



Episode 35: The Benefits of Asking Better Questions

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. Today, let's talk about one of my favorite topics: questions. I love helping leaders think about and ask better questions, because questions are a tool. They are powerful thinking and leading tools that can influence the way you think about yourself, other people, and the world.

Our thoughts create our reality. Each thought we have leads to another, which then causes us to say or do something. When we stop to intentionally ask and answer questions, we can refocus the path of our thinking to be more purposeful and productive.

Asking ourselves questions gives us the time and space to reflect about who we are, what's important to us, and what we want. Asking other people questions helps us be better colleagues, friends, and leaders. Questions invite active listening and gathering information to better understand how someone else thinks and what motivates them.

Our brains are naturally curious and full of questions. We all have an inner toddler who wants to point at everything and ask, what's that? What happens, though, as we grow older, is that our brain shifts from curiosity to focusing on problem solving. We become the person who has to have the answers and knows what should happen. We forget that we used to be innately curious.

Take, for an example, a situation of a leader who is checking in with a direct report after they gave this person an assignment. Suppose the direct report wants to approach the work differently. If the leader's in problem solving mode and not in curiosity mode, they might just tell them how the work should be done. They forget to be curious about the other person's reasoning and approach.

This is a missed opportunity for both people involved. The leader misses an opportunity to broaden their understanding of someone else's ability, and the team member misses an opportunity to feel empowered and heard.

Forgetting to be curious can also continue unhelpful relationship patterns. I know I'm often guilty of this. I think about the times a family member starts to tell me something, and my brain has already jumped to problem solving and answer giving mode. When I forget to be curious, and instead tell the other person how I see the situation, I've lost the opportunity to more deeply hear and understand them.

This is where the tool of questions comes in. Questions are how we operationalize our curiosity and self-reflection. Questions can start making sense of chaos. They can focus all of the thousands of thoughts we have in our head every day.

The cool thing is there's a never-ending pool of questions we can draw from, both to ask ourselves and others. Sometimes, though, when I'm brainstorming questions with my clients, they have a hard time

thinking of new and different questions to ask. They sometimes say, Deb, you're so good coming up with questions. I wish I had that ability.

Here's a secret, though. I used to be horrible at coming up with coaching questions. The first weekend of my coach training, we had lots of opportunities to coach each other through asking questions. The leaders would walk around the room and listen in to our practice sessions. As soon as the leaders came within earshot of me, my mind would go blank. I could not think of single question to ask my partner. When I reflect on that now, I think it was because my perfectionist inner critic told me that I needed to ask the perfect question. Fortunately, I now know that there are no perfect questions, because different questions invite different directions of thinking.

So, I get it. It can be hard to build a new habit of practicing curiosity and asking questions....and it is completely possible. It just takes practice.

Let's help you build your question-asking muscle and expand your repertoire of questions, both to coach yourself and to lead others. And let's start with the basic idea that there are 2 main types of questions.

The two types of questions are closed questions and open-ended questions.

Closed questions invite a yes or no answer. These questions ask something specific that can be answered in a binary way. For example, did you reply to that email? Yes or no. Did you leave the stove on? Yes or no. These questions are helpful in situations in which there really is a yes or no answer that is needed.

The trouble is that many times, we ask a closed question when an open-ended question would suit us much better.

That's because open-ended questions invite deeper reasoning and thinking. They invite clarity and collaboration. These questions start with words like what, who, where, when, and how. They cannot be answered simply with a yes or no. They encourage explanation.

When it comes to intentional self-reflection, and leading to empower others, open-ended questions are your best friend.

The challenge is that our brains often default to closed questions when we really need an open-ended question.

Here's an example: Suppose you are thinking about the next steps of your career, and you want to consider it thoughtfully. You might find your brain automatically posing a closed question, like, Do I want to leave my job? Immediately you might notice you start to feel stressed, because this question is hard for your brain to answer. Your situation is likely complicated, and trying to force your brain to a yes or no answer isn't fair or easy. This closed question gets in the way of deeper and more balanced reflection.

Changing to an open-ended question instead, like, what professional priorities are most important to me, can relax your brain and make it more likely that you'll think productively.

Our brain energy is a resource we can use to feel happier and more empowered and motivated. If you want to direct your mental energy to a more positive and expansive space, use questions.

Here's how to start. To coach yourself, choose 3 questions that you want to try asking, the next time you feel your thoughts getting muddled and cloudy, and write them down.

They might be questions like:

-What's in my control?

-What do I really want?

-Who can help me?

You can also practice curiosity and question asking as a leader. Choose 3 questions you want to ask others more often and write those down, too.

These might be questions like:

-How are you thinking about this?

-What outcome do you want?

-How can I help you get unblocked?

Put these lists of questions where you can see them – on your desk or kitchen table, or even on your bathroom mirror.

Then use them. See how they shift your thinking and your conversations. I'm guessing that questions will invite more dialogue with both your internal narrative and with others. You'll feel clearer with your thoughts, and you'll feel more collaborative and effective as a leader.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you want more questions for your leadership toolkit, head over to my website debelbaum.com where you can find some of my favorite questions on the Resources page. You can also buy my coaching questions card deck there. This deck has powerful questions to help you and others move forward. And as always, reach out if you need some inspiration. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!