

MARCIA REYNOLDS

**COACH THE  
PERSON,**  

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**NOT THE PROBLEM**

A Guide to Using  
**Reflective  
Inquiry**



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# ASKING QUESTIONS IS NOT THE SAME AS INQUIRY

MANY POPULAR BOOKS, leadership actions, and coaching guidelines outline rules for asking good questions. Common rules include ask open questions; start with what, when, where, how, and who; and avoid why questions.

These suggestions are misleading.

Coaches and leaders spend more time trying to remember the questions they're supposed to ask than paying attention to the person they are coaching.<sup>1</sup> They end up “checklist coaching” to ensure their questions follow the model they were taught in coaching school or a leadership workshop, which is more frustrating for the client than helpful.

Not only do coaches spend more time in their own heads than listening, they make coaching more complex than it should be. They don't realize that being present and using reflective statements such as summarizing, paraphrasing, and drawing distinctions can be more powerful—and easier—than seeking the magical question. When a coach asks a question *after* providing a reflection, the question is more likely to arise out of curiosity,

## COACH THE PERSON, NOT THE PROBLEM

not memory. At this point, even a closed question can lead to a breakthrough in thinking.

Coaching should be a process of *inquiry*, not a series of questions. The intent of *inquiry* is not to find solutions but to provoke critical thinking about our own thoughts. Inquiry helps the people being coached discern gaps in their logic, evaluate their beliefs, and clarify fears and desires affecting their choices. Solutions emerge when thoughts are rearranged and expanded.

Statements that prompt us to look inside our brains are *reflective*. They trigger reflection. Reflective statements include recapping, labeling, using metaphors, identifying key or conflicting points, and recognizing emotional shifts. *Inquiry* combines questions with reflective statements.

Questions seek answers;  
inquiry provokes insight.

When using reflective statements in coaching, clients hear their words, see how their beliefs form their perceptions, and face the emotions they are expressing. Then, a follow-up question that either confirms (Is this true for you?) or prompts exploration (when the coach is curious about what, when, where, how, or who) provokes clients to look into their thoughts.

Reflective statements + questions =  
reflective inquiry.

Adding reflective statements to questions makes coaching feel more natural and effortless. You don't have to worry about formulating the breakthrough question.

Pairing reflective statements with questions frees the coach of the weight of finding the perfect/best/right question.

On the other hand, some professionals who call themselves coaches ask questions for the purpose of determining what advice to give. They criticize the International Coaching Federation (ICF), formerly known as the International Coach Federation, for rigidly imposing requirements around question asking. A Harvard psychology professor told me she wasn't an ICF credentialed coach because her high-level executive clients didn't want her to ask about how they were feeling. "It's a waste of time to question their thoughts and emotions," she said. "They want my expertise. They are clueless and need advice or a kick in the butt." It's possible that's what her clients need, but that isn't coaching. It's face-slapping mentoring.

I fear the loss of coaching as a distinct profession when the word *coaching* is diluted by people preferring to give advice. Coaching is an effective technology for helping people quickly reframe, shift perspective, and redefine themselves and their situations. Coaches act as *thinking partners* for people who are stuck inside their stories and perceptions. They help clients think more broadly for themselves, beyond their blinding fears, inherited beliefs, and half-baked assumptions that limit possible actions. As a result of this new perspective, clients discover new solutions, take action on solutions they had avoided, and commit to long-term behavioral changes more often than when they are told what to do.

The goal of coaching is to get clients to stop and question the thoughts and behaviors that limit their perspective so they can

see a new way forward to achieve their desires. Reflective practices provide an instant replay for clients to observe themselves telling their stories. The questions then help clients identify the beliefs and behavioral patterns they are using. They see for themselves what patterns are ineffective, even damaging. If done with patience and respect, it's likely your clients will clearly see what they need to do without your brilliant advice.

The use of reflective inquiry as a powerful learning technology has been around for over one hundred years. I'll explain the origins of reflective inquiry in part I.

