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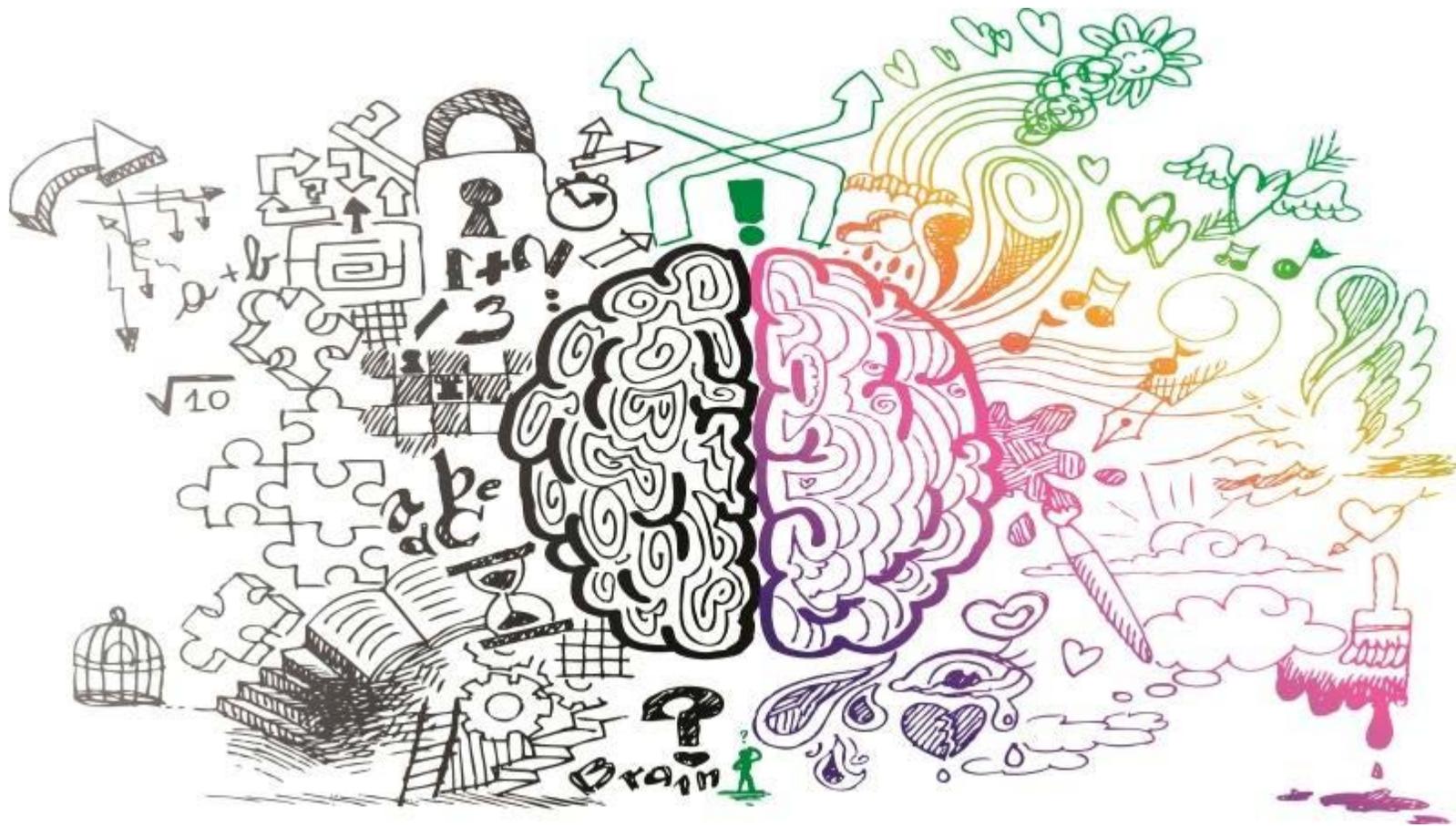
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Coaching with questions

Written by David Hosmer on 10 June 2015 in Feature
Feature

David Hosmer reveals the effectiveness of questions in coaching



Can managers learn to coach like coaches? How could stimulating questions invoke transformative change?

Manager as coach

Practising how to coach is a prime opportunity for managers to enhance their effectiveness. “Regular communication around development – having coaching conversations – is essential. In fact, according to recent research, the single most important managerial competency that separates highly effective managers from average ones is coaching.” Despite this, they struggle with changing how they coach.

Learning versus teaching is a principal point in coaching. In my experience, it is not easy for managers to coach with questions. The following is a typical exchange I have experienced as a facilitator of manager coach training.

Facilitator: *“Let’s do a few rounds of practising the coaching model, emphasising the use of questions, not giving solutions.”*

Following the skill practise we debrief:

Facilitator: *“How was the practise experience for you?”*

Participants: *“It was difficult.”*

Facilitator: *“What made it so?”*

Participant A: *“Asking questions. I caught myself giving advice and then stopped. It was hard.”*

Facilitator: *“So, asking and refraining from giving advice was difficult for you?”*

Participant A: *“Yes, I am used to telling my employee how she could do things better.”*

Facilitator: *“What were others’ experiences?”*

Participant B: *“I agree. It’s hard to ask questions when you have so much experience and know the answers. Sometimes, I gave him advice because I didn’t want to see him struggle.”*

Participant C: *“Why should I ask questions when I can just give the answer? It will save time.”*

Despite managers’ assertion that they appreciate the value of coaching with questions, it is challenging for them to refrain from telling. David Rock is co-founder of the NeuroLeadership Institute and renowned in the field of human performance coaching. His view is optimistic. “This reminds me of the big insights that leaders need to have when I lead programmes to help them be more effective coaches. They need to learn to not give advice, or if they give it, they need to be very unattached to their ideas and present them as options instead of dictats. Secondly, they need to learn to focus more on solutions. When I teach leaders these ideas, it’s clear that their old patterns are hard wired – it’s really hard for them to change. So it’s been useful to discuss this idea of ‘free won’t’ – the concept of noticing something they are about to do, and catching themselves before they do it. In time they do the old habit less and less. It’s inspiring to hear that these activities change the actual functioning of their brains.”

