

# Workplace Coaching Guide and Sample Questions



Sometimes the term “coaching” is used as a more general term referring to conversations giving performance feedback (often in response to poor performance.) The definition below describes a coaching approach to management:

*“A style of management primarily characterized by asking employees questions in order to help them fulfill their immediate responsibilities more effectively and advance their development as professionals over time.”*

- Harvard Business Review Guide to Coaching Employees

A coaching style relies on frequent informal coaching conversations to build on what’s going well and help employees grow needed skills. Most of this coaching happens “in the moment” and is not presented in formal coaching sessions.

*“A coaching view affirms that by inspiring discovery, reflection, and persistence in another person, that person becomes capable of significantly greater achievement, deeper and broader thinking, and more consistent expression of their values over time.”*

- Center for Creative Leadership





## Coaching - it's all about questions!

Instead of giving the employee the solution to a problem (more of a “command and control” style), with a coaching style, you assume the employee has the wisdom within to come to answers on their own. Sometimes you may know a possible answer, but sometimes, as is the case with employees who handle very specific technical information, you may not. With a coaching approach you ask instead of advise as much as possible. Many times when you provide an answer, you limit the possible outcomes and miss growth opportunities.

### Here are tips for using coaching questions:

*Use mainly open-ended questions (cannot be answered with “yes” or “no”).* This type of question cannot be easily answered. There is no “right” or “wrong” answer. Open-ended questions cause an employee to think critically about the answer and new possibilities.

*Keep questions broad and expansive (not “problem solving”).* Ask general questions. The more specific the question is, the more it may appear you are leading the employee toward a particular outcome.

For example: “What do you hope to accomplish with this presentation?” and then if the response is “Demonstrate that our product is the best choice for the client.” Respond with “What might you change in the presentation to better reach your goal?” or “On a scale of 1 to 10, how well do you think the presentation does that? How can you make it a 10?” This is instead of a narrower question like “What slides could you delete to make the presentation more effective?” or “Have you thought about [manager idea for improvement]?” When employees participate in finding the solution, they are much more likely to learn from the situation and take ownership of the results.

*In general, avoid questions that start with “Why.”* Questions that begin with “Why” can often sound accusatory and make an employee feel defensive.

For example: “Tell me about your thought process” instead of “Why did/didn’t you do [something?]” The first sentence assumes a positive intent and comes across as curious and non-judgmental. The employee is more likely to feel comfortable expressing what happened than with the second sentence which can imply that the decision they made was not correct and put the employee on the defensive.





*Keep the mindset that the employee has the solution, and the manager's role is to facilitate their finding the wisdom within.* Resist the urge to tell the employee how to do something. Allow the employee to think through things on their own. Ask thought provoking questions before you provide advice. Allowing the employee to come to their own solution will facilitate their development, allow them to learn more than if you tell them what to do, create employee “buy in” to the solution, and allow you to remain open to other possible ways of doing things.

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*Assume a positive intent.* Appear curious, not critical. Even in the face of what appears to be a negative situation, allow yourself to remain open to other perspectives. You may learn there was a perfectly logical reason for the employee to do what they did. It may be that something that first appears negative on the surface actually has a more neutral or positive outcome. If the situation didn't work out well, but there was a logical and positive reason behind it, focus on the learning in the situation.

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*Listen more than you talk, allow the employee to really feel “heard.”* This is a strategy that builds trust with employees. You are also allowing the employee to find the solution instead of giving it to them.

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*Don't say what you would have done differently.* A coaching mindset recognizes that there are many ways to get a job done and many different work styles that can all be effective. Your goal is not to create another version of you. Focusing too much on your own personal work style can be limiting.

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*Don't interrupt, be distracted or focus on what you will say next.* Being fully present with the employee will show that you care about the employee and help establish trust.

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Using a coaching style can work well when you want to focus on short- and long-term employee development or performance improvement. It's not an end-all-be-all solution and there will be times that you need to use a different approach. For example, misconduct is typically better addressed with more formal disciplinary processes. In some situations it is better to provide clear and actionable praise and corrective feedback. There are also times when a manager needs to use a more directive style of management. Clear direction can be required, for example, when an organization is changing course and the leader needs to motivate employees around the new vision, where rapid results are required, or in times of crisis or extreme change.