## COACHING SHOULDN'T BE SO HARD

Using reflective inquiry with a caring and appreciative presence creates a connection where clients feel safe to critically explore how they think. Clients don't feel pressured to explore their blocks more deeply; they naturally go deeper. Hearing their own words prompts them to willingly dissect the meaning of their statements. They admit when their words are defensive rationalizations for behavior that doesn't align with their core values and desires.

When you coach as a thinking partner instead of an expert, your job is to *catch and return* what you are given by the client. You don't have to concoct a masterful question. You don't need to figure out if what you want to say is intuition or a blatant projection of your own needs. You don't have to have all the answers. You are a good coach if you share what you hear and see and maybe offer what you sense is happening with no attachment to being right.

You will probably ask a question after you share what you heard, saw, and sensed, but the question will come out of your reflection, not your overused "good questions" list.

When I teach these techniques, coaches from around the world say things like this:

“Thank you. You freed me from the tyranny of asking the perfect question.”

“I feel so much lighter after watching you coach.”

“You showed me how to have fun with my coaching.”

“Yes! Be present, be the mirror, and lighten up!”

This book will show how anyone wanting to use a coaching approach in conversations can use reflective inquiry to be more present and effective. The methods and examples will demonstrate how to achieve memorable and meaningful results whether you are a professional coach or a leader, parent, teacher, or friend using a coaching approach in your conversations.

## WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK

In part I, I will clarify what practices are needed to have a conversation focused on coaching the person to better think through dilemmas. Since the word *coaching* has been applied to a range of activities, I want us to begin with a common understanding of the framework we will be exploring.

Chapter 1 explains why this method of coaching—reflective inquiry—is so powerful in changing minds and leading to long-term behavioral change. I'll describe how reflective inquiry maps to the brain science around insight formation, an important element in learning, and how coaching supports clients to explore their thinking in a way they can't do themselves.

The first chapter also takes a look at the ideal moments to put on a coaching hat. Coaching isn't intended to be used in all situations. You will annoy your employees, friends, and spouse

if you're always a coach. You need good reason and sometimes, permission. You'll find a list of scenarios considered good opportunities for coaching.

Chapter 2 explores five beliefs that have thrown the intention of coaching offtrack. I will explain each one, why all of them are true only some of the time, and how they limit the effectiveness of coaching when interpreted as rigid rules. I will also offer an alternative opinion for each belief with examples showing how it works within the context of the coaching relationship.

Part II, the heart of this book, will give you an understanding of and ways to implement the five essential practices for breakthrough coaching:

1. Focus—coaching the person, not the problem
2. Active Replay—playing back the pivotal pieces for review
3. Brain Hacking—finding the treasures in the box
4. Goaltending—staying the course
5. New and Next—coaxing insights and commitments

Coaching mastery isn't just about improving skills; mastery also requires that you quickly catch internal disruptions and shift back to being fully present with your clients. Part III explains and gives exercises for cultivating the three mental habits needed to master the practices of reflective inquiry:

1. Align your brain.
2. Receive (don't just listen).
3. Catch and release judgment.

I have had the opportunity to demonstrate to thousands of coaches worldwide both the essential practices and mental habits. Either they thank me for what they learned or they thank me for what I helped them remember because they knew it all along.

When I teach these practices to leaders, they realize their primary excuse for not coaching—*I don't have time*—is based in

their fear that they can't coach effectively. They have probably tried and failed as they grappled to find good questions. This book gives leaders a coaching approach that reduces their fears when they discover easy steps to implement for quick and more binding results.

Once leaders work with reflective inquiry, they discover it is the best way to prompt a strong shift in perspective and action in a short time. Additionally, the conversations are creative and meaningful as well as productive, inspiring others to learn and grow. Employees feel seen, heard, and valued—the key to increasing engagement, productivity, and excitement around new ideas.

People who have experienced good coaching say it changed their lives. The essence of coaching isn't based in problem-solving or performance improvement. Those committed to using reflective inquiry are change agents who actively recharge the human spirit. At times when events at work and in the world dampen the spirit, coaching brightens the path.



