

## Are you asking the right questions?

Do you ever think about the questions you can ask prior to a situation? Ansel Adams, the famous photographer, was fond of saying that, "Chance favors the prepared mind." For most of us, we did not take a course in college that prepared us to ask good questions. It is something that I have built my career on because, a large part of being a successful executive coach is the ability to engage people in conversation and ask questions that lead to a new awareness, a new outlook, or a new result. Last month I wrote about curiosity and the fact that it starts with questions. I believe the quality of your questions will influence the quality of the answer you get. I believe it is the most underutilized tool in a leaders' toolbox.

In the Harvard Business Review article, "The Surprising Power of Questions", authors Alison Wood Brooks and Leslie John say that, "questioning is a powerful tool for unlocking value in companies: It spurs learning and the exchange of ideas, it fuels innovation and better performance, and it builds trust among team members." I have seen that, when questioning is done effectively, it empowers people by letting them know you take them seriously and want to know their opinion. Good questions can also help you develop your staff into leaders who look to themselves to answer questions instead of just looking to others for answers.

The article says that questioning is a skill that can be honed and that involves learning to choose, "the best type, tone, sequence, and framing of questions." Communication and observation are key soft skills that are needed to ask questions effectively. Listening to the answer and being open to others' opinions is why you are asking the question in the first place. A curious learner will also listen to themselves and reflect on how they are asking their questions to determine what they can do to make conversations more productive.

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In the book, *Change Your Questions, Change Your Life*, Marilee Adams unlocks the power of "questioning thinking." The book explains how to develop a learner mindset versus judger mindset. Adams says that our questions reflect our underlying mindset and that questions that learner questions are "open-minded, curious, and creative" versus judger questions that are "more closed-minded, certain, and critical." She asserts that we all have both mindsets, but with awareness we can choose which to use in any moment. To do that Adams says you need to be aware, breathe (step back, pause and gain perspective, be curious about what is really going on or what you might be missing, and decide which mindset you will choose for the situation. The following, clarifies Adams' research on the differences between the mindset.

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- **Thinking:** A judger asks; what is wrong with me (or the other person, or the situation), how can I protect or defend myself, and why can't they perform? versus a learner who asks; what are the facts and what am I assuming, how can I best understand what is going on here/now, what are my goals, what are my choices, and what do our customers want?
- **Feeling:** A judger asks; how can I avoid, stop or control this feeling, what will people think if they see me feeling this, why bother? versus a learner who asks; what am I feeling, how can I accept and embrace what I am feeling, how can I calm myself, what is one thing I can do now to help me feel better?
- **Behavior:** A judger asks; how can I prove I am right, who is to blame, how can I get them to do what I want? versus a learner who asks; what is the most appropriate way to do this, how can I help, how can I contribute to getting this done or moving this situation forward?
- **Relationship:** A judger asks; how is his/her reaction connected with me, who is winning this argument? versus a learner who asks; in what ways are we alike, should I take this personally, what other explanations are there?"

I suggest Adams book to my coaching clients and think her question, “What do I want my question to accomplish?” is a good summary of the book. While reading a book is a good way to gain insight, I have found that interactive workshops are a better approach for most people. I teach a public course, “The Coaching Clinic,” for executives, managers and leaders to experience and learn coaching skills and competencies. One of the things the course focuses on is powerful ‘Discovery’ questions. Adams’ learner mindset is interwoven in good discovery questions. Questions are woven throughout the coaching process, whether to help set the focus off the interaction, uncover possible insights and actions, develop a plan and identifying any barriers to executing the plan. The following are questions you can ask for each stage of the process.

**Focus:** What would you like to get from this conversation? What feels most urgent for you now? Of all the issues, which one is your top priority? What is the best use of our time together? What do you need most for yourself? What would you like to focus on?

**Discover Possibilities:** What outcome do you want? What is the best thing that could happen? If you knew you wouldn’t fail, what would you do? What have you observed has worked for others? That’s one option...what’s another?

**Plan the Action:** Of all the options, what’s most compelling? What do you need to do first? Who or what do you need to include to succeed? Who do you need to talk to? How will these actions contribute to achieving your goal?

**Remove Barriers:** What might prevent you from succeeding? What’s missing? What resources do you need? Where are the roadblocks you expect or know about? Who do you need to communicate this to in the organization? What will get in the way of executing this plan?

If you’d like to develop your skill in asking questions and being more of a Coach/Leader, the next Coaching Clinic workshop is Oct 16 & 17, in Memphis. Sign up for Coaching Clinic. The Clinic is can also be conducted for specific organizations or groups. If you’d like to explore this or one of the other services Harmony provides, don’t hesitate to contact me at [bburtch@harmonycc.net](mailto:bburtch@harmonycc.net), 901-272-7390.



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## *Schedule of Public Courses*

The following courses are being offered to the public by Harmony Coaching & Consulting. Click on the associated link for more information on the program or to register.

<b>Course Title</b>	<b>Date(s)</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>For More Information/Registration</b>
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**Oct 16 & 17**

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