

Quiz: Powerful Questions

Page 1 of 4

"In coaching, powerful questions knock people off their automatic pilot program and make them fly the airplane".

-- Karen Kimsey-House, Henry Kimsey-House, Phillip Sandahl, in [Co-Active Coaching: Changing Business, Transforming Lives](#) (this is the recent, revised edition of the classic Co-Active coaching text).

I was introduced to the importance of [Curiosity](#) in coaching while going through [Co-Active Coach training](#). One way to practice curiosity is to ask "powerful questions" - in Co-Active coaching this term denotes open questions asked to move a person or group toward something of importance to them. Powerful questions operate by engaging the answerer's own curiosity to surface important facts, memories, assumptions, feelings and ideas. It is taught together with the [Three Levels of Listening](#), because good listening skills enhance the ability to pose and use powerful questions.

What do you know about asking questions that energise people to move forward in constructive and innovative ways? Turn the page for my four-question quiz – I hope it teaches (or reminds) you of at least one practice for your people-skills toolkit!

If you would like some further practice, I would be happy to run a Getting Unstuck workshop for your group in Europe. In America, my colleague Carleton Nettleton runs similar workshops.



Instigator, team whisperer, life coach, holding space for change

+49 151 5066 0940

deb@deborahpreuss.com

abiggergame.today

ONE: What makes a question "powerful"?

- A) It conveys the questioner's strong desire for change.
- B) It sets a clear direction for answerers to follow.
- C) It evokes the answerer's wisdom.
- D) It is specific to the answerer's context.
- E) It is easily answered.
- F) It has never been asked before.

My answer is C.

While a desire for change helps frame questions, and context sensitivity is very important, it is *the effect in the answerer* that defines a powerful question. A powerful question cuts through old habits, defenses and assumptions, and invites the answerer to apply their wisdom in a fresh way. This may or may not make it easy to answer. And the same question in different contexts may lead to a very different outcome, so don't hesitate to re-use a question, when appropriate!

A warning: be careful to look for and remove your own assumptions embedded in the question. If your question embeds hidden assumptions or suggestions, people (ever eager to meet expectations!) may look for *your* answers rather than coming up with their own! This suggests that a little thinking might be in order, if you have the opportunity to prepare (often you don't, you just have to wing it, keep practising!)

TWO: Which of these is (or are) evidence that question has been "powerful"?

- A) The energy in the room shifts.
- B) There is a pause, while a deep breath is taken.
- C) Body language indicates curiosity.
- D) One or more of the above may happen.
- E) It is impossible to tell right away.
- F) All of the above.

My answer is D. And of course, an infinite number of other signals

While there are often long-term effects from a powerful question, its effect is almost always palpable within seconds, as the answerer wakes up, gets curious and begins to think differently. Those of us who would use powerful questions must also develop deep listening skills: using eyes and ears and gut-feel. Listening helps *before*, when framing a question, and *after*, to detect how the question has landed. And if a question does fall flat, be transparent: just acknowledge it and try again. When you are free to fail, so is your coachee... and this is just what we want to model. We "eat our own dogfood" when we fail without shame, learn from it and improve!



Instigator, team whisperer, life coach, holding space for change

+49 151 5066 0940

deb@deborahpreuss.com

abiggergame.today

THREE: Which of these are sure to weaken the effect of a question?

- A) Feeling nervous and stumbling when posing the question.
- B) Already knowing the answer you want the answerers to discover.
- C) Presenting some possible answers, to get the ball rolling.
- D) Rephrasing it, to be sure it was understood.
- E) Allowing an awkward silence to lengthen after asking it.
- F) None of the above.

My answer: B, C and D are sure to weaken a question.

The problem illustrated here is that of being too "helpful," which may be more of an issue in some cultures than others (said the Canadian :-). While it may seem kind to soothe the answerer's anxiety by "helping" them with hints, if you really want powerful, helpful answers you must let kindness sit by the side, as it is this anxiety that irritates the oyster and seeds the pearl, to coin a metaphor.

