

## Application

Evaluate your own asking proficiency with these top ten coaching mistakes.

# The Top Ten Asking Mistakes

## (And How to Correct Them) by Tony Stoltzfus

Here's a coach trainer's personal list of the top ten asking mistakes coaches make.

### 1. Closed Questions

Our number one offender is—closed questions! Open questions have two key benefits: they let the coachee direct the conversation (because they can be answered in many ways) and they make the coachee think by eliciting longer answers. While most people will answer the occasional closed question as if it were open, too many closed questions in a row shuts people down.

#### Solution: Convert Closed to Open Questions

To convert closed questions to open ones, first become aware of what you are asking. If you catch yourself before you've finished asking, stop and restate the question. You'll know a closed question because it can be answered with a simple "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?"*

When you catch yourself in the act of asking a closed question, here's a quick technique for adjusting: restate the question, but this time beginning with the word "what" or "how". Here are the closed questions listed above, but now made open using this technique:

- *"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 (SOQs)

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.

#### Solution: Follow Your Curiosity

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

## Quotes...

*"He who asks is a fool for five minutes, but he who does not ask remains a fool forever."*

Chinese proverb

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 were solitary activities. How could you involve other people in your exercise routine?”*

### 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.

#### **Solution: Trust the Process**

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 will 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 query, like, *“Tell me more,”* or *“What else?”* The benefit of these short-and-sweet questions 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.

#### **Solution: Think, then Talk**

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



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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 trying to lead the person down a particular path (in other words, we are in telling mode). Let go of your agenda, ask the question once, 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 are asking for!

## 5. Interpretive Questions

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 bated 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 said. Interpretive questions erode trust (because they put something on the client) and block the conversational flow as the person responds to our analysis.

### Solution: Use Their Own Words

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?*" The underlined words in these questions are taken 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.

## 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 a change in attitude toward the client. One way is to get in touch with what is going on inside you, and how this situation is pushing your emotional buttons. A second approach is to renew your internal picture of the coachee's potential and ability. Spend 15 to 20 minutes on these reflection questions to reorient yourself

### Exercise: Using Their Own Words

If you ask too many interpretive questions, here's a fun exercise to work on your technique. Get a family member or another coach to join you in a ten-minute conversation. The challenge is to see if you can base every question you ask on the other person's own words.

around believing in the client:

- *"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 two possible scenarios where the coachee's point of view is more valid than your own.
- *"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 questions are blatantly biased, with leading questions you may not even realize you are propelling the conversation in a certain direction. What response do you think the coach wants in the following examples?

- *"How would you describe that feeling: discouraged?"*
- *"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 to choose?"*

### Solution: Multiple Options, Or the Opposite

When you catch yourself in the act of asking a leading question, you can often redeem it by creating multiple solutions. Take the leading question (like, *"Name that emotion: are you disappointed?"*), and then 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 taking the easy way out and just agreeing with you.

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?"*), paste on 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?"*

Part of what makes these two techniques so useful is that you only have to change the very end of the question. You can realize you are asking a leading question midway through, and still change it on the fly without the client ever knowing what happened.

## 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 ten 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 pro-active step is to openly discuss the rambling issue and secure permission to interrupt when needed.



### Quotes...

*"The art and science of asking questions is the source of all knowledge."*

Thomas Berger



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### **Exercise: Top Ten Asking Exercises**

Record a session where you are coaching, and listen for the ten common asking mistakes. It's hard to listen for all ten—you may want to focus on only three for ten minutes or so, then spend the next ten minutes listening for the next three. To keep track, list the ten mistakes on a sheet of paper, and put a tick mark next to a particular mistake each time you hear yourself make it. When you're done, pick an area to focus on and practice using the corrective strategy mentioned in the text.

- *"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 keep us on track 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 or her actions—so don't be surprised if s/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?"*
- **Better:** *"What factors led you to turn down the job?"*
  
- *"Why do you think she'd respond like that?"*
- **Better:** *"What's causing you to anticipate that response?"*
  
- *"Why can't you talk to him about that?"*
- **Better:** *"What do you need to talk to him about that?"*