# WHAT IS A COACHING CONVERSATION?

*Coaching is so much more  
than asking good questions.*

—MARCIA REYNOLDS

THE FOUNDING MEMBERS of the International Coaching Federation asked the question, “What makes coaching different from therapy and consulting?” The ICF definition of coaching emerged from this conversation:

Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.<sup>1</sup>

The key word in the definition is *partnering*. Coaches do not act as experts or analysts even when they have relevant experience and education. Coaches are essentially thinking partners focused on helping clients use their creativity and resources to see beyond their blocks and solve their own problems.

The passion and commitment that fuels the continual growth of coaching is grounded in the coaching experience for both coach and client. For me—when I don’t give in to my urge to advise—nothing is more fulfilling than seeing my clients laugh at themselves when they realize they’ve been clinging to an outdated belief. I love the spark in their eyes when they discover the answer to their problems on their own. They feel relief and gratitude when they recognize they won’t be hurting anyone by following their dreams. When I feel the courage in my clients bubble up, it’s my pleasure to help them put their desires into motion.

People need to feel seen, heard, and valued to have the desire to grow. In this space, their creative brains are activated. They feel safe enough to explore their own thinking and actions. Surfacing their judgments and fears may feel uncomfortable, but when clients see how to move beyond these blocks, they feel empowered.

Although many gurus have been cited as saying people are naturally creative, resourceful, and whole, this concept was first seen in the work of psychologist Alfred Adler. Adler asked us to

believe in the power people feel when realizing their potential. He said, “Man knows much more than he understands.”<sup>2</sup>

In breaking away from the ideas of his teacher Sigmund Freud, Adler said we do not have to plumb the depths of one’s psychological history to help normal people progress. If, as Adler said, “we determine ourselves by the meanings we give to situations,” then changing or expanding the meaning opens new possibilities to define ourselves and our actions.<sup>3</sup>

Adler’s perspective spawned many modern therapies. The regard Adler held for the masses is a foundational concept for coaching. For people who are not seeking therapy but know they will benefit from exploring how they think when unsure of decisions or actions, coaching fills the gap.

## **WHERE DOES THE TERM *REFLECTIVE INQUIRY* COME FROM?**

We owe gratitude to Adler for defining the coaching relationship. Yet even though coaching may be similar to cognitive behavioral therapies and question-based relationship consulting, the actual practice of coaching maps more directly to John Dewey’s learning theory than to a therapeutic or commercial approach.

In 1910, Dewey defined the practice of *reflective inquiry* in his classic book, *How We Think*.<sup>4</sup> As an educational reformer, Dewey wanted to change the practice of dumping information into students’ brains and then testing their memorization skills. He wasn’t just advocating for teachers to ask more questions. He defined methods of inquiry that would prompt students to doubt what they thought they knew so they were open to expansive learning.

Dewey felt that combining the tools that provoke critical thinking with Socratic questioning would prompt students to go

inward to give their thoughts serious consideration. They would then be able to distinguish what they know from what they don't know, confirm or negate a stated belief, and substantiate the value of a fear or doubt. He said that metaphorically, reflective inquiry enables us to climb a tree in our minds.<sup>5</sup> We gain a wider view to see connections and faults in our thinking to better assess what to do next.

## WATCHING THE MOVIE FROM THE TOP OF THE TREE

Reflective inquiry includes statements that hold up a mirror to our thoughts and beliefs to provoke evaluation. The practice of mirroring, or what I call *active replay*, includes when the coach summarizes, paraphrases, acknowledges key phrases, and shares the emotions and gestures clients express. Clients then expand on the meaning of their words with explanations or corrections. They may drop into silence, shifting their eyes up, down, or sideways as they look into their thoughts. Coaches will often pause to let their clients think. If the pause is unbearably long, the coach might offer a reflection and question such as “It looks like you are considering something. What is coming up for you now?”

When coaches use reflective statements, people hear their words, see how their beliefs form their perceptions, and face the emotions they are expressing. Then, when coaches follow up with a confirming question (“Is this what you believe?”) or exploratory question (“What is causing your hesitation?”), clients are prompted to stop and examine their thinking.

We use *reflective statements* plus questions to trigger people to *reflect* on how they think.

