

Powerful Coaching Questions

From ICF group members on LinkedIn

There are two parts in this document:

1. List of powerful questions classified by category
2. Notes on powerful questioning

List of categories of questions

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Part 1: List of Powerful Questions by Category

Category 1: VISION and PURPOSE

Questions used to clarify vision, objectives and purpose

Questions used when clients descend into the "shoulds" and "oughts" and "gottas" of life.

1. What's missing?
2. What does success look like?
3. What do YOU really want?
4. What is most important to you?
5. What are you yearning for?
6. What is the biggest change you'd like to make in your business and life, assuming you had enough support to do it?
7. On a scale of 1-10 (high), how important is it?
8. How do you define, at this stage of your life: a) success? b) happiness?
9. What motivates you?
10. What would you die for?
11. Are you happy?
12. What do you want to create?
13. What do you really need?
14. What's your heart telling you? and the golden key is definitely - silence.
15. What would really make your heart sing?
16. How does the outcome of that task fit with your top five goals?
17. What's important now?
18. What wants to happen?
19. What do you want?
20. What is that like?
21. Who has had a great influence on your business-life? (Top 3 people that come to your mind)/ What was it that they did that caused such an influence?/What is it that you took away from that influential situation?/"Whose list are you on for being influential on their lives?"
22. Who are you? I ask it in a way to open the conversation looking for more than the obvious.
23. WHO will you BE when you achieve... in other words, what will others see in you?
24. Where do you want to be in 5 or 10 years from now?
25. If this issue wasn't there to keep you busy, ... like a full time job,... what do you really want to do with your vital energy?
26. What does this mean to you?
27. "And if you achieved that, what would that do for you, that is even more significant?"
28. To my perfectionist clients I ask "When is good, good enough?"
29. To my egotistical clients "If someone did that to you, what would that motivate you to do? To feel?"

Category 1: VISION and PURPOSE (Continued)

30. What really Matters?
31. What do you want your legacy to be?
32. So what sport would you rather be playing?
33. What are you concerned it would mean if that was not a problem?
34. What would the IDEAL OUTCOME for your situation/issue look like?
35. If your anger was powerful fuel you can redirect to build or develop something you really want, what do you want to go for, with all your heart and energy?
36. If no one ever gave you a break or a chance, if it was never going to happen, what would you have to make it happen?
37. Who do you want to be in this situation?
38. Who do you want to show up as...?
39. What is the goal for the situation (to self)? And what is it your hope to accomplish? (to client)
40. How important is it for you to find a solution for your problem? / What is it worth to you to find a solution/eliminate the problem in terms of your time and energy?
41. Imagine that this coaching session has gone totally wrong, what exactly happened? / Imagine that this coaching session went great, what exactly happened?
42. If you had six, perfectly healthy, months to live, what would you do now?
43. What do you want and why do you want it?
44. What do you REALLY want in this situation?
45. Who do you want to "be"?
46. What were you put on this earth to do?

Category 2: GOALS / OBJECTIVES FOR COACHING SESSION

Useful questions at the beginning of a session to ascertain client's outcome

1. What could we work on that would make the biggest difference to you?
2. What would you like to have happen at the end of the session?
3. So tell me, what's going right for you? (good to get the coaching session started)
4. What is the biggest challenge in your life today?
5. What do you want to walk away with at the end of this call? How will you know we were successful?

Category 3: CLARIFYING NEEDS

Questions used to help clients clarify needs

1. What is "good enough" for right now?
2. What would make you feel most empowered in this situation?
3. What needs to become clear for you?"

Category 4: LISTENING / FOCUS

Questions used to support clients in listening to themselves

Questions that help clients stay focus and search deep inside.

1. Do YOU believe what you just said?
2. What is the story you are telling yourself?
3. Really????
4. If you were providing yourself advice - what would you say to yourself right now.
5. What question do you have for yourself right now?
6. Can I ask you a completely different question?. When they say yes and focus, I ask them exactly the same one again, with much more concentrated attention.
7. What is your body telling you?
8. If you were your own coach, what question or idea would you have right now?
9. I'd like you to have a dialogue with you as coach and you as client (two chairs,Gestalt style).
10. I'd like to try something unusual for me: you just work on your options, and I'll see if I can guess your issue. But don't give me any clues that will make it too easy. OK? (OK is the question part).
11. Wow! Are you sure that's true?
12. Do you know that to be true?
13. How does the situation make YOU feel?
14. Am I ready to listen and say nothing? (question for the Coach)
15. What if you started trusting your legendary feminine intuition and just came out and admitted to what you know you want to do anyway?
16. What if the opposite was true?
17. Do you listen to yourself?
18. What does this situation teach you about yourself?
19. How is this situation an opportunity for you to learn something really important for your future?
20. If this person was actually your spiritual master helping you face a very personal challenge, how do you need to grow here?
21. How is that working for you?
22. What do you make that mean about you?
23. Would you mind if we sit quietly and take a few deep breaths before we continue?
24. I can hear your solution, but I can't catch exactly what the problem is.
25. What????!!! , Really?????
26. What feels right for you right now?

