

The Art of Asking the Right Coaching Question

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Why great coaching requires more than a list of powerful questions

“The power of a coaching question is not in what the coach asks; it is in what the client discovers.”

Questions are not the same as coaching

The effectiveness of a coaching question is not determined solely by its wording. It depends on the client's readiness, the context of the conversation, the quality of listening that preceded it, and the judgment of the coach who asks it.

Most coaches learn early that good coaching depends on good questions. That lesson is true, but incomplete. Some coaches confuse asking good questions with delivering good coaching. A well-worded question asked at the wrong moment can stall a conversation as surely as a poorly framed one.

This paper examines a six-question framework for structuring coaching sessions presented by Andrew Neitlich of the Center for Executive Coaching. The framework is useful. Its value, however, depends on something no list can supply: the coach's judgment about when to ask, how to ask, and whether to ask at all.

The six-question coaching cycle

In his April 23, 2024 article, “The 6 Most Important Coaching Questions to Ask in a Session,” Andrew Neitlich offers six foundational questions. The following are reproduced here for discussion and attributed to the original author:

1. What would be the most valuable outcome you can achieve in our session?
2. What are your ideas to find a solution?
3. What are your insights so far?
4. What would you like to discuss now?
5. What are next steps?
6. What was most valuable for you in our discussion?

Their greatest strength is where they begin: with the client's desired outcome rather than the

coach's assessment. The sequence then moves through exploration, insight, direction, commitment, and reflection. It reflects principles emphasized in PBCA coaching education: client ownership, active listening, thought-provoking inquiry, accountability, and learning.

The sequence is a guide, not a script. Real coaching conversations loop back, change direction, and sometimes yield a new agreement about what would be most useful. Effective coaching does not require mechanically reaching all six questions.

Refining the language

Small changes in wording can reduce unintended assumptions. Each primary refinement below asks one question. Optional follow-ups are separate interventions, to be used only when the client's response warrants them.

Original question (Neitlich)	Suggested refinement	Optional follow-up
Most valuable outcome?	What would make our conversation especially valuable to you today?	How will you recognize that value?
Ideas to find a solution?	What possibilities are you considering?	What else?
Insights so far?	What are you noticing as we explore this?	What does that tell you?
What discuss now?	Where would you like to take our conversation next?	
What are next steps?	What would you like to commit to?	For an experienced coach, when appropriate: What, if anything, would you like to commit to?
What was most valuable?	What are you taking away from our conversation?	How might you use it?

Avoid unintended assumptions. Asking for solutions assumes the issue needs solving. Clients may instead seek clarity, perspective, an opportunity to test an idea, or a better understanding of a relationship.

Preserve client autonomy while supporting accountability. Asking about next steps can imply that every session must end in action. A useful outcome might instead be a decision, a shift in perspective, or a deliberate choice not to act. Foundational coaches should learn to explore meaningful commitments; more experienced coaches can calibrate the wording without abandoning accountability.

Capture learning as well as results. The closing question should help the client identify what changed in their thinking and, where appropriate, how that learning will inform future choices.

Ask one question at a time. Compound questions divide the client's attention and make it harder for the coach to hear what matters most.

Agree on success without demanding a numerical metric. The International Coaching Federation's 2025 Core Competencies call for partnering with the client to define or reconfirm measures of success for an individual session (Competency 3.08). Those measures need not be numerical. They might include greater clarity, a decision, a new perspective, or a specific commitment. The coach should help establish what progress would look like, even when the client's first task is discovering what truly matters.

What happens between the questions

A great coach does not simply have better questions. A great coach has better judgment about which intervention the client needs next.

Consider a client who says, "My leadership team is performing well individually, but they're not working together." An inexperienced coach might immediately ask, "What ideas do you have to solve this?" The question sounds constructive, yet it accepts the client's initial framing and moves toward solutions before examining the situation.

A more experienced coach could begin with one question: "What does working together look like to you?" Depending on the response, the next inquiry might concern where collaboration is already working, what happens when it breaks down, or what the client most wants to understand. The coach does not assume the explanation is trust, communication, accountability, or alignment.

Imagine that the client then pauses and says, "I may be rewarding each executive for individual results while asking them to collaborate." At that moment, an additional question might interrupt a significant discovery. Silence could allow the insight to develop. A concise reflection, such as "You are noticing a possible tension between the outcomes you reward and the teamwork you want," might help the client hear the thought more clearly. This is an illustrative scenario, not a report of an actual client conversation.

Coaching judgment also includes the ability to summarize, reflect, and share an observation without becoming attached to an interpretation. The coach remains curious about the client's understanding rather than planting an answer.

Three levels of coaching

For teaching purposes, we can describe coaching development in three levels:

Level	Distinguishing capability	What it looks like in practice
Foundational	Knows what questions to ask	Uses sound questions to provide structure and establish a useful coaching agreement.
Proficient	Knows when and how to ask them	Adapts the timing, wording, and direction to the client's emerging understanding.
Masterful	Knows whether a question is needed	Chooses among questions, silence, reflection, summarizing, and observation with restraint.

These are instructional descriptions, not formally validated competency levels or substitutes for professional credentialing standards. Their purpose is to make the distinction between knowing a process and exercising coaching judgment visible.

Connection to the Petersen Leadership Model

Coaching is one application of leadership, and three dimensions of the seven-part Petersen Leadership Model are especially relevant:

Dimension	Leadership focus	Application to coaching
Style	How you lead	How the coach engages through tone, pace, presence, and the wording of an intervention.
Judgment	How you decide	How the coach decides what the conversation needs next, including whether to ask a question at all.
Execution	How results are achieved	How the client translates learning into progress; the coach supports conditions for that client-owned execution.

Judgment is the anchor. In *The Facts Don't Matter*, the distinction between facts and the meaning people assign to them is a useful lens for coaching. A coach who reacts to a client's first interpretation as though it were the full reality may inadvertently reinforce an untested story. Better judgment invites exploration of what occurred, how the client interprets it, and what other perspectives may be possible, without insisting that the coach's explanation is correct.

Execution requires a deliberate distinction: the client owns the decisions and results that follow the conversation. The coach's responsibility is to support awareness, choice, commitment, and learning, not to take over the client's work.

Implications for PBCA coach development

PBCA does not need another proprietary coaching model. It can strengthen existing instruction by using Neitlich's questions as a foundational reference while making the judgment required to use questions well a distinctive teaching emphasis.

CPBC: Foundational coaching skills. Teach the six questions as one possible structure for a session. Students practice making clear agreements, asking one question at a time, listening to the answers, and adapting rather than reciting a checklist.

CPMBC: Master-level coaching judgment. Use case studies and observed sessions to examine when a question was premature, leading, repetitive, or less useful than silence or reflection. Assess the reasoning behind the intervention, not merely the elegance of its wording.

PBCA community development. In a 30-minute interactive discussion, invite coaches to compare questions that helped and questions that hindered, then examine differences in timing, client context, and coach assumptions.

A companion one-page reference card could include the six original questions, their refined alternatives, and cues for deciding when to ask, pause, or follow the client elsewhere.

Closing

A list of powerful questions is where coaching begins, not where it ends. The coach who has memorized six questions has a process. The coach who listens carefully, tests assumptions, adapts to the client, and sometimes sets the questions aside is practicing the art.

Coaching mastery is not about asking more questions. It is about making every question count.

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References

Neitlich, A. (2024, April 23). The 6 Most Important Coaching Questions to Ask in a Session. Center for Executive Coaching. centerforexecutivecoaching.com

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