Coaching behaviors include *noticing* energy shifts, tone of voice, pace of speech, inflection, and behaviors. Coaches *play back* clients' beliefs and assumptions to examine their verity and limitations. They *summarize* complex outcomes and possibilities, offering the statements to clients to accept or alter. They *offer observations* when clients show resistance. They *reflect progress* to reinforce movement and growth. The goal of offering reflective statements is not to lead clients in a specific direction but to help them clarify and evaluate their thoughts.

By using reflective practices, coaches encourage clients to think about what they said and expressed. The coach accepts the client's responses, even if the client gets defensive or uncomfortable. Giving clients a judgment-free space to process the coaching observations is critical to their progress.

John Dewey may not have been successful at transforming our educational systems, but his gift of defining how to grow people's minds can be seen in the actions of trained coaches.

## COACHING ISN'T RAH-RAH

Most people I know like the idea of having someone act as a sounding board when they feel stuck trying to think through a dilemma. Talking about a problem can help people look at how their thoughts help or hinder their goal achievement. They don't want nonspecific encouragement. "You can do it" statements feel patronizing, especially to the high achiever.

In fact, good coaching isn't always comfortable. Learning often happens in a moment of awkward uncertainty—when we come to doubt the beliefs and assumptions that underlie our choices. Dewey also acknowledged the discomfort that accompanies doubt as inherent in the process of learning. A surprising

fact, disruptive reflection, or incisive question is needed to break down what we think we know. Then, we are open to learning. The breakdown doesn't always feel good. Yet over time, we usually are grateful for the insights we gain.

For example, I had a boss who had this uncanny ability to read me. He knew what drove me, what I desperately wanted, and what barriers my own brain created that got in my way. His questions broke through the walls in my mind so I could see my blind spots. My realizations were often painful, but I knew what I had to do differently.

Once, when I was on a rampage about the incompetency of my peers and the overload of work I then had to do, he said, "It seems that everyone disappoints you." As I paused to think about his observation, he added, "Will anyone ever be good enough for you?" There was nothing left for me to say.

Back at my desk, I wondered if I had always focused on other people's flaws. I saw how this pattern had hurt my personal relationships for years. With one reflection plus one question, he made me face how I was playing out this pattern at work. I would never see my work relationships the same again.

His observation and question made me stop and question my thinking, which was terribly uncomfortable. In the midst of this discomfort, I became more conscious of how I distanced myself from others by my need to prove I was better than them. I wanted to be a leader. Instead, I was a complainer. The painful truth led me to learn how I could better work with others and, someday, lead them.

The best coaches make us recognize we have gaps in our reasoning. The moment we become unsure of what we know, learning happens. This is good coaching.

Even if all clients need from you in the moment is to be a sounding board as they sort through their thoughts, we can still use curiosity to *partner* with them to see themselves and the world in a broader way. Coaches facilitate this process in the way that Dewey imagined was possible.

## **WE'VE DRIFTED AWAY FROM THE INTENTION OF COACHING**

My second master's degree is in adult learning/instructional design. I'll never forget a professor saying we should always tell students what they would be tested on so they could focus their learning. As a student, I loved this advice. My hope was to get an A in the class. I wasn't considering how I would apply what I learned when I graduated. I just wanted to learn enough to be an A student.

I still believe you should test what you teach, but a growing number of students in coach training programs worldwide are demanding to learn specific coaching steps to earn their credentials. The focus of learning has shifted to the test and away from the client relationship. ICF efforts to legitimize coaching by making it data-driven often overshadow the intention of coaching. Taking an evidence-based approach to limit assessor subjectivity is important, and behavioral descriptions are useful for trainers and mentors, but transferring specific requirements to students has contributed to thinking of coaching as a formulaic process. In attempts to make coaching memorable, the heart of coaching is disappearing.

The identified coaching competencies were never intended to be a checklist of behaviors. I was a part of the ICF leadership when the competencies were written. The focus was on

the transformational experience where people learned from the inside out. The competencies weren't meant to be taken in any order other than the beginning and ending—to determine where the conversation is going and then to close it out with a commitment. The remaining competencies reflected how present coaches are with their clients. Coaches need to fully receive what their clients say and express with no judgment. Then they could competently be curious about intentions and meaning. There isn't one right way to coach; coaching is a spontaneous process between the coach and client.

