

If you could only ask one question in a coaching session, what would it be?

A background information paper for a presentation made by Joseph Tigani at the EMCC 22nd Annual Mentoring and Coaching Conference, on 19 November 2015, in Istanbul, Turkey.

“Less is more.”

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to explore the idea of asking just one question in a coaching session, propose what that question could actually be and how to introduce it with coachees, and then apply it in coaching sessions.

Imagine

Imagine the following challenge. You are a coach who is about to go into a coaching session with a coachee, and throughout the entire coaching session you will only be allowed to ask one question. Only one question, no more.

To make it a little easier, I want you to suppose that you already know what the topic of the coaching session will be since you have previously determined that in an earlier conversation with the coachee.

Now, here are some more points for you to consider:

- Even though you will be asking just one question, you must still conduct a coaching session that is as equally effective (or more effective) as your other coaching sessions in which you ask many questions.
- Asking just one question doesn't necessarily mean it will be a 'speed' coaching session that is over within a few minutes.
- You may wish to tell your coachee, at the beginning of the coaching session, that you will only use one question so the coachee knows what to expect.
- Your question could be such that you can use it for multiple coaching sessions with almost any coachee.

At this point you may be having doubts about whether it is really possible to coach using just one coaching question. How can it be done?

Traditional Questioning

The notion of a coach asking just one question in a coaching session runs contrary to the way coaching is usually conducted, whereby coaches ask a series of questions. This is because questions are often based on multi-stage coaching models or frameworks, or on a particular sequencing of questions, all of which are designed to result in some form of progressive and forward movement for the coachee.

The role of questions in coaching usually aims to facilitate a coachee's awareness of a particular issue, to identify a preferred end state or alternative that deals appropriately with the issue, and then to identify actions which the coachee can take to achieve that state or alternative.

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For coaches, the idea of asking just one question can run counter to their training and experience in which they normally ask numerous questions. Nonetheless, the idea of asking just one question in a coaching session seeks to achieve comparable or better outcomes to those produced by traditional questioning techniques.

Simple Does Not Mean...

Simple does not mean easy. It has been said that, "*Simplicity is the ultimate form of sophistication.*" Conducting a coaching session using one question may appear overly simplistic, even unrealistic, but that doesn't mean it is easy. The ultimate sophistication is to reduce something complicated to something that looks incredibly simple and straightforward. That is not an easy thing to do.

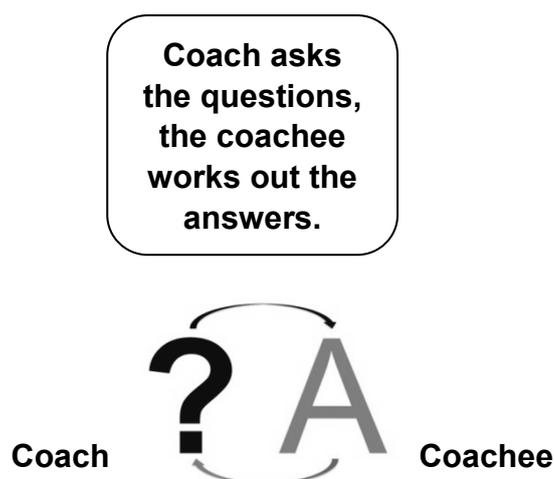
Simple does not mean ineffective. Just because something appears to be simple, or is simple, that does not mean that it is ineffective. However, it may well seem to be a paradox or contradiction to people.

Hence, in terms of a 'one only question' coaching session, at first glance it could appear to be unsophisticated because it is simple, and it could appear to be ineffective because it appears to be too simple.

Who Does the Asking?

In 'pure' coaching, coachees ideally come up with their own ideas, arrive at their own decisions, and then personally take action. In that way, the results should be owned entirely by the coachee, who also owns all of the content that leads up to those results.