Category 5: OPTIONS/ CHOICES

Questions used to help clients explore options

1. What other choices do you have?
2. Which option best fits your goals?
3. What are your options?

Category 6: ACTION/ ACCOUNTABILITY/RESPONSIBILITY

Questions used to support clients in moving into action, be accountable and responsible

Questions that project clients into the future

Questions that tag into the emotional side of action

1. What do you choose to do with that information?
2. How would improving that make you feel?
3. Who may be available to help/support you in this?
4. If not THE GROWTH COACH, Then WHAT? If not YOU, then WHO? If not NOW, then WHEN?
5. What can you do better?
6. Imagine you wake up one morning and whatever challenge you had previously was miraculously overcome while you were sleeping. What is the first thing you notice that confirms something actually happened?
7. What would it take to have such a day?
8. How willing would you be to do your part to make that happen ?
9. If nothing changes, what will that cost you?
10. What would be the result if you did X?
11. Is there something you have always wanted to do but never tried? possibly never even told anyone?
12. Are you moving forward in the right gear?? Is it too high/low?? How can you change gear??
13. What other resources (people or things) can you use to help you find the answer to your issue/problem/etc.
14. How would the situation look like if you had the power of a magician?
15. How are you planning to get there?
16. What do you want to do with this?
17. To succeed your meetings starting tomorrow, what is the first thing you will make sure you don't do anymore?
18. Who will decide?
19. What's next?
20. What DO you have the power to do right now?
21. "Do you want to find out that anything is possible?"
22. "What if?"
23. "What is the smallest possible step you could immediately take, in the right direction?"
24. "So what would have to happen for you to set it up that way?":
25. "I would go for "If your sadness indicated that it was high time you really took care of yourself as you would with your best friend ever, how can you really give yourself the ROYAL treat for which you really yearn?"
26. How willing are you to do whatever it takes to discover the highest and best of who you are?
27. What could you be losing, if you do nothing?

Category 6: ACTION/ ACCOUNTABILITY/RESPONSIBILITY (Continued)

28. "What could you do to worsen this problem?"
29. "What have you already tried to overcome this problem?" sometimes coupled with "What is your own theory why you haven't been able to overcome it?"
30. "Have you used all the resources at your disposal? Really??? ALL of them???"
31. "What could you do today without anything or anyone else changing?"
32. What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?
33. "What wouldn't happen if you didn't do it?"
34. Imagine that you are 5 or 10 years in the future. "How do you remember this day (02.11.2010)?" "What do you want to remember?"
35. Imagine that you can do anything... If you were the king/queen of Spain, what would you do in this situation? What is it that you want to achieve/accomplish?
36. "What is the best use of your time RIGHT NOW?"
37. "What is the BEST use of YOUR TIME right now?"
38. "If you could wave a magic wand..." (i.e. "what would this situation look like?" or "what would you be doing?" or...)
39. Who is in control? Who decides?

Category 7: LIMITING BELIEFS/NEW THINKING/NEW PERSPECTIVE

Questions used to open clients to new possibilities or perspectives

Questions that expose self limiting beliefs and open a path to a new thinking

1. What is 'perfect' about this?
2. 'Is there anything we're missing here?'
3. What else ?
4. What assumptions are you making?
5. What are the underlying assumptions that you are making about yourself?
6. Are those assumptions supporting you or bringing you down?
7. What do you need to believe about yourself that will support you?
8. What would happen / what could and would you do if all obstacles magically disappeared?"
9. Where did these barriers come from?
10. Do you know that to be true?
11. "What would you like to celebrate/honor about your work today?"
12. If your close friend was in a similar situation (maybe describe the situation a little bit here) what would you say to them?
13. What is the positive intention behind his behaviour (client's perceived aggressor)?
14. What in this situation, can you be grateful for?
15. "How have you contributed to the success of the group? What can you contribute towards the success of the group?"
16. What would you tell someone else in the same situation?
17. If the same situation would arrive to your best friend, what would you recommend him?

