

Our Twelve Favorite Questions



Coaches ask a lot of questions (and of course, much more than asking questions). Read on to discover those Tandem coaches favor most and why.



Transformational Questions are an integral part of any coaching conversation. They evoke new awareness, help the client think beyond their current boundaries, and provide new perspectives. We are well aware that there are no prescribed "powerful" questions. Every question derives its power from the context it is asked in. However some questions are more universal than others in helping move the client forward - especially when asked organically in different forms. In this brochure we've collected twelve of our favorites.

Alex Kudinov, MCC: Clients often communicate their desires and what they believe will assist them. Yet, as you collaborate and listen to the individual as a whole, you may detect uncertainty and contradictions. It's possible to identify multiple desires and needs that the client is articulating. While they may seek a better-paying job or business opportunities, their true need might be financial stability. This stability would enable them to worry less about basic necessities and concentrate more on what truly matters to them—family, friends, hobbies, or anything else. This question underscores the dual nature of coaching. While the client explores what is known on the surface, the coach aids them in delving into the unknown.

The power of this question lies in its ability to penetrate beyond the surface, beyond what is immediately on the client's mind. It does not dismiss or ignore these surface-level needs and wants but rather probes deeper, beneath them. In the appropriate context, this question can help the client recognize their deep, unspoken, and previously unrecognized wishes and desires.

1

What do you really want?

Cherie Silas, MCC: Clients often discuss their desires in terms of what would be acceptable to others or what would make others happy. This question prompts them to remove all external considerations and reflect on their true desires, even if these desires are not popular. It allows the client to adopt a new perspective and give themselves permission to acknowledge desires and needs that are worthy of fulfillment. Moreover, it can empower them to speak their truth and admit to themselves what they have been afraid to express aloud due to concerns about others' opinions. This can lead to a lasting change in the client's mindset.

Cherie Silas, MCC: This question helps the client move beyond thinking about the details of the problem and focus on the impact of the problem. It also allows the client to focus on finding the best solutions for the problem by looking deeper than the details that contain information they already know - like what happened, who did what, etc. Asking what is challenging for them causes the client to think beyond the details and look at the real problem that needs to be solved. By identifying the challenge they are experiencing in the situation, they can then identify what they really want to happen in the future. And, the solution will span wider than the details of this problem.

The details of this particular problem are isolated to this specific situation. Discovering why the details are bothering the client tells them what values, wants, needs, and desires they need to serve in order to be satisfied beyond this problem. Knowing these things will help them plan for and solve a wide range of problems in the future.

What is challenging about this for you?

2

Alex Kudinov, MCC: While it's important to concentrate on the challenge, the most effective and perhaps subtler aspect of this question is the inclusion of "for you." This phrase personalizes the question. Without it, you might receive a generic answer about issues others face. The coach may then need to ask if such a generalized focus is beneficial for the client and if a more personal reflection is necessary. When your focus is on coaching the individual in front of you, rather than their problems, it's crucial to add "for you" –possibly even emphasizing it—to foster deeper introspection and greater impact.

Alex Kudinov, MCC: “And what else?” is the quintessential question for delving deeper, akin to a “slay-the-dragon” approach. When clients initially respond to a question, they often immediately relay what they already know about their situation or themselves, essentially providing a data dump. While this might be more informative for you as the coach [assuming you find the data useful], it may not be as beneficial for the client. Coaching aims to reveal the unknown. By asking this question, you can help the client exhaust their known thoughts and start considering unexplored aspects. Repeating variations of this question multiple times in succession can amplify its impact. It’s important to use the client’s own language and acknowledge their responses to ensure they feel understood.

This question not only encourages deeper reflection but also facilitates new insights by prompting the client to think about things they haven’t yet considered or articulated. It serves as an excellent moment for coaches to pause, allowing the session and the client to slow down, encouraging deeper thinking and learning. Additionally, it offers you, the coach, a chance to listen more intently.

3

And what else?

