

Coaching Questions Leaders Should Consider

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In healthy organizations, coaching is rapidly becoming a very effective way for leaders to support and guide their direct reports. This is in contrast to the traditional approach of command and control, where the leader gives the orders and expects compliance.

Here are four questions typically used by executive coaches to support and challenge their clients. Consider experimenting with using these questions when collaborating with your direct reports.

What do you want to create? For many individuals at work, it's easy to become focused on the execution of routine tasks. "To do" lists develop a life of their own. This question causes the individual to pause to consider the purpose of all that activity.

By focusing on the desired outcome, you reduce the likelihood that effort will be expended on a project that has little value. The individual is able to prioritize opportunities and focus on the few that will deliver the greatest return on the investment of time and money.

Everything we create actually occurs in two distinct steps. This question invites the individual to first generate a mental image of the result he or she wants to create. Once that is clear, the action steps that will most likely lead to that outcome can be selected.

What are you willing to do to get what you want? Many of us, if given a magic wand, would wave it enthusiastically! Ah, but that's not how life works. Nothing is created just by wishing for it.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Do not worry if you have built your castles in the air. They are where they should be. Now put the foundations under them." The foundations of outstanding results are appropriate choices and diligent, tenacious execution.

There are many ways to achieve a given objective. However, barriers are sure to develop, impeding progress and frustrating established plans. It is wise to encourage an individual to count the cost and evaluate commitment before beginning.

What's getting in your way? Complex projects will have dozens, perhaps hundreds of impediments. Sometimes we just get stuck, and we're tempted to give up. This question helps to identify explicitly the obstacles that are preventing progress.

As the leader, you might be able to use your influence and position to remove some of those barriers. At a minimum, you can creatively brainstorm with the individual possible options for overcoming the limitations.

Sometimes the obstacles are not really "out there." They may be internal perceptions, doubts, or fears that prevent progress in a very different way. Your question can help the individual acknowledge and then break through these previously invisible obstructions.

What's the story you are telling yourself? All of us make meaning of the situations we face. Our past experiences, future hopes, and the expectations of others influence us as we seek the truth. We fabricate explanations for why we do (or don't do) certain things, and they can inhibit our progress.

This question is a powerfully confrontive, yet gentle inquiry. It provides a bit of a shocking nudge, which can lead to a new awareness. As "the story" is evaluated, the individual may understand the situation in a new way or may consider new approaches for responding to the situation.

Become skilled at asking these four questions, and you'll invite individuals to assume personal responsibility, demonstrate initiative, and exercise tenacity and discipline. Isn't that what you want? These open-ended questions are a great way to offer transformative help to those you influence!

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