

QUESTIONS THAT CREATE INSIGHT

Asking unfamiliar, unexpected and unavoidable questions

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Recently, I was running a presentation skills workshop. We had spoken about visual, auditory and kinaesthetic language patterns, and the use of rich language as a way of engaging your audience. The speeches of Martin Luther King are outstanding examples of this. One participant, Paul, was naturally very good at rich language. He enthralled us all for six minutes with nothing other than his words and a copy of the book he was recommending. What struck me most, as I listened avidly, was the unfamiliar choice of some of his words and phrases. These leapt out of the presentation and grabbed my attention. They fascinated me and created a richer image of what Paul was saying, rather than the dull thud of the stale and overused phrases we have heard so many times before.

One phrase in particular stands out from the rest. It was the use of the word 'fine' instead of 'good'. A single word made such a difference to my attention, my thoughts and my engagement. If Paul had said: "... and this book makes a good introduction to the sci-fi fantasy genre", it would have glided over my ears without a second thought. However, he chose to say: "... and this book makes a *fine* introduction in to the sci-fi fantasy genre".

It was unexpected, unfamiliar. It grabbed my attention and the cogs in my brain whirred into action in an effort to define "a *fine* introduction", to differentiate it from merely "a good introduction". For me, it has more elegance and standing. Another question sprang to my mind: "What had made Paul use 'fine'? What message did he want to convey with its use?" One thought led to another and another, all from the use of one unfamiliar word. It was a captivating six-minute presentation and the recommended book was in my son's Christmas stocking. I may even read it myself, although it's not my usual taste, as I am left curious about whether it lives up to Paul's recommendation.

Picking up on the theme of familiar versus unfamiliar, Martin Seligman, in his book *Authentic Happiness*, talks about how 'treats' become commonplace and the norm if they are overused. They lose their excitement and the 'treat' is lost. He describes how he still buys reasonably priced wine, even though he can afford to buy expensive wine. For him, expensive wine, with its luxurious palette, is a real treat. He knows that if he regularly drinks expensive wine, this experience will be lost as the texture and taste become the norm.

It is the concept of the 'unfamiliar' that I find I apply to my coaching questions, although I had not realised this. During coaching practice sessions, participants have remarked how different my questions are to their questions. Also, they feel that coachees respond to my questions with richer, more pertinent answers. It is only now, after Paul's presentation, that I feel I can answer their question as to what it is that I am doing differently. I believe the difference is that I ask 'rich' questions that are unfamiliar and unexpected. They compel people to think, as the answers cannot be pulled from the pile of 'pat' answers requiring only a moment of thought to deliver.

"Rich questions demand rich answers, which are unfamiliar and sometimes even unexpected" Rich questions demand rich answers, which are unfamiliar and sometimes even unexpected. They require searching thought.

They make and break connections that do not always provide answers, but always provoke thought.

Coaching is about moving the coachee forward. If, at times, you feel that progress could be quicker if only you could ask some fine questions, rich questions may be useful to you. Sometimes a good, thought-provoking question where there is a search for an answer, even if no answer is found, is worth far more than questions that can be answered without any thought. The coachee's subconscious will go on searching and searching, and a rich answer bubbles up at a later point.

There are three main forms of rich questions that I use:

- 1 Unfamiliar questions with an unfamiliar word that deserves understanding and gives refinement to a situation.
- 2 Unexpected questions that jump out in front of you and turn you around to look at things from a different perspective.
- 3 Unavoidable questions that take you beyond the decision and the deadline, and force you to look back at the choices you made.

The unfamiliar question

Usually, during a thorough conversation, we almost *know* the types of questions to expect: "What did you do well?", "What could you have done better?" Like Martin Seligman's expensive wine, these questions have become commonplace and therefore, we don't bother to think about them – we just assume we know the answers. The *expected* answers! They are also generic questions that lead to generic answers. However, an unfamiliar question contains at least one word that captures the attention, demanding to be deciphered and to have meaning attached to it.

These questions give rise to an unfamiliar answer, one that has been thought through and has dug into the depths of your memory, making new connections. It leaves the subconscious to mull and chew over the new possibilities. An unfamiliar answer helps the coachee move forward. The unfamiliar element needs to home in on the essence of what is required. It defines what really will make a difference to the topic being explored. These questions are rich and put the emotion back into the discussion.

"What concerns do you have?"

"What really scares you about this?"

"What did you do well?"

"If you were in the audience, what was the most impressive moment?"

Unfamiliar questions are specific and, therefore, their answers are more tailored and pertinent to the conversation. This can often save time, as two questions can be replaced by one. "What will make this project successful?" and "Which of these is the most important?" could be replaced by: "What three things are essential for this project to be truly successful?"

Coachees frequently use metaphors and analogies when they are talking. These provide easy access to unfamiliar words and phrases that connect directly to their world and thinking. Using their words makes for the most successful unfamiliar questions.

The unexpected question

The unexpected question does not follow an unworthy train of thought. It catches coachees by surprise, jumping out in front of them and taking them to a different viewpoint; giving them a different angle. You pick them up and put them somewhere else. It is this shift in perspective that causes people to make connections and gain new insights. If you can ask the right unexpected question, people can make radical shifts in their progress.