How neuroscience correlates

Neuroscience – the study of nervous system and how it functions – offers insight for understanding why effective questions can have dramatic effects. Neuroplasticity, right and left hemispheres, and metacognition have particular relevance to this understanding.

It is natural for humans to resist being told what to do. Change agents know the angst of employees who feel organisational change is thrust upon them. The same holds true in coaching. Rock explains: “But the human brain can behave like a two-year-old: Tell it what to do and it automatically pushes back. Partly this phenomenon is a function of homeostasis (the natural movement of any organism toward equilibrium and away from change), but it also reflects the fact that brains are pattern-making organs with an innate desire to create novel connections. When people solve a problem themselves, the brain releases a rush of neurotransmitters like adrenaline. This phenomenon provides a scientific basis for some of the practices of leadership coaching. Rather than lecturing and providing solutions, effective coaches ask pertinent questions and support their clients in working out solutions on their own.” By engaging employees in problem-solving, both one-on-one and in teams, managers foster change individually and organisationally.

Questioning, rather than telling, shifts the focus from the coach to the coachee as it should be, i.e., ‘See how smart I am.’ to ‘Let’s explore the issue at hand by engaging your intelligence’. Giving solutions also perpetuates dependency on the coach, rather than self-reliance. Employees understand their unique challenges intimately. The more managers can engage their employees in exploring answers through questions, the more likely employees will develop confidence in their ability to solve problems in the future. Consider also that it is unlikely someone will resist their own solutions and what this means for breakthrough change.

Neuroplasticity is the brain’s ability to form new neural connections from new experiences throughout life. The good news for coaching is “You can reformat any brain at any time and it’s never too late.” This suggests promising implications for coachees and coaches who might wonder if old habits can be unlearned. On the other hand, neuroplasticity can forge less desirable pathways. In a 2014 article, *Google makes us all dumber: The neuroscience of search engines*, Leslie warns that by seeking quick answers via search engines our minds can get lazy.

What happens in the brain when a coachee experiences a new insight? In effect, neuroplasticity is possible through novelty, which releases a chemical in the brain and forms new neural pathways. “Co-Active Coaches bring this by challenging their clients to stretch out of their comfort zones and take risks, encouraging their clients to make bold leaps, not just do what they are already doing a little bit better. They also ask expansive, powerful questions which often lead the client to an “Aha” moment of clarity, a feeling of something new being opened before them.” Consequently, this experience can have significance in facilitating change.

A coachee can often gain new perspectives through **metacognition** – stepping back and thinking about her thinking. Thoughtful questions coupled with mental and physical space allowing for metacognitive reflection can be an effective combination.

Think-aloud is a metacognitive technique initially used with students to enhance reading comprehension and learning. It enables them to learn problem-solving by verbalising their thought process as they approach a problem/task. I have used a modified think-aloud in coaching. As a case-in-point, an employee entered my office asking for advice. I uttered merely two sentences, “Come on in. What’s on your mind?” After 20 minutes, she left happy with the ideas she arrived with and implemented them. “Because there is no judgment or evaluation in Co-Active Coaching, the client remains open to input and is much more able to access their own unique creativity.” Consider a 90/10 approach, in which the coach speaks 10 per cent of the time and the coachee provides the majority of input. A quote by an unknown source is a helpful reminder: “A wise man [coach] once said nothing.”

Types of questions

Let’s not confuse coaching questions with the Socratic Method. This approach is intended to expose contradictions in a learner’s argument and lead to the questioner’s preferred answer. It is no surprise that this interrogative approach is well suited for lawyers. Instead, great questions can provoke new paths that surface latent solutions, creativity and insights. Socrates we are not.

Similarly, leading questions suggest the coachee should answer in a particular way. ‘Don’t you think this is a good idea?’ versus ‘What ideas do you have?’ will yield different impact.

Questions are the vertebrae of effectual coaching linking to the intricacies of the brain. The type of questions and the intent do matter. Theoretically, effective questions promote change by drawing on the brain’s right hemisphere. Melanie Hendrix elucidates the interrelationship between the right and left brain hemispheres: “The left brain’s offerings of logic, structure, facts, analysis and details are essential, but they do not lead beyond where the person has already been. Left brain reliance upon rules, discipline, predictability and order remain with familiar structures and routines. Given a question, the left brain seeks a correct answer from what is already known, mechanically, like a computer. Right brain functions allow exploration of the novel or unknown.” We might conclude that if you want facts and data, ask the left brain close-ended questions. If you want problem-solving and creative ideas, ask the right brain open-ended questions. There are times closed ended questions do have a use in coaching. For example: “Would you like to select an idea now or think of more?” Sometimes telling is appropriate, such as at the end of a session. “Please review what you have agreed to do over the next week.” A practised coach knows the judicious use of type and intention.

A fully referenced version of this article is available on request

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