

# **Coaching is about More than Asking Questions**

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I've heard a lot of people define coaching as an inquiry-based process. I've even had people tell me they were taught to only ask questions. Many coaches rely on lists of questions to help them coach.

Coaching isn't about asking versus telling. It's about creating a new awareness, which includes the reflective practices of sharing observations and sensations, motivational acts of encouraging and challenging, and ways of holding the space in the moment so the person can fully experience their self even when it feels uncomfortable. Coaches do all of these things as well as questioning.

The ICF defines coaching as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential." Within this partnership, the coach shares observations of what the client is experiencing in the moment, encourages people to talk things through, challenges them to stretch their goals based on strengths and aspirations, and maintains silence as appropriate when people are processing a new, and maybe difficult, view of themselves and the world around them.

To me, the key competency isn't powerful questions; the foundation of coaching is presence. The coach needs to be present to the whole person and his or her experience. This includes acknowledging the emotions the client is feeling in the moment and recognizing the energy shifts that are occurring (a person can feel excited and resentful in one sentence!).

When coaches are grounded in the moment and are open and listening with their entire nervous system, including the heart and gut, they can receive nuances and shifts that indicate what is most important to the client. When a coach maintains this presence, the client's defenses drop. The client feels safe enough to self-reflect, experience vulnerability, and express the awareness that is emerging.

The coach then uses both direct communications (i.e. sharing observations, intuitions based on what the client shared, and shifts in the desired outcome of the session) and questions to help the client self-reflect and explore their motivations, blind spots, and desires more deeply. The questions come from what the coach is present to, not from remembering good questions from a list. In fact, thinking often gets in the way of good coaching!

### **Coaching is an Awareness-Based Process**

Coaching is an organic, spontaneous process based on the intention of helping a client think more broadly for themselves. To do this, you must:

- Seek to go deeper into the client's experience instead of jumping to find solutions
- Release both evaluations of the client and yourself
- Be willing to be share what you sense and able to accept you could be wrong
- Open your heart to the essence of what is being conveyed
- Open your gut to courageously share with compassion
- Receive the gifts the person is sharing – their vulnerability, insights, yearnings and fears.  
Check out if what you sense rings true for them and give them time to process what they are coming to understand

There is so much more to coaching than asking questions. Yes, powerful questions initiate profound shifts in thinking, believing and actions. The bulk of what a coach does is asking. It's asking in the service of creating a new awareness. Noticing, sharing, encouraging, challenging, and silence are important parts of this process as well.



**Marcia Reynolds, PsyD, MCC** is the president of the **Association for Coach Training Organizations**. More about how to be present with your brain, heart and gut can be found in Marcia's latest book, **The Discomfort Zone**. In addition to writing and speaking, Marcia

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This article was originally posted on the [International Coach Federation Blog](#).