The answer to this natural temptation to "help" is to learn to WAIT. Practise waiting, even if you think the question needs a little rephrasing (oh, this is a hard one for me!) Wait longer than you think you should. If you feel pressured to talk, count to 20 (try this, it's harder than it sounds). If you have the courage, count to 20 again! When it starts to get awkward, Diana Larsen sometimes says to a group "I bet I can wait longer than you can!" and continues to wait! With an individual it is easier to watch for non-verbal clues and be sensitive to their own timing. Remember that, with both groups and individuals, the reply may come non-verbally. I once had a group reveal deep distress non-verbally, at which point the right question was: What is going on here now? And suddenly we moved off a new and more deeply relevant direction.

Here's something else to practice: while you wait, remain curious - *let go* of the outcome. With an open question, you cannot know in advance where they will go with their answers, and if you try to control or direct (i.e. suggesting there is a "correct answer") people may sit back and wait for you to deliver your wisdom, short-circuiting the collaboration and innovation you seek.

Items A and E, while awkward, may well become invisible once the answerer is engaged and thinking. A powerful question shifts the answerer's focus inward, and the asker's discomfort or imperfection quickly becomes irrelevant.

FOUR: Which of the following statements about "Why...?" questions is/are FALSE?

- A) Research has found "Why" questions, in general, to be more powerful than "what," "when" and "which" questions.
- B) You can pose a "why" question without using "why".
- C) A "Why" question is the fastest way to the real root of any issue.
- D) A "why" question may need to be repeated to dig down.
- E) A "why" question can put answerers on the defensive.
- F) It doesn't matter who asks it - a solid "why" question always works.

My answer is: C and F.


Deborah Preuss

Instigator, team whisperer, life coach, holding space for change

+49 151 5066 0940

deb@deborahpreuss.com

abiggergame.today

A "why" question may need to be repeated in different ways to get past the initial excuses, assumptions or "pat" answers - hence Lean Manufacturing's "5 whys" exercise. But be careful: a "Why" question can backfire powerfully, too, making "Why" a great way to NOT get to the root cause. If people feel blamed, their energy will go towards hiding or justification, not memory and creative thinking. For best results, use "why" questions in situations where mutual trust and respect exist. And beware: situations of inequality, despite respect, may in fact reduce trust: Questioning while towering over a seated person can send an unintentional message of inequality and pressure! And any question could land quite differently if asked by a peer or by the CEO. These effects can be reduced by paying attention to body language (again, a form of listening), or by rephrasing "why" in a less triggering way: "What made you choose that?" or "What is it that causes us to behave like this?". These remain effectively "why" questions: digging for root causes while feeling less blaming.

You can read a little about the research that revealed the differences between different sorts of questions in [The Art of Powerful Questions](#), a pdf download on the World Cafe website. How does this relate to World Cafe? I have come to realise that many of our facilitation practices, including World Cafe, are simply ways to set up a context in which we can use powerful questions to help people! A powerful question is a great way to "get the right people in the room", as when we make an invitation to an Open Space event.

Do you wish you had a coach to ask you powerful questions when you get stuck?

(Question: What's keeping you from getting a coach? :-)

Here is my offer to you: The next best thing might be my [Powerful Question cards](#), a free pdf download in English, German and Dutch. (Further translations are welcome).

Links

[Curiosity](#) as a coaching context, from The Coaches Institute
<http://www.thecoaches.com/resources/multimedia/Co-Active-Contexts-Curiosity.html>

[Co-Active Coaching: Changing Business, Transforming Lives](#), Karen Kimsey-House, Henry Kimsey-House, Phillip Sandahl. (this is the recent, revised edition of the classic Co-Active coaching text).
<http://www.amazon.com/Co-Active-Coaching-Changing-Business-Transforming/dp/1857885678/>

[Co-Active Coach training](#) from The Coaches Training Institute
<http://thecoaches.com/>

[Three Levels of Listening](#), on the Co-Active Coaching site
<http://www.thecoaches.com/resources/multimedia/Co-Active-Contexts-Listening.html>

[The Art of Powerful Questions](#), a pdf download on the World Cafe website
<http://www.theworldcafe.com/pdfs/aopq.pdf>

[Powerful Question cards](#), a free pdf download in English, German and Dutch.
<http://deborahpreuss.com/PowerfulQuestionCards.zip>



Instigator, team whisperer, life coach, holding space for change

+49 151 5066 0940

deb@deborahpreuss.com

abiggergame.today