
Cheat Sheet: Starting a Coaching Conversation with Great Questions

Starters into the Conversation

If we want people to think better, we must essentially let them do all the thinking. Here is a five-step process for establishing a coaching conversation that enables self-directed learning:

1. Let the employee think through his specific issue. Avoid telling him/her what to do or giving advice. Ask questions about their thought process.
2. Keep him/her focused on solutions, not problems.
3. Challenge him/her to expand their thinking and stretch themselves, instead of clinging to their comfort zone.
4. Focus on what s/he is doing well so you can play to his/her strengths.
5. Make sure there are clear processes behind every conversation. To be truly helpful, a coaching conversation requires permission to ask questions and explore possibilities.

Posing questions allows you to focus on your employees' mental processes. Asking them to share thoughts:

- Helps them find connections in their minds
- Makes them more self-aware
- Encourages them to take greater responsibility for solutions

Diagnostic Questions

Take time to accurately diagnose the situation. Begin coaching conversations using open-ended questions, then sit back and hear what s/he is saying in response. Staff members start to recognize behavioral patterns through their own answers to good questions.

Possible diagnostic questions or approaches:

- Help me to understand why this (behavior) happens so that I may better support you.
- I've noticed this (behavior) happens during certain times, do you notice any pattern?
- When do you find that you don't have this challenge?
- What do you already know about this challenge? When has it happened in the past?
- What other assumptions could also be valid?
- What generalizations have you made?
- Why is this situation occurring?
- What are the pros and cons of your current approach?
- Why is it working for you?

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- What would you do if the behavior were not an issue?

Check for Understanding

Before a person can move forward, they need to feel confident that you truly understand the situation. Ask these questions to check and confirm your understanding of the issues.

- Did I get that right?
- Is that correct?
- Did I understand you correctly?
- Right?
- What have I missed?
- What don't I understand?

Now that you have a shared perspective of the situation you can jump into options and alternatives.

Useful Coaching Questions

The following questions can facilitate a constructive coaching conversation:

- How long have you been thinking about this?
- How often do you think about it?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is this?
- How clear are you about the issue?
- How high a priority does this issue have?
- How committed are you to resolving this?
- Can you see any gaps in your thinking?
- What impact is thinking about this issue having on you?
- How do you react when you think of this?
- How do you feel about the resources you've invested thus far?
- Do you have a plan for shifting this issue?
- How can you deepen your insight on this?
- How clear are you on what to do next?

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- How can I best help you further?
- What did you do well? What could improve?
- How did you think you handled the client's question on "x"?
- What led you to approach it this way?
- What are the risks, and how are we mitigating?

None of these questions focuses on the problem's specific details. Notice how the questions avoid suggesting what employees should think or do. They're designed to help your people take notice of their own thinking.

Asking Permission Questions

An effective coaching conversation requires an environment where people feel safe enough to explore their thoughts and reach new insights. Four elements should be in place:

1. Permission: "Is this a good time to talk and explore your thinking?"
2. Placement: "Let's see if you can come up with some ideas in the next few minutes."
3. Questioning: "Is it OK if I ask you to share your thoughts with me?"
4. Clarifying: "Tell me more about this. What do you mean?"

As you approach the most personal questions, ask yet again for permission. People can quickly become defensive and stop listening to you. Asking permission frequently helps people feel safe, acknowledged and respected. Here are some sample approaches:

1. I get the sense you have more to say about this. Could I probe a little further?
2. I'd like to have a more open conversation than we've had before. Would it be OK to ask you some more specific questions right now?
3. Can we spend a few minutes brainstorming ideas around this?
4. I'd like to understand more about your thinking. Would you be OK with talking more about this?
5. I'd like to discuss some more personal matters. Would this be OK with you?

The key is to jump in and start engaging in these coaching conversations from a mindset that your primary goal is to support their learning and unlock their potential.