Category 8: 'I DON'T KNOW'

Questions used when a client does not know the answer

Questions to help client get clear on the resolutions he/she is seeking

1. What if you knew? what would you say?
2. Let's suppose you did know what the answer was, how would you know when you found it? What would be different?
3. What are you pretending not to know, that if you were to know would enable you to make the change easily and effortlessly, right now?
4. If you did know, what would you do...say...feel...decide?
5. If I could give you the answer to what you want right now, what would the question be?
6. "What's the greatest truth for you in this situation?" OR "What is the truest thing you know about yourself in this situation?"
7. Question with "If" . For example "please imagine if you have every resources you need, what will you do"

Category 9: 'AWARENESS OF OBSTACLES'

Questions used to help client get an awareness of obstacles to reach target

Questions to help client see where barriers may be and create the possibility of new solutions

1. What might be preventing you from doing X?"
2. Imagine that money, time and skill were not an issue. Is there anything that would stop you then?
3. Specifically, what is/are the biggest challenge(s) you face?
4. What is the hesitation about getting started now?
5. What is standing in your way ? What's the first step you can take ? When will you start?
6. 'What could hold you back in X situation ?'
7. "So what's getting in the way of you doing this right now?"

Category 10: 'FACING FEARS'

Questions used to help client express, face and minimize their fears

1. And what would happen - just imagine the worst ?
2. What is the worst case scenario if you would actually go forth with 'it'?
3. What is the senior leadership team saying behind closed doors about you?
4. If your fear was really useful for you to develop your awareness of areas where you need to be particularly attentive, just to stay safe, how can you use it with high precision?
5. What would you do if you weren't afraid?
6. What is the worst that can happen to you?
7. What is the worst thing that could happen? Is that a risk you could live with?
8. What are you afraid would happen?

Category 10: 'FACING FEARS' (Continued)

9. How would you approach this situation if you weren't afraid of failing?
10. What would be the best way to tackle that fear?
11. Where do you think you would be, right now, if it were not for your fear of taking a chance?
12. Where would you like to be, right now, in your career, your life, etc.? whichever is appropriate for the situation...

Category 11: 'CLIENT STUCK/CONFUSION/ IN NEED OF AWARENESS

Questions used when a client seems stuck, experiences confusion

Questions to for situations calling for a change

1. As you move towards your most inspired goal, what do you notice about who you are becoming?
2. "What is missing, that if present, would have the biggest impact?"
3. How's that working for you? How is that serving you?
4. What is this calling forth from you?
5. What do you mean by (a word, concept, idea) i.e. I'm a perfectionist : And what does perfectionist mean for you... ?
6. If you were to meet the younger version of yourself at the point in your life where this ____ issue became the most vivid, what would you share with her and what would you not share?
7. What does it feel like to be you?
8. By saying "yes" to longer work hours, what / who are you saying "no" to?
9. What is the benefit of the present situation?, what are the disadvantages of the new situation?
10. And what is true? (and if they ask, as some do, what do you mean?, I add: about this situation, about what you know in your heart).
11. What % of your sales team is on track to exceed their goal this year?
12. Are you upset with him or yourself?
13. What would be the most powerful question I could ask you right now?
14. Does that really matter? If answer is yes, then "How?". If no, then "Why is it coming up for you here?"
15. What do you need to let go of?
16. What do you really need to know?
17. Are you really persuaded that the confusion is in you and not in the situation
18. You seem convinced that this place is external to you. What if it was actually in you and so much part of you that you could access it wherever you are?
19. And if that were true, what would that mean?
20. What is the truth of the matter?
21. What is the risk if you change ? And what is the risk if you do not change?

Category 11: 'CLIENT STUCK/CONFUSION/ IN NEED OF AWARENESS (Continued)

22. Do you have to do X or do you want to do X?
23. Are you doing something for change this situation?
24. I have been struck by the power of questions related to a certain gesture, so often ask, what was that..(movement) about?
25. What would it take to move you toward "yes"?
26. "What question do you hear me asking you right now?!"
27. "If you could start (this relationship, this project, etc) all over again from scratch, how would you do it completely differently, knowing what you know now?" "What can you do now to create that reality?"
28. "What problems does that create for you"
29. By doing X, you are accepting Y. Is this the choice you are making?

Category 12: 'PERSONAL STRENGTH'

Questions used when to help clients connect with their own personal strength

1. What are you doing well?
2. How / why were you successful this past week?
3. If you were to advise your best friend about (your problem, difficulty, obstacle, situation, next step action plan) what would you suggest?
4. What would your hero do in this situation?
5. And when you were being X, how did that situation work out better than when you were Y?" X = highlight of strength and Y = reference to non-strength.
6. How did you manage to survive so far? What did you do to prevent worse?
7. When was the last time you were in a situation like this?
8. What did you do? What worked? What might you have done differently?
9. What can you learn from your past..?
10. What would you do if you were ten times bolder?