## Sample Coaching Questions

- » Tell me more about that. (When the person hasn't provided details or you don't thoroughly understand the situation.)
- » Help me to understand... (Provides clarity on something; Puts the responsibility on the manager for not having understood.)
- » Tell me more about why you feel this way. (You can reflect "You said you don't think that you are as challenged as you would like to be. Tell me more about why you feel this way.")
- » What's holding you back?
- » What is happening right now around [this issue]?
- » What have you done so far?
- » What effect did it have?
- » What is your goal/desired outcome in this situation?
- » How would achieving this goal matter to the organization? (tests whether the goal is the best one to focus on in light of strategic goals.)
- » What do you propose?
- » What is your plan?
- » What are some different ways that you might approach this situation?
- » What are some ways that you could make [stated desired result] happen?
- » What could be your next step?
- » What options do you have?
- » What would happen if you do nothing? (Helps solve the problem by "not solving" it.)
- » What has worked well in similar situations in the past? or How have you solved a similar problem in the past? (Works well if person is stuck on how to reach a goal.)
- » What are the costs and benefits (or pros and cons) of each approach?
- » What approach seems most effective to you in reaching your goal?
- » What else do you need to consider?
- » What is the goal of the meeting? How can you ensure that you accomplish it?
- » What impact do you think this presentation will have? What changes might you make for it to have more impact?



- » What is your desired message? How effective do you think this [news story, grant proposal, presentation, etc.] is at communicating it?
- » What is the worst that could happen? (When someone is resistant to a particular action, this gets them to realize that the worst that could happen is not actually that bad.)
- » What can you control in this situation? (useful where an employee is talking about something or someone they disagree with; helps them to focus on how they can change their approach.)
- » How can you take responsibility for your role in this situation? (Useful when employee pointing blame at others and not owning their role.)
- » What evidence do you have to support that? (Can be useful if the employee is expressing a limiting negative belief or making an assumption that something will fail. The questions helps point out contrary and more positive points of view. For example, use in response to things like: This project will never work. No one in the accounting department respects my opinion.)
- » What do you know for sure? (Similar to the question above, encourages employee to drop a subjective interpretation and take a more objective look at a situation.)
- » What's another way that you could look at that?
- » What might another interpretation of that situation be?
- » What do you think is really causing this situation?
- » What will an indicator of success be?
- » What will a successful final outcome look like?
- » How will you measure success?
- » Envision that you are finished with this. Describe the final product. What steps do you need to take to get there?
- » How will you know if you've succeeded on [this project]?
- » What do you need to do to achieve your goal?
- » What will it take for you to be successful on [this project]?
- » Whose input is necessary to ensure the project is successful?
- » Who are the stakeholders for this project?
- » Who could negatively impact this project? How?
- » Who could positively impact this project? How?
- » If you will finish the project on time, what tasks do you need to concentrate on in the short term?

- » If you need to complete this project by January 10th, what steps need to be finished immediately to ensure that happens? (Also, working backwards and breaking a large goal into smaller parts by asking questions about what needs to be accomplished and by when. Often employees need help breaking down large projects into manageable parts. Ensure that the action items and dates they are committing to are attainable/realistic.)
- » How attainable is that goal?
- » What actions do you need to take to get to your goal?
- » What specific steps do you need to take to reach your goal?
- » What might get in the way of your completing these steps?
- » What can you do to ensure success? How will you do that?
- » When will you do that?
- » When should I follow up with you on this?
- » Who needs to know about this and how will you inform them?
- » What do you need from me right now?
- » What would you do if you knew that you couldn't fail?
- » What areas do you want to strengthen, improve or develop?
- » How will you benefit from developing this skill?
- » What resources are available to you?
- » If you started this project today, knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?
- » What can you learn from this situation? or How can you view this as a learning experience?
- » How can you double the number of [people impacted by our services, clients, audience that sees your message, etc.]?
- » How could you turn this around in time?
- » What can you delegate to others?
- » What is working well right now?
- » On a scale from one to ten, what is the likelihood of your plan succeeding? How would you rate your presentation (or project, etc.)? What would it take to make it a ten?

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