only answer — and rarely the best answer. There are always more answers to be found and possibilities to be uncovered. Equally as important, it slows down the question asker's "advice monster" — that part of every manager that wants to leap in, take over, and give advice/be an expert/solve the problem.

Question 3: "What's the real challenge here for you?"

This is the Focus Question. It gets to the essence of the issue at hand. This question defuses the rush to action, which has many people in organizations busily and cleverly solving the wrong problems. This is the question to get you focused on solving the *real* problem, not just the *first* problem.

The first three questions combine to form a powerful script for any coaching scenario, performance review formal, or ‘water-cooler’ casual conversation. Start fast and strong, provide the opportunity for the conversation to deepen, and then bring things into focus with the next questions.

Question 4: "What do you want?"

This is the Foundation Question. It's trickier than you think to answer, and many disagreements or dysfunctional relationships will untangle with this simple but difficult exchange: "Here's what I want. What do you want?" It's a basis for an adult relationship with those you work with, and a powerful way to understand what's at the heart of things.

Question 5: "How can I help?"

It might come as a surprise that sometimes a commissioners’ desire to be helpful can actually have a disempowering effect on the person being helped. This question counteracts that in two ways. First, it forces the other person to make a clear request by pressing them to be specific about what they want or need. Second, the question works as a self-management tool to keep you curious and keep you purposefully hands-off — it prevents you from leaping in and solving things you *think* people want you to do.

Question 6: "If you're saying yes to this, what are you saying *no* to?"

If you're someone who feels compelled to say "yes" to every request or challenge, then this question is for you. Many of us feel overwhelmed and overcommitted; we've lost our focus and spread ourselves too thin. That's why you need to ask this Strategic Question. A "yes" without an attendant "no" may be an empty promise.

Question 7: "What was most useful for you?"

Your closer is the Learning Question. It helps finish the conversation strong, rather than just fading away. Asking "What was most useful for you?" helps to reinforce learning and development. They identify the value in the conversation — something they're likely to miss otherwise, and you get the bonus of useful feedback for your next conversation. You're also framing every conversation with you as a useful one, something that will build and strengthen your reputation.