

# QUESTIONING MISTAKES

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In his book, *Coaching Questions*, Tony Stoltzfus identifies some common questioning mistakes that coaches make. As you read through this list, you might immediately recognize the patterns you most often fall into in questioning.

## 1. Closed Questions

Asking a “yes” or “no” question, or one that invites only a short response. A closed question directs the conversation while an open question encourages the client to think deeper. When you hear yourself asking a closed question, first consider what you’re really asking and see if you can restate it. Often just starting with the word “what” or “how” opens up a question.

## 2. Solution-Oriented Questions

These questions contain advice; we often ask them when we really just want to give someone an answer. Whenever a “should you, could you, will you, can you” is attached to a question, there’s a subtle direction implied. “Could you move that teacher to the 8<sup>th</sup> grade position?” is a suggestion. Of course, sometimes this is appropriate—but we need to be aware that this kind of a question is a suggestion. You can also rephrase your question with many possible solutions. For example, “What are some other ways to think about teaching assignments for next year?”

## 3. Seeking the “One True Question”

Our role is to help our clients move deeper into their thinking and to understand that it’s not the perfect question that will make the biggest difference. Simply asking, “Can you say more about that?” can be effective. You can also recall something someone said that might have been significant. Repeat back those words and ask them to expand on it: “You mentioned... Tell me more about that...”

## 4. Rambling questions

This was a mistake I often made. As I tried to find the “One True Question,” I’d ask the same question in three different ways, stringing together a list of sentence fragments. This often happens for verbal processors because this is the way we think—by hearing ourselves say it. By the time we’ve finally articulated the question, the client is confused about what to answer. It took me some time to learn to think and then talk. I had to become comfortable with a few moments of silence while I formulated the question I wanted to ask. What was interesting also was that as I was thinking, often the client was thinking too. Sometimes I didn’t even need to ask another question—the client would just keep talking. The other reason coaches can ask rambling questions is because we’re really trying to lead the client down a path and we’re trying to do it surreptitiously. At these moments, we need to practice becoming aware of our agenda, and letting go of it.

## 5. Interpretive Questions

Sometimes questions can reflect our interpretation of what a client says. These questions can erode trust. The client can feel defensive about the analysis and can feel put on the

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spot to respond to it. For example, let's say a teacher says, "Lately it's been hard for me to deal with my 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. I'm really missing teaching elementary students. This is so hard." An interpretive question from a coach could be, "So are you saying you want to look for a different teaching job?" An open-ended and probing question could be: "Can you tell me more about how your 8<sup>th</sup> graders are challenging right now?" or "What specifically do you miss about your elementary students?"

## **6. Rhetorical Questions**

Rhetorical questions are often emotional or judgmental opinions that are posed as questions. They can elicit a defensive response or none at all. If you find yourself asking a lot of rhetorical questions you might want to explore your beliefs and feelings about your client.

## **7. Leading Questions**

Leading questions subtly point the client to a certain answer—usually the one that the coach wants to hear. Rather than asking, "Would you describe that feeling as discouraged?" you can ask a question with multiple solutions: "Would you describe that feeling as discouraged, frustrated, confused, upset?" This asks the client to select and not just agree with you. If you realize that you've just asked a leading question, then try this: Add an "or" to the end of the statement and ask the opposite question. "Would you describe that feeling as discouraged? Or would you say you were feeling sad?"

## **8. Interrupting**

For some, interrupting can be a habit we're not even aware of. Frequent interrupters are frustrating to talk to. We might interrupt, or talk over someone, or when we both started talking at the same time, don't defer to the client. Another way of interrupting is to "talk for" the client—to jump in and finish his thoughts for him. This habit takes some time to break. Start by making a commitment to count to two after the client has stopped speaking before you reply or ask a question. If the person starts speaking before the two seconds are up that's great. We have to remember that our goal as a coach is not to interject our ideas, but to help the client explore his.

## **9. Not interrupting**

Interrupting a lot is a problem, but *not* interrupting and refocusing or redirecting the conversation can also be a problem. Some clients can speak for 15 minutes without stopping—but they might be giving irrelevant details and slowing their own progress. The coach's job is to manage the conversation. If you notice a client speaking in this way—and you'll probably sense that the client is running off in some less than useful direction—then you need to interject a question that brings things back to focus. You can also openly discuss the rambling and secure permission to interrupt when you notice it. Using a phrase such as "Earlier you said...can we go back to that?" can be effective. You can also say, "Excuse me for interrupting..."

## **10. Why Questions**

It is a good idea not to ask "Why" questions in coaching. With a few exceptions, is one of

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the rules that I hold in coaching. Why questions put people on the defensive—we're being asked to justify our actions. Instead of using why, see if you can rephrase a question and lead with "What..." So transform a question like: "Why do you think your assistant principal responded like that?" to "What might have caused your AP to respond like that?" Or "Why did you do that?" to "Can you tell me how you made the decision to...?"

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