



The Energy of Conversation

Dedicated to Learning & Improvement

A NATURAL CURIOSITY

Asking questions to initiate change

BASED ON AN ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN 2015 SPRING EDITION OF Association for Coaching BULLETIN



When I studied non-directive coaching I discovered the basic attributes of an effective coach; a natural curiosity, active listening, seeking to fully understand, asking incisive questions and working towards measurable objectives. Like other coaches before me and others after me I was hooked, the process fascinated me. Later I studied quality auditing and discovered the basic attributes of an effective auditor; a natural curiosity, active listening, seeking to fully understand, asking incisive questions and working towards measurable objectives. Both of these processes are designed for one purpose: to initiate change and trigger improvement, and each uses 'The Question' as its main tool.

I spent 20 twenty years in the Market Research industry - the original home of curiosity you might say - launched in the nineteen thirties by George Gallup. "Question everything, be a radical", Gallup was alleged to have written. George, too it seems loved The Question, surveying his family over breakfast about their favourite pets and cereals before moving on to become the forerunner of opinion polls. Market Research is now a 33 billion dollar global industry.

Coaches know that asking 'the right question' can drive people forward but are also aware that without looking at context in full, questions – however good they are – can lead to the wrong answers. Context not only takes into account the client, the situation they are in and their values but also the 'interested parties' who may be concerned with or affected by the outcome. Here are five examples:

Questions to customers

Business would be very straightforward if we simply listened to what the customer wanted and supplied the product or service accordingly. But sometimes customers do not know what they really

need and so to be an effective service provider we must find out about them, their (working) lives and their interested parties. A car salesman may ask “what would your wife think” or “what about when you take your dog on holiday”. A carpenter might ask “would you want the bookcase to have a back to it” or “do you think you might be moving in the next few years”; and a business coach might ask “what would your line manager think about that” or “how does this approach align with your company’s commercial strategy”. Customers not only have unidentified needs they also have *expectations* which may not get mentioned. In restaurants we only tell the waiter what we want to eat, everything else is about our expectations being met; this approach applies across the business world.

Questions to suppliers

A customer who hears a business say that it was let down by its supplier may go elsewhere next time. Organisations need to forge strong relationships with their business partners, evaluate their abilities, establish ground rules and ask important questions: “what will you need from us in order for your teams to perform at their best’. Formalising service level agreements is important but talking them through first is critical.

Questions for managers

I can remember a job interview many years ago when I was asked “how do you like to be managed”. The ‘meta question’ behind it of course was “how can we get the best out of you!” When managers hires an external coach to tackle a tricky issue, the coach must first determine who would most benefit from the coaching – the manager or the direct report. If the latter, the coach must take into account the often complex needs of ‘the sponsor’, ‘the client’ and the organisation as a whole. Goals must be complementary or the coach might leave a mess behind them when they go.



Questions about quality

Quality Auditors must ensure that when mistakes are made (e.g. erroneous data sent to a client), that as well as the errors being corrected, time is set aside to find out how and why the mistake was made so as to prevent recurrence. Root cause analysis can be a lengthy process and using “the five whys” is an effective method of getting to the heart of an issue. In addition quality auditors could use non-directive coaching techniques to explore options, test appropriateness of action plans, establish measurement criteria and empower staff to take full ownership.

Questions for business leaders

The contemporary leader must demonstrate 360 degree leadership and ask questions of customers (research the market, determine needs and expectations), of suppliers (evaluate and enquire), of staff (how best to achieve customer satisfaction) and to complete the circle, customers again (how did we do and how could we improve). They may even want to ask a question or two of themselves: in twenty years' time what story will I want to tell about my career and how will I know I have been a successful leader?

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