

Powerful Questions

Every question sends a client somewhere to look for an answer. That's the power in the coach's role of asking questions; your job is to send the client to a place where they discover things they've never thought of or felt before. If all they're doing is telling you what they already know, or filling you in with background, the coaching has stalled. Co-Active® Coaching is about the client's learning and action, not the coach's. You probably need a lot less information, story and background than you think.

Powerful questions are provocative and open-ended. They send the client to new territory. They are inherently curious — on the client's behalf. Watch when you are asking curious questions for your own benefit or understanding. You do not have to understand the situation well enough to solve the problem. That's the client's job. Your job is to be really, truly, child-like curious.

Notice when you are nodding in agreement with your client's underlying assumptions. Is that really so? Get curious. Challenge everything. Take nothing for granted.

Closed-ended questions stop the looking. They come to a conclusion. Sometimes they ask for permission or clarity, which is perfectly okay. "Are you ready to move on?" is a question for clarity. It's one of those "yes/no" questions that are sometimes appropriate, even necessary. But watch when you find yourself in the habit of asking yes/no questions often. It can be a sign that you still need permission from the client or yourself to be more direct. Assume that the contract — the designed alliance between you and the client — gives you that permission. It's what the client is paying for. For example, when you ask, "Is this relationship honoring your values?" some clients will understand your intention and go right to a description of how the relationship is and isn't honoring their values. But the question invites analysis; it can bring on the client's need to explain, rationalize and defend. It's as if the prosecuting attorney asked the question, rather than their coach.

The powerful question might be, "In what ways does this relationship honor your top five values? What values are not honored in this relationship?" This approach is more direct and is inherently more powerful. For some of the same reasons, another question to use sparingly, and with intent, is the "Why" question. These questions also have the tendency to send clients to explanations and rationale. It's likely that their Saboteurs have prepared them to answer the defensive "why" questions.