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## **ARTICLE** **COACHING**

# The Questions Good Coaches Ask

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In the [HBR Guide to Coaching Employees](#), executive coach Ed Batista defines coaching as a style of management characterized by asking questions. With those questions you can move away from command-and-control leadership to a dynamic in which your direct report grows through self-reflection.

Asking the *right* coaching questions means the difference between a one-way interrogation and a dynamic learning session. Good coaching questions give someone who's busy and competent the space in which to step back and examine herself. The right question can stop her in her tracks as she finally sees her own actions from a different perspective or envisions a new solution to an old

problem. She may indeed learn to question *herself* so that next time she can catch herself in the act and change her actions in the moment.

Begin by planning out what you'll ask and get yourself into the right mindset *before* the coaching session begins.

While there are a lot of coaching questions you can't directly prepare for ahead of time, many of the ones you'll ask in the first session are fairly standard, so take time to consider them beforehand.

First think about what *you* need to know to help your direct report. Your questions in this session will not only help you understand her situation but also can help you to identify her:

- Current developmental level and goals (what she is ready for, what she can handle, what's the next step in her journey)
- Skill level against leadership competencies and behaviors
- Preferences (e.g. how she processes information or makes decisions – Meyers-Briggs-type categorization)
- Motivations and values
- Habits and structures that might be holding her back

Then think about how you'll ask your questions. To give your direct report the space to reflect and respond effectively, they should be phrased as open-ended queries. It can be helpful to think about the first word: open-ended questions often begin with “what,” “how,” “who,” “where,” and “when.” (See the sidebar “Open-Ended Coaching Questions.”) Stay away from “why” – it can feel confrontational and judgmental. To get at the same thing, instead ask, “What was your intention with that?”

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## Open-Ended Coaching Questions

To give your direct report the space to reflect and respond effectively, your questions should be phrased as open-ended queries. It can be helpful to think about the first word: open-ended questions often begin with “what,” “how,” “who,” “where,” and “when.”

### What

- What is happening?
- What is challenging about it?
- What have you done, tried, or considered?
- What is the impact on you, your team, or the business?
- What are your ideal outcomes?
- What would the CEO, board, or shareholders want to see happen?
- What would have to change to make that happen?
- What conditions would have to be in place?

### How

- How will you prepare for that?
- How will we know we've moved the needle on this?
- How will we measure success?
- How will you communicate your goals with key stakeholders?
- How will you stay self-aware and mindful when things get busy?

#### Who

- Who will be impacted—positively or negatively—by these potential changes?
- Who are exemplars or leaders you respect because they demonstrate those leadership behaviors?
- Who else could offer you feedback?
- Who needs to be included or in alignment to these goals?
- Who are the key people in your network of support?

#### Where/When

- Where/when do you feel you are at your personal best?
- Where/when do you feel most triggered, reactive, not at your personal best?
- Where might you experience resistance?
- When you experience [an emotion—frustration, impatience, etc.]; where do you experience that in your body (e.g. tension in the jaw)?
- Where would you like to be in your career in 3-5 years?

Lastly, there are some descriptor questions that can help you get at what is happening in a given situation:

- Help me understand...
- Tell me more about that...
- Let me make sure I understand what you are saying...
- I'm curious about...
- Could you describe further...

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The most important thing to keep in mind while composing (and delivering) coaching questions is that you need to be genuinely curious about the answers. People can tell if you're just asking a question because it's what you're "supposed" to do. And you won't be able to get to that one question and that moment of self-discovery if you're just going through the motions rather than authentically interested in your direct report, her situation, and her growth.

Being authentically curious can take practice and rewiring: you have to accept the idea that others may be as smart as you, and suspend (good!) habits like asserting a strong point of view. But it will help you both as you prepare for your session and in the moment.

Once you are in the coaching session, you will need to respond to your direct report's comments with further questions. Think of these questions as creating a bridge between what she has said and what else you want to learn. This intuitive process at the heart of the coaching relationship can't be scripted. Your own authentic curiosity in her and her development is invaluable in triggering your next question: it's something that happens from the gut.

You can help your gut to be ready, though, by intentionally getting into the right frame of mind as the session begins. For example, I always find it incredibly difficult to walk into a coaching session immediately after facilitating training or delivering a key note address: there is a big shift that I need to do to go from having a strong presence in front of a large audience to having a more intimate presence of being quiet and hearing and reacting to the person in front of me.

Deliberately schedule your coaching sessions so that you'll be able to get into that place of listening, and if you anticipate being frantic in the hour leading up to your session take a few minutes out to pause, take a few deep breaths, and get yourself physically centered. Pull up your notes from the last coaching meeting with this direct report to reconnect to the conversation as it stands now.

Once you understand your direct report's point of view into a given situation, be careful not to let the session turn into venting or blaming others. Instead of asking questions that might reinforce the emotional charge she already feels, ask questions that open up possibilities she may not have considered yet.

For example, if your direct report has described an argument she had with another colleague, instead of saying things like, "I can't believe that person would do that to you" or belaboring "how did that make you feel," ask questions that pose a different perspective: "I hear how frustrated you are. What do you think is going on in his world that may have led to this behavior?" or "What does the business need the two of you to do? What would you need to see from this person to have a better relationship?"

Or if she's frustrated at her own perceived lack of personal development: "You've had to come through many learning curves in your career. What has been your success cycle in the past?" Recognizing your coachee's story but asking her to shift her thinking beyond it is one of the most important ways a question can open up new possibilities.

Once you've asked a set of questions that opens the dialogue and helps you to see things through her eyes, it's your turn to share your perspective. And even that begins with a question: "Are you open to me sharing with you how I am seeing this? Could I offer you a different lens? A new approach?"

Bosses have a taller order than executive coaches when it comes to asking questions. Your direct reports will always be asking themselves whether they actually want you to see their weaknesses (real or perceived) and their personal opinions about professional colleagues and situations—this takes real trust. But that's also what can make managers the most invaluable coaches: once you build that relationship over time, you have a much deeper ability to ask just the right question.

*Amy Jen Su is a contributor to the [HBR Guide to Coaching Employees](#), published by Harvard Business Review Press in December 2014.*

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