Part 2: Notes on Powerful Questioning

1. Familiarity with coaching questions

I find clients are becoming more familiar with coaching questions and that one of the risks with a 'tried and tested' good question is that it turns the clients mind and heart off very quickly if they feel they are being put through a process. I've heard coaches use questions like '...and if you did know the answer?' and seen clients quickly disengage.

Part 2: Notes on Powerful Questioning (Continued)

2. Being cautious

I am a bit cautious of anything that will place the client in a defensive mode. I think that there are questions (although the tone used and the existing chemistry are key) that may backfire if the client feels like he is being questioned.

3. Different meaning for different people

As coaches, we know it's not so much the answer to the question, it's the question being asked that sets up the 'aha' moment within the client. That's a powerful question! I find 'no' risk with 'tried and tested' questions...as a person evolves that same powerful question has a different meaning.

4. Benefiting from others

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5. Avoiding coach routine: Letting a question choose us.

I agree to the idea that it is best never to ask the same question twice: a good way to avoid coach routine. I like to think in categories of questions, like magical, or fast forward, or paradoxical, or spatial, etc. And then each time let a question choose me rather than go look for it. And if a powerful question doesn't come out of the blue, well silence is just as good.

6. The power of the simplest questions

There really is no most powerful question and all must come from really being present and with the client, listening for what is wanted. The simplest question is often the most powerful. "Clever", or ego driven "powerful" questions are more of a distraction than anything. The most powerful questions are often the humblest ones that seem to come right out of the space between- whisperings that we articulate without attachment.

7. Prioritizing the 'rocks' before the 'pebbles'

It reminds me of Stephen Covey's prioritizing the "rocks" before the "pebbles" and scheduling them. The rocks are really what supports our lives, the foundation, and source of all we do. When we focus on the pebbles- which often is what happens in coaching, our clients get more burned out and tired. They are spinning on the hamster wheel of their lives.

Part 2: Notes on Powerful Questioning (Continued)

8. Focusing on client's want and uniqueness

Coaches, often motivated by a desire to create change and results, can actually add to the burnout by focusing on strategizing and "doing" without adequately distinguishing what is most important and what really calls the client forward (and deeper) to what they want. What calls them forward is unique to them and speaks more to their longing for "being", "aliveness", and contribution.

9. Searching and Articulating what's deep inside, Opening up the curtain

When you give your client "permission" to look beyond whatever the perceived limitations are, it is truly amazing what opens up. I have seen my clients produce what they see as "miracles" in their lives based on removing the obstacles through this kind of simple yet powerful inquiry. Invite them to open the curtain, to see what is really wanting to happen. When they actually articulate it they most often can find ways to remove the obstacles and move forward- leap forward, faster and more powerfully than they could have imagined. It is easy to skip over and buy into the clients very "real" obstacles or limits - or even address the obstacles in some long range strategic way, skipping over this one vital step. Invite them to articulate what they really want- if the obstacles were not an issue, and they get in touch with their authentic desire, and true source of power.

10. Importance of timing and combination

Thank you for all for sharing your wisdom. As I read through each of the comments, I was struck by the power of the type of question...descriptive or creative and how the timing and combination make an impact on the client. I too, appreciate how silence after a question is also a clue that something has landed at a deeper level.

11. The power of words

I love this quote: "Words like the chisel of the carver, can create what never existed before rather than simply describe what already exists." (Heidegger as cited in Hargrove, 2008, pp. 68-69).

12. Timing and being present in the moment

I find interesting that you identify " powerful questions" My style is to be in the moment and let those questions emerged in the dance. I of course use what you say and more but for me a powerful question is any question asked at the right moment, so the timing is probably as important as the question.

Part 2: Notes on Powerful Questioning (Continued)

13. General questions vs. powerful questions

There are questions in general and then there are powerful questions. In masterful coaching, the latter are reputed to help clients operate major shifts in perspective or frame of reference. The former are more incremental questions such as where, when, with whom, how, etc, which the client can usually readily answer. And avoiding the "Why" question is usually good policy. When you have asked a question that the client cannot readily answer, a question that provokes a deep silence, then chances are it is very powerful. Sometimes that reaction can be provoked by just repeating a key word or reformulating a key client phrase. If the client answers your question right away, even if to say "My-my, now that's a good question" (clients are often well trained to please their coaches) then chances are the question is not so powerful.

