



Episode 39: One question that Gets to the Heart of the Matter

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 we're going to talk about a seemingly simple question that everyone should have in their communication toolkit. This question is a brain-friendly question that can quickly engage others and create a shared focus. It's a powerful question because it seems like it should be easy to answer, and it's often not.

It's a question that, when asked of us, can momentarily stop us in our tracks, because it engages our brain and shifts our perspective from what we're familiar with to what is not yet known. This question invites our brain to create clarity, to imagine, and dream.

And because we're often focused on the challenge in the moment or on the many thoughts that are top of mind, we often forget to ask this question. And if we asked this question more regularly to others, we would be helping them create clarity.

Are you ready for the question? Here it is: What do you want?

What do you want?

Obviously, we're all familiar with this question in certain contexts, because we ask and answer it all the time: for instance, when ordering at a restaurant, when choosing paint colors, or when making weekend plans.

Today, I invite us to appreciate the power of this question and understand how to use it as a coaching question for ourselves and others, when we want to think purposefully about life, relationships, and challenges.

What do you want? is powerful because it cuts through the noise and chaos of our mental chatter to zoom in on what's most important to us. It gets to the heart of the matter.

And when we have a way to get to the heart of the matter, we can move forward into planning, partnership, and action more quickly and easily.

Asking what do you want? is especially helpful in complex situations during times of uncertainty and change.

And to use this question to its fullest advantage requires curiosity and space to think, listen, and allow one's thoughts to flow. It is a question to be pondered.

Here's an example. In a coaching session, a client shared that her organization was at a pivotal moment. Poised for growth, there were personnel changes, a new vision, and, of course, accompanying worries. As a VP, she was in an interesting position. While she had concerns, she also saw an opportunity to help guide people through the next few months.

As she talked, she shared many thoughts. She was excited, and she was anxious. She had ideas, and she had fears. She was clear about some pieces and not others. When she paused, I asked her, What do you want?

She thought for a minute. Then she said, I want to help move the organization and the people who are staying through this transition. That's a great place to start, I said. Let's break that down. Specifically, what do you want?

Again, she thought. Then here's how she answered.

I want to take advantage of our technology. I want to reduce the rate of effort so people feel more balanced. I want us to stay connected to our customers. I want to look for processes that can help us improve.

When you get increasingly specific with what you want, it becomes easy to identify the next action steps.

Let's pick one of those to start, I said. Let's talk about processes to improve on. If this is what you want, who do you need to talk to? What questions do you need to ask? Where can you start?

I asked her those questions one at a time to give her space to let her thoughts organize themselves into cohesive ideas and to let her brain shift gears into problem-solving mode.

Asking people what do you want? is a gift for their thinking because it's an opportunity to engage their prefrontal cortex's higher-level thinking. It invites the brain to step into courage and innovation, to remember that we have agency and choice, and that we get to identify and name what we want. That is empowering.

At the end of the coaching session, my client shared that she felt completely different than how she felt at the beginning of the conversation. She felt clear, calm, and ready.

Imagine if you felt that way navigating a complicated situation – clear and confident about your next steps. Using this question can help, so let's bring this to you.

If you are someone who likes to put ideas into action, here's how you can use this question in different ways with the various groups of people you interact with.

First, if you want to build your leadership coaching skills, you can ask this question any time when coaching others, as a stand alone or in the middle of a conversation. It works especially well when talking about career development, guiding someone through a challenge, or when you hear that someone's mind is full of thoughts and feelings.

When you have the time and space for them to reflect, ask, what do you want?

You can even add a phrase on at the end for more specificity. For example:

What do you want for your career?

What do you want for an outcome?

What do you want more of in your life?

Usually people can shift perspective to start talking in a future-focused way, although sometimes the brain gets stuck in what's familiar and known, and continues identifying what we don't want.

Here's what that sounds like. For example, if a client is talking about feeling overwhelmed, and I ask what do you want? they sometimes start speaking with lots of nots. They say, I do not want to feel burnt out. I do not want to second guess myself. I do not want to feel like an impostor.

Not language is not helpful because it misses the chance to focus on what we truly want.

So if you ask the question, what do you want? and get a lot of not answers, try again. Say, OK, if those are things you do not want, what do you want? Keep holding the space and encouraging their brains to shift into courage, innovation, and possibility.

In addition to using this question at work, you can use this question with those you share your life with. If you want to deepen your relationship, show that you care, or get excited about joint goals, ask them, what do you want? and actively listen to the answer.

Sharing our wants with others helps us feel appreciated and strengthens trust and connection.

Lastly, if you are someone who likes to journal and ponder your life's journey, try using this question to coach yourself.

Here's one way. Out loud, ask yourself, what do I want? Then answer yourself, again, out loud, saying I want....and then say one thing you want. For example, What do I want? I want to have a brainstorming session with a colleague. Then ask again, what do I want? and again, answer out loud. What do I want? I want to do something fun this weekend. Get the idea? If you ask and answer this question 10-15 times in a row, you'll be amazed at what surfaces.

Focusing our wants directs our energy and thoughts to those things. And when we put energy and thinking toward what we do want, our brain can start seeing a path to making those things happen. Our thoughts create our reality. Thinking about what we want makes it easier to create the life and outcomes that matter to us.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you found today's episode interesting and want to talk about what you want, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum or schedule a complimentary consult through my website: debelbaum.com. I look forward to it. 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!