



Article

Five modes of questioning

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Prof David Clutterbuck
Coaching and Mentoring International Ltd
Woodlands, Tollgate,
Maidenhead,
Berks, UK. SL6 4LJ

www.coachingandmentoringinternational.org
e-mail: info@coachingandmentoringinternational.org
Company registration number : 08158710

Five modes of questioning

Asking questions is something we do all the time. It's essential to how we learn, how we keep safe, how we collaborate with other people, how we make decisions, and so on... It's a core skill of being human, yet few people stop to think about how they ask questions or whether they could be better at doing so.

One simple way to help people become more aware of how they use questions is to acquaint them with the five modes of questioning. These are:

1. *Questioning to demonstrate superiority or undermine.* For example: "You thought that would work, did you?" or "What else would you expect from someone like that?" With such questions, the answer – usually highly judgemental – is implied. Ego-driven, in this mode the questioner is neither expecting nor listening for an answer.
2. *Questioning to elicit specific information.* This is about plugging predictable, bounded gaps in what we already know. These questions tend to be precise and based on pre-existing assumptions about an issue. While less ego-focused than questions to demonstrate superiority, our motivation is our focused on our own knowledge and intentions, not those of the other person. Even when asking about the other person's opinions or feelings, it is in service of our own goals.
3. *Questioning for self-curiosity.* Here we don't have a fixed agenda for our enquiry. We are acting on the instinct that this might be interesting, useful or both – not just for ourselves, but for other people in the conversation. This is the territory of co-learning.
4. *Questioning for other-curiosity.* This is at the heart of good coaching and mentoring. Here we use questions to help the other person structure their reflection and creative thinking. We move from ego to "we-go" – the exploration together of ideas the learner has not previously considered deeply.
5. *Seeking the right question.* A useful coaching or mentoring question is "What's the question you can ask yourself that might change the way you see this?" or some variation on the same theme. In each of the previous modes, we are able to draw on experience that gives context to the questions that come to mind. In this mode, however, the context itself is ill-defined. The "right" question will only emerge by questioning the assumptions behind the questions that have gone before. In this mode, no-one knows the answer and each question that does arise may simply be a stepping stone to a better question, with even greater insight-provoking potential. To achieve this, the coach-mentor and the client both have to let go of their egos, engaging with each other's curiosity.

Consigning the "demonstrating superiority" mode of questioning to our behavioural trash can, while achieving more of a balance between the other four modes has substantial benefits, not just for the quality of coaching and mentoring, but also for workplace conversations more generally. Having the self-awareness and flexibility to move into the other-curiosity and seeking the right question modes can enhance

engagement, teamwork and collective creativity – all of which are related to higher productivity and team performance.

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