

The Coach's Greatest Tool: Asking Powerful Questions

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Insight. Experience. Motivation. Know-how.

All important factors that contribute to a coach's success. But none of these yield positive results more effectively than asking powerful questions. If a coach asks the right questions to turn-on a student's thinking, engage her in problem-solving, and mobilize action, he's done his job whether or not he's an expert of the situation or dilemma at hand. This is because the coaching model depends on students generating their own solutions and approaches to challenges, rather than being told by a coach

what to do. And nothing helps students think through these processes like pointed, powerful questions.

So how does a coach know how to ask such questions? First, by understanding what makes questions powerful, and second, by practicing asking questions. Today, we'll examine what makes questions powerful.

A question is powerful when it expands thinking. Instead of asking a question that requires a yes or no response, strive to ask questions that must be expounded upon and generate further thinking. For example, instead of asking "Do you like your history class?" you could ask "What do you like about your history class?" or "What are three interesting perspectives you've gained in your history class?" or "If you were teaching the history class, how would you best convey the material?"

A question is powerful if it helps make connections. Students benefit from connecting the dots in life, whether they are past experiences leading to a current moment, or connections across disciplines that help broaden perspectives. Questions along these lines include: "How does this relate to what happened last year?" "What elements in this situation are similar to the other situation?" or "What is different/similar here?"

A question is powerful if it focuses a thought. While coaches often strive to expand a student's thinking there are times it helps to bring laser like focus to a situation. A powerful question can do just this. If a student is circling around an idea, a yes or no question creates an opportunity to take a stand. For example, "Are you willing to do what it takes to make the change?" or "Will you regret not pursuing this opportunity?" Once a student has clarity where he or she stands, further coaching can help explore next steps.

A question is powerful if it shifts perspectives. Students can get locked into a way of seeing things and become stuck from a limited perspective. Powerful questions can transport them to new places where they can view their dilemmas from different points of view. Powerful questions along these lines might include: "How would your friend approach this problem?" "How do you think your family views this situation?" or "Imagine you solved this situation, what might have been your first steps in the solution?"

A question is powerful if it can't be answered immediately. A question that lingers and demands further reflection helps students pursue a deeper thinking process that can continue to inform them for days, weeks, months and even years. These questions often relate to one's core values and the steps students must take in life to align actions according to these values.

A question is powerful if it triggers an "ah-ha" moment or emotional response. As coaches, we don't always know when a question will have this type of effect. But it is our job to look for such responses, often indicated by a shift in body language, a pause, or a sound of relief in the voice. These moments inform us that the student is onto something and making deeper connections.