Coaching competencies provide the framework to facilitate self-discovery. They are not a checklist of required statements and questions.

The early ICF leaders committed to building the coaching profession because of the positive impact we believed coaching would make in the world. The emphasis was on establishing a safe and caring relationship between coach and client so people felt seen and valued. Then, once agreement was reached on the outcome they would attempt to achieve, the conversation flowed naturally from the coach's curiosity. The coach was not recalling memorized lists, models, and formulas. I am happy to see that the 2020 updated ICF competencies better reflect the aspirations of the founding members.

Coaching is more than reflecting and asking questions. Coaches must create a bond of trust that deepens over time. The relationship is essential for the coach to be an effective thinking partner. The courage, care, and curiosity coaches feel, and the belief they have in their clients' potential, make the competencies work.



During my first class at my coaching school, the founder, Thomas Leonard, said we can learn how to coach only by getting out there and coaching people. We resisted, saying we didn't know what to do. He said we would learn enough to start coaching after the first class, and then we should "just go love them."

I have used this advice for over twenty years. Most times, I feel my clients love me back.

I want to bring the heart as well as the art of coaching into all of our conversations about coaching. I wrote this book to be a guide for all people who use coaching, regardless of the school they attend, the credential they earn, and the role they play.

Although part II provides practices that will ensure coaching effectiveness, the mental habits in part III are essential for establishing the relationship that makes coaching so powerful. You won't find lists of what you should ask and say. You will discover how you can expand people's capacity to learn and grow together in our complex, uncertain world. I honor you for choosing this journey.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcia Reynolds, PsyD, Master Certified Coach



WHAT DOES IT take to influence others to change their lives for the better? That is the question Dr. Marcia Reynolds has been asking for three decades. She knew telling people what is best for them doesn't work, even though she turned her life around before nearly destroying it as a teenager. She found her answer

when she discovered coaching. She has since devoted her work to understanding the science of coaching—why it is so powerful in shifting people's minds and behaviors and what the best ways are to effectively coach. She is passionate about teaching what she learns to coaches and leaders around the world. She knows coaching can bring people together in a respectful, caring way that makes our world a better place to live in for all.

As president of Covisioning LLC, Marcia coaches executives and teaches coaching skills to students and leaders, working in forty-one countries to date. She also consults with change agents who want to establish coaching cultures in their organizations. She is a frequent speaker at conferences and has presented at the Harvard Kennedy School and Cornell University as well as universities in Europe and Asia.

Marcia is a pioneer in the coaching profession. She was the fifth global president of the International Coach Federation (which became the International Coaching Federation in 2020) and was recently inducted into its Circle of Distinction for her many years of service to the global coaching community. Currently, she is the training director for the Healthcare Coaching Institute and is also on the faculty for the International Coaching Academy in Russia and Create China Coaching in China. She also teaches coaching skills classes in organizations around the world. She is recognized by Global Gurus as one of the top five coaches in the world.

Before she launched her own business, her greatest success came from designing the employee development program for a global semiconductor company facing bankruptcy. Within three years, the company turned around and became the number one stock market success in 1993.

Interviews and excerpts from her books *The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs*; *Outsmart Your Brain: How to Master Your Mind When Emotions Take the Wheel*; and *Wander Woman: How High-Achieving Women Find Contentment and Direction* have appeared in many places, including *Fast Company*, *Forbes.com*, *CNN.com*, *Psychology Today*, *the Globe and Mail*, and *the Wall Street Journal*, and she has appeared in business magazines in Europe and Asia and on *ABC World News*.

Marcia is passionate about evoking transformation with coaching. Email or call her if you or others in your organization have a need that coaching can meet or you want to teach your leaders or coaches to have more transformational conversations: [Marcia@covisioning.com](mailto:Marcia@covisioning.com) or +1-602-954-9030. Her website is <https://covisioning.com/>.