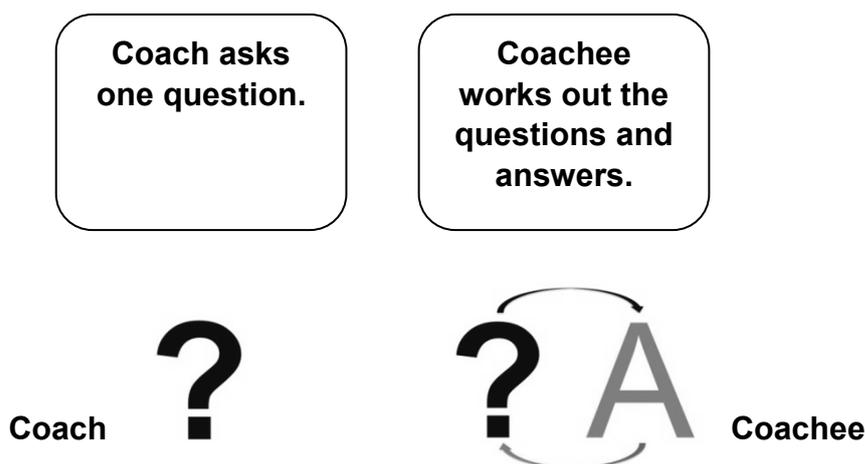
The process, however, remains the domain of the coach, and as suggested earlier, is normally one whereby the coach asks a series of different questions to which the coachee works out the answers. The coach does the asking and the coachee does the answering, as depicted in the diagram below, which is how coaching is often conducted.



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The One Question Coaching Session

An alternative approach to the coach asking an array of questions is to let coachees work out their own questions, and for coachees to come up with the answers to their questions. Effectively, the coachee will then have a 'question and answer' session entirely of their own making. Under this approach, as depicted in the diagram below, there is really only one essential question that the coach needs to ask the coachee.



In Practice

To give an illustration of how to introduce the 'one question' in practice, the following example may be helpful. Please note that as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the use of the one question technique is easier once the topic for the coaching session has been agreed, a point reflected in the example that follows.

“In our earlier discussion you identified that you would like to deal with [insert topic] as you mentioned that was important for you to resolve. To help you resolve that issue, I would like to ask you just one question. The basis of my question is to best serve your interests by you finding your own questions to answer. In that way the answers will come entirely from you. By that means, you are most likely to reach the answer or answers that have meaning to you, that resonate and are relevant to you, and that you will act upon.

So reflecting upon the topic that you want to resolve, my question to you is as follows; What is the one question you think you need to ask and answer for yourself at this moment™?”

It is then up to the coachee to work out the question that he thinks, feels or believes he needs to ask and answer for himself at that point. As the coachee works out his first question and answer, the coach can then repeat the same question allowing for acknowledgement of the coachee's response.

“In light of your answer to your question, what is the one question you think you now need to ask and answer for yourself™?”

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In that way the coachee moves to their second question and answer, and the process is repeated for the third and subsequent questions.

In my own experience in using the one question coaching session, it is interesting to note the reactions of coachees in the time gap between asking coachees what their question is and when they actually come up with a question. At times the gap is filled with coachees seeking more clarification from the coach, at other times it is filled with silence. Once coachees do formulate their question, then there is often a time gap before they provide their answer. It is an interesting dynamic, and as a coach it is very helpful to adopt the Eastern practice of 'listening to the silence'.

Another interesting aspect is the nature of coachees' questions. Their questions and answers usually penetrate well below the surface, meaning that rather than just 'peeling layers' off one at a time about the coaching topic, they will frequently dissect and get very quickly to the core of the matter at hand.

From a professional perspective as a coach, remember that trying anything new requires practice. It can be difficult and even unsettling at first to use the one question technique, because, as a coach, your stock of available questions is suddenly reduced to just one question rather than many.

Keep in mind also that the one question technique is advocated as an additional coaching tool, not as a replacement for existing coaching models or techniques.

Re-Imagine

Early in this paper, I asked you, as a coach, to imagine that you were about to go into a coaching session with a coachee, and throughout the entire coaching session you would only be allowed to ask one question. Only one question, no more.

I hope by this stage that you feel more confident about being able to do that, whether you use the question I have proposed or some personalised variation of it, or indeed use an entirely different question that you come up with.

Finally, I am also very interested in your perspective as a coach. Please send me any comments or feedback about your thoughts or experiences with this technique, or if you would like further information. Please email Joseph Tigani at info@absolute-leadership.com