

The Top Five Asking Mistakes Coaches Make (And How to Correct Them)

From long experience as a coach trainer, here's my personal list of the top five asking mistakes coaches make (excerpted from the book, [Coaching Questions](#) by Tony Stoltzfus).

1. Closed Questions

Our #1 offender is—closed questions! Open questions have two important benefits: they let the coachee direct the conversation (you can answer in many different ways) and they make the coachee think by eliciting more than one-word answers. While most people will answer the occasional closed question as if it were open, too many will shut people down.

To convert closed questions to open ones, first become aware of what you are asking. If you catch yourself before you've finished asking, you can simply restate the question. You'll know it's a closed question if it can be answered with a simply "yes" or "no", like these examples:

- "Is there a way to do that and still keep evenings for family?"
- "Can you realistically take that on too?"
- "Could there be any other ways to approach that?"
- "Do you have any other options?"

If you catch yourself in the act of asking a closed question, here's a quick technique for readjusting: just start again with the word "what" or "how". Here are the closed questions above, made open:

- "What could you do to still keep evenings for family?"
- "How would your life change if you take that on, too?"
- "How else could you approach that?"
- "What other options do you have?"

2. Solution Oriented Questions

A special kind of closed question is the solution oriented question. SOQs are pieces of advice with a question mark pasted on. We want to tell the client the answer, but we remember we are supposed to be coaching, so we give our solution in the form of a question:

- "Shouldn't you check in with your boss before you act on this?"
- "Could you do your jogging with your spouse?"
- "Do you think that affirming the person would give you a better result?"
- "Can you give her the benefit of the doubt on this one?"

"Should you, could you, will you, don't you, can you, are you"—if the second word in the question is "you", you're in trouble. First, let go of fixing, reaffirm to yourself that you believe in this person, and begin again by asking the coachee for a solution. On a practical level, SOQs usually originate in an intuitive insight: something the person says makes us curious, so (all in our own heads) we proceed to identify what we think the underlying problem is, create a solution, and then offer it to the person. The trick is to go back to the thing that made you curious in the first place, and ask about that. Often this involves broadening our SOQ (which focused on one potential solution) into an open question with many possible solutions. For instance:

- Our insight on the first question listed above was wondering what the channels of authority in this organization are. So we might ask, "In your company, what kind of channels do you need to go through before you act on this?" (Notice how this question allows for other answers than just talking to the boss.
- On the second question, our intuition noticed that the client is an extrovert, yet all the potential exercise options were done alone. So you might say, "I noticed that all your exercise options involved you doing it alone. How could you involve other people in your exercise routine?" What would happen if you mentioned that to the boss?

3. Seeking the "One True Question"

One of the biggest stumbling blocks for beginning coaches is the quest for the Holy Grail: the question that will unlock the secrets of the universe for the client. Before each question there is a long, awkward pause while we search our mind for just the right thing to say—and meanwhile the momentum of the conversation is lost.

It's not the perfect question that makes the difference: you just need to help the person you are coaching think a little farther down the road than they can on their own. *Trust the process* to help the person, not the greatness of your insight. One excellent technique when you are starting out as a coach is to lean on a very simple question, like, "Tell me more," or "What else?" The benefit of these short-and-sweet queries is that they don't interrupt the person's thought process at all. Another great tool is the *Observation and Question* technique. Pick out the most significant thing the person said, repeat their exact words, and ask them to expand on it, like this:

- "You mentioned that _____. Tell me more about that."

By varying the question (instead of "Tell me more...", try "Say more," or "Expand on that," or "What's going on there?") you can use this technique over and over without sounding stilted. It's a great way to keep the focus on the client and not on your greatness as a coach.

4. Rambling Questions

A variant of the "One True Question" problem is the rambling question. Some coaches can't stop themselves from asking the same question in three different ways, while stringing together five different nuances or potential answers along the way. By the time the coach has finally articulated the question, the client is confused about what to answer and any conversational flow is lost.

The propensity to ramble can usually be overcome in one of two ways. First, some coaches do this because they are still figuring out what they want to ask while they are asking. The solution is simple: allow it to be silent for a moment or two while you formulate the question. Our uncomfortableness with silence is leading us to jump in before we are ready to ask. When you start doing this, you'll often find that a little silence will lead the client to continue to process without you asking any question at all.

The second common cause of rambling is that we are overly concerned that our question be fully grasped. Our need to be understood comes from unconsciously trying to lead the person down a particular path we want them to go on. In other words, we are in telling mode. Let go, stop ask the question once and stop, and see where the person chooses to take it. Often the most exciting coaching moments come when the client *doesn't* understand what you were asking for!

