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How to ask better questions in developing others

Ben Oakley and Alex Twitchen

The questions coach developers ask influence the reflective focus of those with whom they work. However, asking appropriate questions is not straightforward and may, for some, represent a considerable shift in the role of a coach developer – from directing and being in control to facilitating and guiding.

Questions that encourage coaches to reflect on what they have done, including decisions they have made can be a powerful tool. However, as you have already seen coach developers need to develop relationships that will allow questioning without rancour, thereby stretching coaches to think beyond what they already know.

Most experienced coach developers know that good questions are usually open-ended and divergent where the intention is not to look for a specific answer but to open up a conversation. Such questions often begin with “How,” or “What do you think about...,” they set the stage for people to understand their practice better and perhaps work towards alternative approaches. There is more to it than meets the eye: here in this short reading there are two sets of ideas and principles that may stretch your own thinking further.

Questioning insights from business coaching

Ross (2009) writing in the context of business leadership suggested that the most effective questions are valuable because they support:

- a) *Greater clarity*: e.g. “Can you explain more about this part of this situation?”
- b) *Better working relations*: e.g. Instead of “Did you achieve your last goal?” ask, “How have sessions been going since we last met?”
- c) *Analytical thinking*: e.g. “What are the consequences of going down this route?”
- d) *A prompt to reflect and perhaps see things in fresh ways*: e.g. “What made this work?”
- e) *The challenging of assumptions*: e.g. “What do you think your participants engagement levels will be if you allow them to comment?”
- f) *The creation of ownership of alternative approaches*: e.g. “Based on your experience, what do you suggest we do to solve this?”

This provides further justification for the use of questioning to develop subjective evaluations of coaching practices and behaviours. However, questioning takes practice and it is likely that the preparation time put into framing a few key themes for questions will help you improve your skills at what works best and is most appropriate in different situations.

Pitfalls to avoid: insights from research

The behaviour and response once a question has been asked also carry considerable importance. Cope et. al. (2016), researched coach behaviours using conversational analysis. They identified three

items that those using questioning could use to enhance practice. These can also be adapted and applied to coach developers:

- *Give your participants time to think after you ask a question.* Their analysis of sessions showed that coaches expect participants to give immediate responses to questions. Participants were rarely given more than two seconds to reply, and coaches seem to hate silence. Indeed, coaches often interrupted thinking time with more talking.
- *When you ask a question, don't always have a particular answer in mind.* Coaches often use a series of questions leading to a desired response. For the participants, this interaction becomes more like a game of trying to guess what the coach wanted them to say, rather than thinking for themselves.
- *Let the answers to your questions dictate where the discussion goes next.* Conversations can become a recitation of question and answer rather than a discussion. As a result, the coach fails to explore the answers given by a participant. In standard conversation, the maxim 'follow, don't lead' often applies and the same is true in attending to question replies; if coaches fail to engage with learners' responses and ideas, then a participant is far less likely to take anything useful from the exchange.

Summary

Coach developers should plan a few key questions before any session. Ross's (2009) observations from business leadership may act as a useful prompt for diverse ways in which questioning may be used. Coach developers should not be afraid of silence, and finally, they should follow where the conversation takes them, within reason.

References

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