



Episode 76: The Question to Ask When You Don't Know What to Do

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. Here are the starting questions today: What tools do you lean into when you feel stuck or don't know what to do? What do you say to yourself, or ask yourself?

Life sends challenges our way every day, both big and small. We move toward the unknown, and sometimes we feel like we've got it, and sometimes, we feel like we don't know what to do in the moment or with a situation that has arisen.

Coaching is fundamentally about empowering people, helping them connect to and operate from their essence and purpose. Being a human being means creating our life one day at a time, celebrating the ups and navigating the downs, and trying to come back to our center more quickly. And when we navigate the challenges, we want to remember that we have resources, and can use the resources we have.

Each of us gets to create our toolkit for coping for when things get hard. We each get to identify and list the things we know help us – they could be close friends or family members, nature, music, or exercise and movement.

As part of your toolkit for tackling challenges big and small, it's also helpful to have cognitive tools, meaning tools that can help your thinking and help shift your thinking from constricted to flowing, from unproductive to productive.

Questions are tools to help focus and refocus our thoughts. Because our thoughts are powerful! Our thoughts create our reality, and if you want a reality of resilience and making decisions with more peace of mind, you need to start with your thoughts.

Today's topic is a powerful question that is a thought helper. It's an immediate way to shift negative thinking into more positive thinking. It's a question that you can ask yourself, when you start to feel the physical discomfort of not knowing what to do. It works for immediate problems, as well as longer-term situations that you've been grappling with for a while.

It's also a coaching question that you can and should add to your toolkit of questions that you use to coach those around you. When you want to help other people build their resilience and problem-solving capacity, it's the perfect question to ask and let them answer.

Today's question reminds us that we have agency. It reminds us that we're not completely at the mercy of others or an external situation. It reminds us that we have strengths and ideas, and that we can bring those back to the forefront.

Here is today's question: "What three choices do you have?"

Or, if you're asking yourself, "What three choices do I have?"

It's a question that can stop the obsessing and ruminating about the past or the future. It's a question that brings you back to the here and now, and invites you to be present and take a next step from your values and personal power.

Let me share two examples of how this question has been helpful in coaching conversations.

A client shared that she had a decision to make about letting someone go on her team. This person had not been meeting expectations for a while, and yet, had been with the organization for a long time. My client was going around in circles in her thinking.

I asked, "What are three choices you have right now around this?"

When people allow their brain to receive and process that question, I often see their body position shift, and the imaginary wheels in their brain start to churn.

She thought, and answered: "One, I could reach out to a recruiter for a conversation to find a new person. Two, I could have an honest conversation with this person to see if they even want to stay. Three, I could write out a plan for the next 6 months to see how we could adjust for this person leaving."

That question brought more clarity to the situation, and it also brought the focus back to my client and what was in her control.

Too often, we get pulled by things not in our control. I hear this when my clients say things like, "They just need to do x, y, and z." Giving too much energy to things out of our control drains us.

When we feel stuck or adrift, or feel our energy too tied up in others, we need to come back to ourselves.

We can ask ourselves, "What are 3 choices I have, with this person, or in this situation?"

Here's another example from a coaching conversation.

A client was telling me that she wanted to give feedback to a direct report, although she was worried because her direct report had not taken feedback well in the past. Plus, it was secondhand information, and that felt awkward for my client to share.

She didn't know what to do, and she asked me, "What do I do?"

When clients ask me what to do, it often signals that they've forgotten their personal agency and need a reminder that they can figure things out.

So I asked, "What are 3 choices you have?"

The reason I use the number 3 is that the specificity helps the brain. Simply asking, "What choices do you have?" can still feel vague and hard to wrap one's thinking around. Making the question specific with a number – I personally like the number 3 – gives the brain a specific task. This shifts your brain from chaos into more effective thinking. Your brain now has a job to do. It needs to sort through all of the possible things you could do, to come up with a list of potential actions.

I asked the client, "What are 3 choices you have?"

She thought and answered: “One, I could have an initial conversation letting the person know I plan to gather feedback. Two, I could meet with the person and simply ask them how they think the interaction went. Three, I could not say anything right now and instead having some teaching and coaching conversations with the feedback in mind.”

My clients are always able to generate choices. When they do, they can then evaluate the choices and sort through them based on their goal, their timeline, and their personal values. This allows them to lead, make decisions, and communicate from their inner leader. This is living more intentionally.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this episode, the question, “What are 3 choices you have?” Works for you to ask yourself. It also works for you to ask other people when you want to coach them. Remember, coaching others means bringing a 100% curious mindset. When you coach others, your job is to ask a powerful question and then hold the space with curiosity for the other person to think, answer, and choose.

Having clear thinking is a gift. When you ask others, “What are 3 choices you have?” you’re giving them the gift of reconnecting to their strengths, their knowledge, and their capability.

When you coach yourself with the question, “What are 3 choices I have?” you’re empowering yourself. You’re returning to your inner leader and your effective thinking. And when you think effectively, you can then make decisions with more confidence and ease, you can communicate more clearly, and you can live and work with more purpose.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you would like a coaching conversation to problem solve a challenge that’s top of mind right now, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com to schedule a consult. 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!