



Episode 11: How to Tell What Someone is Thinking

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host Deb Elbaum and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone. It's Deb. Tell me if this has ever happened to you. You're having a conversation with someone when you realize that you've done most of the talking. The other person might be quiet and not saying much. And it dawns on you that you have no idea what they're thinking. Even if they're nodding along with you or smiling, the truth is that we have no idea what's happening in other people's brains.

What are they thinking? If only we could read other people's minds, how great that might be. And we can't.

Today, I'm going to share my most used coaching question to help you understand what someone else is thinking. What's great about this question is that it helps you understand someone's thoughts in a curious and non-threatening way. Making this coaching tool part of your regular communication will help you build relationships, increase trust, and get the information you want to know quickly and easily. You'll feel more empowered as a professional, a leader and partner. You ready?

Here's the coaching question that gives you a window into someone else's thoughts. It's the coaching question I ask most often during coaching sessions. Here it is. Where are your thoughts going? Where are your thoughts going? Using this question during a conversation will help you instantly get clarity and a glimpse into the other. Person's thinking. And then when you know what someone's thinking, you can then tailor your conversation in a helpful direction. You can speak to someone's concerns, or you can pause to explain something that might be unclear.

The key to asking this question is to ask from 100% curiosity and openness, and then making sure to pause, to create space for the other person to answer. I ask this question all the time in coaching sessions, because during conversations, my clients and I cover a lot of ground, and I'm often sharing my perspective or my impression about what they're saying, or I'm reflecting the words I hear them say back to them, or I might even be sharing a bit of neuroscience about the brain and how it works.

And after I have talked for a bit, I pause and I ask: where your thoughts going? I ask this question deliberately, and I want to share the reason I choose this question specifically.

First, this is an open-ended question. When we want to understand someone fully, we need to ask an open-ended versus a closed question. Open-ended questions are expansive questions that invite more than one word answers. And remember they start with a what, where, who, how, or when.

Second, the question, where are your thoughts going? Asks about our thoughts. I don't ask how are you feeling or how are you doing? Because those questions often generate vague words for an answer, like fine or good. And some people don't have access to the nuances of how they feel in a moment. I ask about thoughts, because I believe that our thoughts create our reality. And when we identify our thoughts, it gives us an opportunity to follow them, to reframe them, or shift them as needed. Our thoughts create the roadmap of our life.

Third, there's energy and movement in the question with the word going. Where are your thoughts going? Like, I know you have thoughts. I know they flow. We all know that one thought follows another. So what path are your thoughts on? Where is our conversation and the ideas we're talking about taking you? When we know this, we can understand where it makes sense to go next.

You might be asking, Deb, do I really need to ask this question? Because I know what people are thinking. I can see it in their face. I can see them nodding or saying yeah as I speak. Doesn't this question just take up valuable time? Well, here's how I'd answer. First, the truth is that even if people nod or smile or say yes, it doesn't mean they agree with us or understand us, or are even following along with us, because we have no idea what's truly going on in other people's brains.

Second, it depends on your goal for the conversation. If you're having a conversation where the goal is to share information, provide an update, or present a predetermined plan without discussion, then yes, you might choose to not ask this question. On the other hand, if you do care about what the people around you are thinking, if you're trying to create agreement, trying to problem solve, coaching someone around their challenges, or making a decision and wanting buy-in, then yes. It's a valuable question to have in your relationship and communication toolkit, because maybe you'll learn that the conversation is headed in the direction you thought, or maybe you'll find out that the other person's thinking took a detour or a left turn, and they're not with you at all.

I always tell my clients that everything we do in a coaching session can absolutely be brought to their work and personal lives. I tell my clients that just like I periodically pause and ask them, "Where are your thoughts going?" they can use this question with their colleagues, team members, and the clients they serve.

Recently, one of my clients shared that she's been doing this with great success and she couldn't wait to tell me about it. We got on our call and she said, Deb, I have to tell you, I have been using this question with everyone. And it is awesome. Now this client does business development. She's always having conversations with potential partners and clients to create work together. And in those conversations, she often finds herself explaining her organization's mission and approach. And sometimes she feels like she's doing most of the

talking. So recently she decided to pause and ask deliberately more often, where are your thoughts going?

When I asked her what was awesome for her, she said that in addition to just being fun to ask, asking this question, gave her so much more information and insight.

When she asked, "Where are your thoughts going?", potential clients shared exactly what was on their mind. And this was super helpful for her because it gave her information she was previously just guessing or assuming. The thoughts then guided their conversation in a more focused and more productive way.

I was curious and I asked her if what they shared was what she might have expected. And she said about half of the time. She said that about half of the time, she felt like she might've anticipated where their thoughts were going. They said something she could have predicted. And then, in the other half of the conversations, the potential clients said something totally unexpected. And this was great because it then gave my client the opportunity to pivot the conversation in the moment to address exactly what was on their mind. This helped my client with her business development conversations tremendously, as she felt confident that she was maximizing her time with the people, and she felt like they built trust and alignment more quickly.

That's exactly what I find in coaching, too. When I ask my clients, where are your thoughts going?, it's an opportunity for us to focus in on exactly where my client is and exactly where they need to go next.

Let's bring this to you. In the next few weeks, I invite you to try this experiment of asking people you're with, where your thoughts going? Please ask it from curiosity and spaciousness without rushing someone or putting words in someone's mouth. Ask the question and let them answer. And see what type of answers you get and how it affects your conversations and relationships. Maybe it brings you closer or maybe it allows an opportunity to explore an idea that you hadn't thought about before. And you can even share with another person, let them know here's where my thoughts are going, as a way for them to have a glimpse into your mind.

If you try this experiment, I'd love to hear about it. Please email me at deb@debelbaum.com and let me know what it's like. As we close out this episode, I'm curious, where are your thoughts going? I hope that they're moving you in the right direction, for you, in your life right now. Until next time!