5. Interpretive Questions (Not Using Their Own Words)

Sometimes just by asking a question we put a spin on what the client is saying. For instance, a client says, "I'm finding it tough lately to want to get up on Monday mornings. I'm frustrated with my current project, I'm not getting the support I need, and I keep finding myself looking at the clock and wishing the day was over." A response like, "How long have you hated your job?" is likely to get a reaction from the client ("Wait a minute—I never said I hated my job...!") The reason? Our coaching question reveals our *interpretation* of what the client said. We don't know yet whether this person hates his job, dislikes it, or even loves it. We only know what the client says. Interpretive questions erode trust (because they put something on the client) and block the conversational flow as the person responds to our analysis.

Interpretative questions are easy to correct: simply make a habit of incorporating the client's own words in your questions. For the example above, we might ask, "How long have you been frustrated with your current project?" or "What kind of support do you need that you aren't getting?" or "What triggers you looking at the clock and wishing the day was over?" Each underlined section in these questions comes directly from the client's own statements. Asking in this way prevents the client from reacting to your spin and keeps the conversation moving in a productive direction.

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More Top Asking Mistakes Coaches Make

(And How to Correct Them)

From the book, [Coaching Questions: A Guide to Powerful Asking Skills](#), by Tony Stoltzfus

In December I shared the top five asking mistakes I see coaches make (visit the newsletter archive at www.coach22.com/discovercoaching/ if you missed this article). This month, I want to share five more, so you have the complete top ten.

6. Rhetorical Questions

Although posed in question form, rhetorical questions are actually statements (often emotional or judgmental) of your own opinion of the situation:

- "What were you thinking!?!"
- "Are you really going to throw away your career like that?"
- "Isn't that just a cop out?"
- "Wouldn't you rather get along with your spouse?"

Since we aren't really asking for the other person's opinion, these questions evoke either no response or a defensive one. Rhetorical questions are generally a sign that you've made a judgement or developed an attitude about the person you are coaching.

Solution: Reset Your Attitude

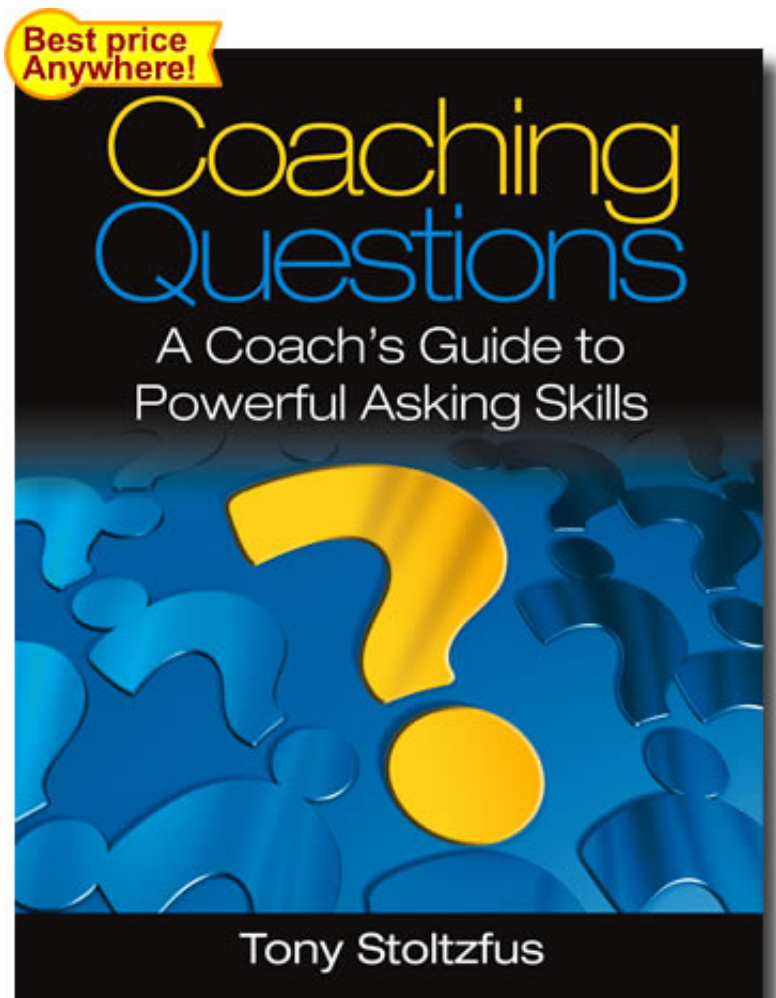
Eliminating rhetorical questions requires changing your viewpoint, usually in one of two ways. First, you can get in touch with what is going on inside you, and how this situation is pushing your emotional buttons. A second approach is renew your internal picture of the coachee's potential and ability. Spend 15 or 20 minutes on these reflection questions: to reorient:

