

# Why we need to stop asking so many questions – and what to do instead!

Jake was 'stuck'. Forty minutes into our session, whilst I had listened intently, he'd done some very productive work as his thoughts came tumbling out and he began to generate new ideas, occasionally encouraged by me quietly asking: 'What more do you think or feel or want to say?' Now he fell silent, still thinking. I chose to wait expectantly for yet more, again offering him my undivided attention and my unflagging interest. He gazed back at me for a few moments, sighed, hunched his shoulders and said he couldn't think of anything. I asked if he'd like me to ask him 'What more?' again to see if that helped, and he nodded. So I asked just that. 'Nothing,' he said ruefully. 'Nada.'

So I asked: 'What would you like to achieve with the rest of this session?' 'I don't know,' he replied. After a few moments I said: 'We've still got plenty of time left. Is there another question you'd like me to ask you?' Jake's shoulders lifted, he sat up straight, looked me in the eye and said: 'Yes. Ask me why am I dragging my damn heels on this crazy situation with the finance team.' So I asked him, using his exact words. Then I looked at him and kept his gaze, encouragingly. He took a deep breath, looked away for a moment and then began talking, exploring this in all its complexity, aided by my sustained attention, yet without further verbal prompting from me.

After 20 minutes, he'd achieved far more insight and made more gains than I think he would have done if I'd devised and asked him a different question, however good I might have thought my question was.

**In the first part of a two-part article, Linda Aspey explores what happens when we give our clients or coachees sustained, uncorrupted attention instead of bombarding them with questions**

Questions are one of the cornerstones of effective coaching and counselling. We use them to help our clients open the door to possibilities, inviting them into a discussion with themselves and with us. We're trained and often highly skilled in questioning; it's understandable that we see this as a key part of our role. Which is why it's sometimes a habit, like adding salt and pepper to food before tasting to check if it's needed.

Whenever we ask a question, it has the potential to influence the client. As soon as we take the lead, we're inevitably, consciously or unconsciously, bringing in our own agenda. Even in some of the most precise and prescribed forms of coaching and counselling, the questions – and how we ask them – will come from within us. Sometimes we feel under pressure from the client to ask questions, or use them as a way of managing our own anxieties about just sitting there 'doing nothing'. We might use questions to show care, empathy, interest, supremacy, knowledge, and even to compete. I wonder if coaches are particularly prone to this because of the drive for achievement inherent in coaching? I've seen forum postings asking 'What's your favourite/most powerful transformational coaching question?' and been fascinated at the competition to come up with the most brilliant. 'What a great question!' they say. 'Must try that one with *my* clients!'

Knowing when and how to use questions can be a particular challenge for counsellors and therapists coming to coaching anew, or when integrating the two as coach-therapists. Some people differentiate coaching from counselling by claiming that coaching is more driven, more upbeat and more of a two-way dialogue than counselling. That may be true, but I don't think it means that we need to bombard our clients with questions.

I'd like to invite you to think about *your* use of questions. Consider the last time you asked a client a 'great' question, and what you intended or hoped the question would do.

Was it:

- To help them to identify something – perhaps a positive trait, a strength, a pattern or a blind spot?
- To help you to understand them or the situation better?
- To indicate that you were really listening and really interested?
- To bring them back 'on track'?
- To encourage them to have an 'aha' moment?
- Because you could see what the problem or solution was but they couldn't?
- To test out a hypothesis or hunch that you had?
- To make a suggestion of some kind that could be hidden in your question?
- To challenge their thinking or reasoning?
- Or something else entirely?

I certainly recognise myself here in my earlier career. I thought that was what I was there for – to ask insightful questions. (I can still fall into the same trap from time to time.) Yet as well-meaning (or egotistical!) as my reasons might have been, looking back now, many of these questions were a response to *my* agenda, not the client's. Even with really good supervision, which I've been fortunate to have over the years, I don't think I ever really thought about the use of questions in the way I do now.

### **The problem with questions**

The moment we choose to ask a question we have directed the conversation to wherever *we* think it should go next. Not to where the client thinks it should go – yet only

the client can know where that is, as Jake showed me so clearly. This conscious choice immediately puts us in the role of expert in someone else's thinking. Is that what we are? I don't think so. Not if we are to be effective or true to our ethical framework. Whichever one you subscribe to as a coach or therapist, it usually includes principles such as those found in the BACP *Ethical Framework*<sup>1</sup>: autonomy – having respect for the client's right to be self-governing, and respect – showing appropriate regard for others and their understanding of themselves. When we choose new questions to direct the client's thinking, what is happening to these vital principles?

### **What an alternative approach looks like**

I find that The Thinking Environment™ developed by Nancy Kline of Time to Think<sup>2</sup> offers a gentle yet robust framework that enables clients to be autonomous and enables me to be really respectful as a coach and coach-therapist. Built around what she calls the Ten Components – ways of thinking and being that help thinking, with *attention*, *ease* and *equality* at the core – it means choosing to deploy the lowest number of coaching interventions possible. Why? So the client can go to the edge of their own thinking in their own way.

Sessions start with the simple question 'What would you like to think about today, and what are your thoughts?' And then I listen.

