

## The Question

### Paper 1 – Coach For Life Program

**ICF Competency 6-- Ability to ask questions that reveal the information needed for maximum benefit to the coaching relationship and the client**

**With special emphasis on sub competency -- Asks questions that evoke discovery, insight, commitment or action (e.g., those that challenge the client's assumptions)**

*This write-up is based on experiences that have occurred in my evolving journey as a coach. I gave something to my clients. I got much more for myself. My insights are interspersed at end of each example.*

Change causing questions are one of the most powerful tools available to a coach. They make the client think, ponder, introspect, explore inwards -- and find their own answers. Answers so found are owned by clients. They use these answers. They expand on them. They propound them to others. There is energy in them. There is no better way of creating power in a person than to help them find their own answers.

I remember things that I discovered for myself – others have been consigned to obscure corners of my mind. I remember those teachers who did not teach me -- but helped me learn. *The power of seemingly innocuous questions is amazing if they come with Three Degrees of Appropriateness – right time, right place & right manner.* Asking the right question is the first step in getting the right answers. There is no way anyone can get the right answer by asking the wrong question!

Here are eight questions that caused fundamental changes for my clients. Stand-alone, I would never recognize have them as life changing. Because they happened with the Three Degrees of Appropriateness they caused a shift in the brain's tectonic plates. They became life changers.

- a. A client was finding it difficult to gain acceptance in a new group in her organisation. It was a strange and hostile environment -- since she had been promoted from another department. She had considerable knowledge and information to share with colleagues but was not getting opportunities to showcase her stuff. And a few that came she let go since she was miffed with colleagues. This was discussed with her over 3 sessions. She was fully conscious that she had to use her talents if she had to grow -- but could not get around to doing it. As a result she felt miserable, unwanted and angry with everyone – and herself. The breakthrough question was -- *How does this inaction support you? Are you being true to your values of openness and sharing?* She went silent. She had never consciously related her actions to her values. Then she nodded -- her anger at her own inaction was the root. And she was feeding it by not being true to her values. This moved her to take action by doing some unconditional sharing at office. She offered her skills and knowledge, volunteered for activities that were not her area and generally increased her participation level in group activities. Within a

few days her acceptance and her standing increased. Today her team accepts her fully.

*Being angry at others is often a reflection of our anger at ourselves.*

- b. This client was stuck with multiple options. He had just moved out from a corporate job and was looking at an alternative career that would keep him “useful and productive”. Having been very successful CEO he could become a CEO elsewhere, go into teaching in the USA, just retire in the hills, get into social service, start his own work ..... in short the problem of plenty. We brainstormed many ideas to select from. What would he love to do? What was his passion? What was true to his values? What would he advise a friend? He made a matrix and gave marks to different parameters. He used a mind mapping software. But the answer still eluded him. His breakthrough question was -- *What are you willing to lose?* He discovered that in each option he could end up losing something -- status, comfort, values etc. And he was not able to reconcile to any of these. He wanted to cross the river but did not want to leave the shore. With this question he made what we called the throwaway list. A list of least important things instead of the most important that he was trying to grapple with. This made the list of options more manageable and enabled him to take a decision for the way forward. He is now looking at starting his own organisation.

*Decisions are not always about what we may gain, but also about what we are willing to lose.*

- c. *How can this insight be useful in other areas of your life?* Where else are you using these strengths? Having discovered a insight how often do you want use it? These questions -- and their variations -- have invariably helped in extending benefits of learning and insights to the client. In the goal based coaching approach clients are exclusively focused on getting to their defined objectives. In the process, they discover things about themselves e.g I am not being objective in my approach, I love being with people who are direct, my strength is diligence etc. But they do not instinctively connect the dots to apply them elsewhere. They are wearing what I call focus blinders. Questions outlined above help in getting these blinders off. This helps in spreading the learning around and provides a quantum jump in value to the client.

*Knowledge only increases by spreading and sharing.*

- d. *Why is this an either / or situation? Why cannot it be and?* This client was stuck on a difficult life situation. The way he described it was --- I have to choose between a life and a wife! He was getting a fabulous career offer outside India. But his wife was reluctant to leave her successful career in India. Somehow they had walked into a confrontation situation -- and the only option discussed was take up the job OR stay with your wife. The above question got a new door opened

– I challenged them to explore options in which they both - great careers AND were together. Once this door opened they were able to drop the confrontation and see many new possibilities. He spoke to the prospective employers about his problem and they were able to get his wife a job with a sister concern at Singapore. Both moved there in three months!

OR options divide. AND options multiply.

- e. This client was a senior manager in an organisation. Very skilful and articulate but not know for his ability to take initiative. As a part of his leadership development goals he committed to the introduction of at least ten initiatives in his department over six months that I had to work with him. For almost a month and half he was unable to share possible options. For a very bright and articulate person this was surprising. Going with a gut feeling I asked – *Can we put down the options now, in the next fifteen minutes before we end this session?* This forced him to put them down without going back and evaluating them. He had many options but was trying to cover all bases before sharing them. He wanted to present only the ‘best one’. Excessive evaluation and risk aversion were preventing him from doing that. Once they came out from the recesses of his mind he was able to discuss them rationally and move forward.

Sometimes the best option is to get started.

- f. Another client was hesitating to move forward. Being a highly intelligent and detail oriented person she was trying to make a ‘comprehensive business plan’ for a new business. Except that at each step there were some imponderables and she wanted all answers before she started the journey. My job was to help her with the business plan. Over a few sessions I felt that her plan was perfect but her mind was fickle. The breakthrough question was -- *We all have ghosts from the past visiting us, why are you inviting home ghosts of the future?* This got through to her and she was able to get over the uncertainties and start her project. Variations of this question that I have used are ‘*You cannot look around corners. Can we first get to the corner and then look ahead?* And ‘*You cannot see mountain paths from a distance. Can we get a little closer so that they become visible?* All these have moved clients from thought to action.

Looking too far ahead only makes the distance feel longer.

- g. *When you are not taking the calls from your friend what are you being?* This client was in a relationship which was going wrong. She was unhappy and refusing to take HIS (this was her way of calling her friend!) calls and messages. This, in turn, was shutting of all communication and things were not moving anywhere. Even as she repeatedly stated that she wanted things to move. The simple question above kind of jolted her. With some thought and much hesitation she

shared that she was being scared and stubborn. The follow up question was 'Do you want to live with someone who is being scared and stubborn?' This made her introspect and she was able to see the damage she was doing to herself. It made her act. She got the communication going again. The relationship did not happen -- but movement did happen. The young lady is now wants to train to be a coach!

*If we are not in sync with our being we cannot be effective with our doing.*

- h. *Is there something deeper here that we are yet to discover? OR What is this really about?* I can recall occasions when clients were stuck at what I call the first level of depth. Clients share and express to a certain level. In many situations that is just great. In others it does not serve the client's purpose. And the coach intuition says 'this is not it.' In one such situation a client was setting up a new wing to her home and coping with a new life style. She was resolving those problems in her coaching sessions. The above question made her dig deeper – only to find that she was really struggling with bigger demons of doubt about her own confidence. In another case, a working mother had a goal of increasing time spent with her children / family. But was not satisfied with whatever progress she achieved. With this question she discovered that her challenge was not one of creating family time. It was of getting rid of her 'guilt' about being a working woman. These discoveries changed their being and their beliefs. And they were able to find more satisfying answers.

*If there is a stone wall in front step back and look around. There is always a way around it.*