- Why am I forming judgments here? How is focusing on the negative in this person meeting my own needs? What can I do about that?
- Could I be wrong about the situation? What am I missing?(See if you can construct at least two possible scenarios where the coachee's point of view on this is more valid than yours.)
- What potential, ability and wisdom do I see in this person? What can s/he become? Why am I drawn to coach him/her?

7. Leading Questions

Leading questions are ones that subtly point the coachee to a certain answer: the one the coach (knowingly or unknowingly) wants. While rhetorical are blatantly biased, with leading questions you may not even realize you've skewed the conversation toward a "right" answer. What response do you think the coach wants to the following questions?

- "How would you describe that feeling: sad?"
- "We've spent a fair amount of time processing this over the last several weeks: are you ready to make a decision on that now?"
- "Do you want to stay with this organization you've invested so much in?"
- "It seems like this option would feel good today, but the other would give lasting satisfaction: which



one do you want?"

Solution: Multiple Options, Or the Opposite

One great way to make leading questions more open is to offer multiple solutions. If you catch yourself asking a leading question (like, "Name that emotion: are you disappointed?"), just add several more options on the end: "...are you disappointed, excited, upset, or what?" With multiple options, the coachee has to choose how to respond, instead of just assenting to your idea.

Another excellent technique is one I call "Or the Opposite". If you realize you've just asked a leading question (i.e. "If you take this new position, will it take time and energy away from your family?") just add an "or", and then ask the opposite question: "...Or will this open up doors to get you the kind of family time you truly want?"

8. Neglecting to Interrupt

No, that's not a misprint. Being too timid to interrupt and refocus the conversation is more of a problem for beginning coaches than interrupting too much. While some clients speak concisely, others can go on for 10 minutes every time you ask an open question. Too much irrelevant detail slows progress and blurs your focus.

Solution: Restore the Focus

Part of your job as a coach is managing the conversation, so when you see the client bunny-trailing, interject with a question that brings things back to focus. A great step with a talkative client is to discuss it and get permission to interrupt when needed.

- *"It caught my attention when you mentioned earlier that _____. Let's come back to that."*
- *"You are pretty good at expressing yourself. Would you mind if I interrupt occasionally to bring us back to the main topic so that we can make the most of our time?"*

9. Interrupting

The other side of the interruption coin is that for some of us (often the most verbal or relational personalities) interrupting is a habit we aren't very aware of. Frequent interrupters tend to be perceived as dishonoring and frustrating to talk to—not the kind of image you want to cultivate as a coach! Are you an interrupter? If you want to find out, here's a revealing exercise. First, record one of your coaching conversations. Then fast-forward to the middle (by then you'll have forgotten you're recording yourself), listen to the tape, and make a note every time you hear each of the three following things:

- Interruption: I interrupted or made a comment while the client was still talking
- Talking Over: I kept talking when the client tried to interrupt me, or when we both started simultaneously, I failed to defer to the client
- Talking For: I finished the client's thought for him/her

The Solution: Count to Two

Here's a simple discipline you can practice to break an interrupting habit. Make a commitment that when you are coaching you will count off two seconds ("one, one thousand; two, one thousand") after the coachee has stopped speaking before you reply or ask a question. And if the person begins speaking again before the two seconds is up, good! Your goal as a coach is not to interject your ideas, but to help the coachees explore and implement their own.

10. "Why" Questions

"Why" questions tend to make people clam up because they challenge motives. When you pose a question like, "Why did you do that?" you are asking the coachee to defend and justify his actions—so don't be surprised if he gets defensive!

Solution: Use "What" Instead

It's easy to rephrase questions to replace the "why" with "what". Here are several examples of "why" questions that have been reworded with "what" to keep from putting people on the defensive:

- *"Why did you turn down the job?"*
- *"What factors led you to turn down the job?"*

- *"Why do you think she'd respond like that?"*
- *"What's causing you to anticipate that response?"*

- *"Why can't you talk to him about that?"*
- *"What do you need to talk to him about that?"*

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