The exercise with the picture of the young/old lady (left) is a good example of this. By positioning the upfront conversation around 'old', participants usually easily see the old lady. The scene has been set and people duly respond with the same train of thought. Sometimes, this blinkered train of thought needs to be broken. Unexpected questions shatter the assumptions that we are reinforcing in an attempt to gain a new and useful insight, a way forward. Therefore, if I have been working with a coachee and something goes awry – if there is a dip in energy, a momentary hesitation, which could be the deciding moment between giving up and success – I'll ask:

“How could this be the best thing that could have happened?”

A bit of a surprise question for a number of people, but said with the most honest of intentions: to enable. My intention with this question is that it is only at the point when you start to think about “What can I do now?” or “How can I move forward?” that the conversation is useful and regains momentum. Sometimes I work with someone who has a particular person who is being less than helpful in a project. The usual train of thought is to condemn the person, to look to minimise their impact or even sideline them. The unexpected question asks:

“How can this person be outstandingly useful to you?”

Again, my intention springs from the fact that sometimes your worst detractor becomes your greatest advocate if they 'see the light'. Or that destructive people become constructive, once their energies are channelled in the same direction as the project.

Often, we cannot change the people we want in a project team, especially in such a matrix-managed world. We can, more easily, change our view of them, and it is amazing how often they reciprocate and, in turn, change.

The unavoidable question

Sometimes, when working with a coachee, there is going to be a point, in the future, when an event will happen – a fork in the road – and one or other of the routes will have to be taken. I rarely find that a coachee has faced up to that decision and contemplated fully which of the alternatives they may prefer or what could be the real decider that ensures the success of his chosen path. Unavoidable questions are invaluable for exploring these areas before the fork in the road occurs.

Unavoidable questions usually work in sets of two or more, depending on the number of alternatives. Essentially, they are the actual alternatives that have to be faced up to – the things that are actually going to happen.

Yet many coachees act as if they can somehow never reach that point. Life will continue and the fork will remain in the future. The unavoidable question will not allow you to maintain a position of ‘nothing will happen’ or ‘I can procrastinate for ever’. It forces you to go beyond the decision, the deadline. It turns you around to look back and face up to the decisions or choices that you made, for better or for worse.

It digs deepest into those thoughts of “if you really felt you couldn’t fail, or if you had 100 per cent conviction, what would you do differently?” It allows you to experience what really will make a difference, and have a taste of how each route may feel once taken.

When I use unavoidable questions, I set these up with the coachee because they are not as succinct as the previous question styles. These questions require a scene-setting introduction which works best if it truly triggers the coachee’s feelings as if each choice had actually been made.

A simple example of where an unavoidable question works well is in working towards getting another job. Once you decide to go for it, there will be a fork in the road – the day you find out whether you have got the job. If possible, I would ask the coachee when they expected to find out the result of the interview and where he might be when he receives the news. Then I set the scene, pose the first question and get a response. I set the second scene and pose the second question.

The first alternative

“Okay, it is Thursday morning and you have just put down the phone in your study. You sit back in your chair. You’ve just found out that you didn’t get the job. How do you feel? (Response). Now, what do you *really, really* wish you’d done?”

The second alternative

“Okay, it is Thursday morning and you have just put down the phone in your study. You sit back in your chair. Great! You’ve just found out that you have got the job. How do you feel? (Response). Now, what are you *really, really* glad that you did do?”

How the scene-setting element and the questions are delivered can be significant, as I want the coachee to feel the difference in each alternative. In the example above, the first question I deliver in a flat tone and downbeat. The second question, I say with excitement and encouragement. This adds to their thinking, as it connects a feeling to the question.

Sometimes, the coachee does not know which option he might like to take. A modified form of the unavoidable question will be helpful in that case. It is important that each alternative is said with equal tone and clarity so that all options are fairly weighted.

The first alternative

“Okay, it is Thursday morning and you have just put down the phone in your study. You sit back in your chair. You’ve just found out that you didn’t get the job. How does *that* feel?”

The second alternative

“Okay, it is Thursday morning and you have just put down the phone in your study. You sit back in your chair. You’ve just found out that you have got the job. How does *that* feel?”

“What have you learned about the options you have in front of you?”

My intention with unavoidable questions is to unearth vital actions that will heavily weight the outcome in favour of what the coachee wants. So many times I hear people say “I knew I should have done...” or “Gosh, I’m really glad I did... I nearly didn’t do that.” To enable the most robust action plan, it is worth uncovering these actions before the fork in the road, and not leaving them totally to chance.

Overall, I find rich questions a useful addition to the more standard and fundamental coaching questions. If you follow the coachee’s train of thought and use their own brand of words and phrases, they will come naturally. Like anything that is rich, if used excessively they may prove too much for the coachee’s appetite.

Being useful as a coach means providing a stimulating environment in which thoughts are uncovered, created, debated, viewed, challenged and progressed. I believe that, just as rich language from a presenter creates an inspired audience, rich questions from a coach create an inspired coachee.

This article first appeared in Training Journal June 2008 as “Rich questions in coaching”.

ⁱ *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*, Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D