14. The right number of questions in a session?

I find that in a coaching sequence, one really powerful question is more than enough. If you find yourself trying to dish out many more questions than that, then chances are you are carrying the coaching relationship too much, and that the number of questions could be seriously reduced, and improved to become more powerful.

15. The 5 Why's

I used to think that asking 'why' was not good practice but since I came across the problem solving technique of asking 5 straight-in-a-row "why's" for the explicit purpose of getting to the root of a problem, my coachees and I have found it to highly instructive and simple.

16. Balancing 'favorite question' with flowing with the moment

I also agree on being careful to balance "in the back pocket favorite questions" with asking what "comes up" from a place of curiosity and being present with the client.

Part 2: Notes on Powerful Questioning (Continued)

17. Particularity of the most powerful question

- To me the most powerful thing for both the coach and client is to know where the client wants to go.
- The most powerful question is that which follows from the essence of what you have heard from the coachee. Don't pluck a "great question" out of the air.
- It sounds like "the most powerful coaching question" is client dependent. There is that right question at the right moment tailored for a particular client, taking into account their needs and situation that is "most powerful".
- There are so many powerful questions that have been suggested in this wonderful discussion, it is clear that the most powerful coaching question depends on the state of consciousness of the client at that particular time.
- The most important thing to remember about "powerful questions" is that no question is powerful in and of itself. The real power of the question comes from being present as a coach and listening for what will open up a new perspective or deeper discovery.
- In general the most powerful question is one that does not draw attention to itself. It is not a particularly "clever" question usually, but one that is short, simple, and intuitive. Long or clever questions tend to distract, confuse, or send the client to searching for the "right answer", or "to their "head", which actually creates a limitation.

18. Relation between Coach Alertness and level of listening and powerful questioning

This would apply to us as coaches too. Our state of consciousness, our alertness and level of listening which is determined by how integrated our brain functioning is, determines how powerful our questions turn out to be. Is our own awareness expanded and alert enough to be really tuned in to the client's needs such that we ask that most powerful coaching question at any particular moment? That is very "Self Care" dependent - one of the most under served aspects of daily life in our country that tends towards living to work rather than working to live. This underscores the age old proverb that "knowledge or experience is structured in consciousness". The quality of consciousness of the listener (in this case our clients) determines how they perceive and filter things. If you wear red glasses, everything looks red, if green then green. Same with the questioner (the coach). It also underscores the need to utilize any proven methods to more powerfully develop the quality of consciousness and brain functioning of ourselves and our clients.

19. Coach Awareness and powerful questions

Another aspect of the "powerful questions" is to be aware when we ask a powerful question that it is aligned with the client's agenda. The agenda they have designed in coaching and all of the aspects of getting the results they want. Sometimes coaches are so focused on moving a client toward a result that they step over issues that need attention - which ultimately bring greater possibility and congruency for the client.

Part 2: Notes on Powerful Questioning (Continued)

20. New coaches: strategies vs. discoveries

New coaches sometimes "hide" behind powerful questions and other strategies, before they have a deeper sense of confidence which allows them to be more present and connected to what is really being communicated or what is missing that will bring to most discovery and fulfillment.

21. The depth of the coaching relationship is key

So, these questions are all fine and ultimately the most powerful questions come from experience, solid skills, and ability to be present and truly co-active. In my own experience simple, short, questions are the most powerful at any time, and the depth of the coaching relationship depends on much more than questions.

22. Over-emphasis on powerful questions or tools

But then... I find there is sometimes too much focus on powerful questions, effective action plans and other results-oriented tools in the coaching world. This focus on powerful and effective tools may be at the expense of more receptive coaching skills, such as very intense presence, profound silence, creating a truly intention-free environment and giving clients all the space they need to grow. I sometimes feel that in the coaching community, the over-emphasis on powerful tools may rest on remnants of macho values and the influence of the business coaching market. Regular emphasis and training on our more feminine receptive tools and skills will remind us what coaching is also about.

23. Spontaneity

I never know what I'm going to ask when I begin a conversation with a coaching client. It's by being present and listening to them that the questions come to me. It's a dance.

24. The Peak leadership model

We have developed a framework for determining the type of question given the situation. We found that questions fall along to axis', outcome and process. Outcome is either knowledge questions or action questions. The 'y' axis is process either perspective questions or evaluation questions. We call the model PEAK Leadership model. The interesting thing we learned was the best questions came from putting an outcome and perspective together to form a question.

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