And during that listening, clients generate their own thoughts and questions and then answer them – beautifully. The human mind seems to have a powerful drive to do so, and I've often been amazed by how gracefully a client can coach themselves when I hold back. I've also been surprised at how incisive, brave, direct and even blunt people's self-questioning can be, as Jake's was.

Imagine you could ask your own coach or therapist to ask *you* your own question, one that that would get right to the heart of the issue. What would that feel like?

### **Working integratively**

This approach is an excellent example of working integratively as a coach-therapist. There are some parallels with person-centred counselling in being client led and non-directive. I see an element of the psychodynamic approach in using the power of silence to support the client as they unfold their

own thinking. It shares aspects of the solution-focused approach – for example, the Thinking Environment has appreciation, attention, encouragement and equality as components, whilst the solution-focused approach has ‘respectful curiosity’, a quest for strengths, and the belief that people are the experts in all aspects of their own lives, able to make their own choices, and to decide for themselves what is right or wrong. ‘Content free’ coaching similarly offers very open questions for the client to take where they want, unhindered by being channelled towards a particular destination.

However, Nancy Kline didn’t develop this to be used by therapists, and would never claim it as a therapeutic model but a relationship model. She started developing it over 20 years ago for use in educational settings. Yet its value in therapy and coaching is clear. Interestingly, although the Thinking Environment is used more in coaching than it is in counselling, and Nancy’s books are recommended reading on most coach training programmes, it doesn’t contain many of the traditional approaches to coaching.

For example, the Thinking Environment framework isn’t present or future focused – the client takes it wherever they want to, which may also include the past. (Clearly, careful assessment, contracting and supervision is necessary; more of this in part 2 of this article.) It doesn’t have homework unless the client wants some. It invites and welcomes the expression of feelings, which many forms of coaching tend to see as treading on dangerous territory. And it’s not pointedly goal driven but subtly so:

‘What would you like to think about today and what are your thoughts?’  
Or: ‘What more would you like to achieve with this session?’

‘Is there anything you would like to write down from this?’

### **Creating thinking conditions**

The session with Jake illustrates that if we create the right *conditions* for the client to explore their thinking, they will generate their own questions, which are usually far better than ours. They may not even need to say them out loud (some of my clients say very little but think a lot) but they will most certainly produce them when we give them quality time to think. Nine times out of 10, people will say more when invited to with the simple question ‘What more do you think, or feel or want to say?’ when the conditions are right. Pure, clean and simple, with no other agenda than enabling the client to think for themselves.

In fact, there’s an increasing amount of neuropsychological research to show how creating the right conditions can quieten the amygdala and create feelings of safety, trust and attachment, generating approach hormones such as dopamine and serotonin. These hormones make it possible to really explore thinking and generate new thoughts unhindered by fear. It seems the 10 components of the Thinking Environment offer this capacity in spades. How this works is explained further in Paul Brown’s and Virginia Brown’s forthcoming book *Neuropsychology for Coaches: understanding the basics*<sup>3</sup>.

It is crucial to the whole process to give clients sustained and complete *attention*. Listening to what they say and being fascinated by what they might say *next*. Not waiting *patiently* when they are silent, but waiting *expectantly*. It means making it comfortable for them to feel *uncomfortable*, enabling them to dig deep to find the answers and create the shifts they seek. It means relying on my presence rather than my questions, letting go of my need to assess, analyse, interpret, look for themes or give them ‘aha’ moments. They will find their own.

Does giving clients this level of attention sound simple? It’s not, yet with training and extensive practice it can become natural, and it’s liberating for both sides of the coaching relationship.

### **What, no questions – ever?**

Of course, there *are* times when questions are useful and relevant. For example, when fact finding or asking the client what they want next

from the session. Or when the client hasn't come to the insight they hoped for, despite the conditions being as conducive as they can, and a new question can help.

In the Thinking Environment session, we use questions to help the client to get to the heart of the matter – with their permission and *only when we are sure they have done all the thinking they can without our direct intervention.*

Sometimes clients achieve all they want to by freely exploring their thinking. They go away relieved, purposeful and decisive. And sometimes they want and need more, and then we take the process further with them. More of this in part 2.

Critically, to make this type of integrative coaching work well, you need to have genuine faith and trust in the intelligence of the client; even to value their thinking more than you value your own. Put simply, the mind that contains the question or the problem is usually the best mind to answer or solve it. We add value through our presence and our generative attention: the coach is both essential to the process and irrelevant to its outcome.

**So...**

- Do you find you spend more time thinking about asking good questions than creating conditions for people to think well?
- Do you think you might unwittingly be getting in the way of your client's thinking with questions?
- If so, might this be a liberating alternative for both of you?

There are many other counselling/therapy approaches that share elements of the Thinking Environment and I'd welcome dialogue with readers willing to share their ideas and experiences.

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To find out more about training in the Thinking Environment, visit Linda's blog for details of a forthcoming two-day programme, 'The Time to Think Foundation Course', with Linda Aspey and Ruth McCarthy, on November 12 & 13, 2012 in Oxford, UK.

And during that listening,  
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#### References

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