Cherie Silas, MCC: Bear in mind that posing a bare “What else?” question can come across as somewhat abrupt to the client. Instead, you should aim to integrate the question seamlessly into the conversation, tailoring it to what the client is currently discussing. For instance, you might ask, “What else is important to you?” or “What else can you learn from this?” or even “What else do you want?” The essence is to craft questions that resonate with what the client is expressing and encourage them to extend their thought process beyond their current considerations, thereby broadening their perspective. This approach also offers a prime opportunity to mirror the client’s language, facilitating cognitive ease and enhancing rapport.

Cherie Silas, MCC: It's common for individuals to dwell on what they don't want or dislike rather than on their preferences and desires. Consequently, clients frequently bring scenarios into coaching sessions that highlight all the things they believe they did wrong. The issue here is that focusing on past actions doesn't alter that past. However, redirecting their attention from unchangeable aspects of the past to aspects they can influence can be significantly beneficial. This shift facilitates a transition from dwelling on and regretting past actions to envisioning the possibility of a do-over. By posing this question, clients are encouraged to move beyond their current focus on unchangeable facts. Asking clients to consider how they wish situations had unfolded provides them with the insight necessary to progress. Once they can envisage how they might have handled a situation differently, achieving a desired outcome becomes a straightforward step towards discussing how they intend to act in future similar circumstances. This not only aids in shifting focus from past regrets to future possibilities but also empowers clients with a proactive mindset for handling similar situations.

**How would you
like to have
handled it?**

4

Alex Kudinov, MCC: Effective coaching goes beyond just the questions that lead to new insights; it's also about the nuances of how those questions are framed. Often, the focus is on exploring different ways a client could have handled a situation. However, I frequently use this approach when clients are focused on critiquing others' actions and behaviors. We can't coach people who aren't our clients, so the best way to support our clients is by encouraging them to reflect on their own behaviors, skills, expertise, and resources. This reflection can help them consider alternative ways to deal with situations that align with their own perspectives, desires, values, and beliefs.

Alex Kudinov, MCC: Many of my clients have reached their current positions thanks to their excellent problem-solving abilities. They excel at finding solutions—sometimes the right ones, and occasionally the wrong ones. As a coach, it's disheartening to see clients spend valuable coaching time on solutions that don't align with their goals, especially when they believe those solutions are feasible. This question encourages clients to clearly define their goals and examine how the solutions they're considering will help them achieve their desired future state. It's crucial not to let clients settle for an easy answer. Asking follow-up questions like "And what else?" can lead to a deeper understanding.

Furthermore, this question acts as another effective way to emphasize the importance of certain outcomes. By discussing what implementing a solution will accomplish, clients also come to understand how crucial this outcome is to them and how it ranks among their other priorities. Answering this question can motivate clients to pursue their goals with renewed vigor or to realize that there might be other areas that are currently more important to them.

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What will having this give you?

Cherie Silas, MCC: Incorporating some level of sensory acuity can also be beneficial. By paying close attention to the client's choice of words, you can tailor this question to align with their preferred sensory modality. For instance, you might ask, "How will your world look different when you have achieved this?" to appeal to visual thinkers, or "How will you feel when you have this?" to connect with those who are more kinesthetically inclined. Alternatively, asking, "What will you be saying differently when you have accomplished this?" can resonate with auditory processors. This approach helps clients form a stronger, more personal connection with the outcomes they're aiming for.

Cherie Silas, MCC: This question is instrumental in helping the client identify the aspects of the problem that require exploration during the conversation, enabling them to find the answers needed to progress. It not only provides a high-level framework for the dialogue but also clarifies for the client what they need to understand about the problem. Depending on the client's stated goals, this question may take various forms, such as "What are the parts of this you are unsure about?" "What do you need to resolve to feel at peace with your decision?" or "How can we break this topic into manageable chunks?"

The question encourages the client to mentally deconstruct the problem, which can assist them in prioritizing the aspects they need to discuss. Following this breakdown, a logical next step is to ask them which part they wish to address first. Many clients hesitate to approach problems that appear overwhelming. Guiding them to dissect these challenges into smaller, more manageable pieces can unlock their potential to move toward the solutions they seek.

**What do you need
to consider to get
there?**

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Alex Kudinov, MCC: Great coaches place more trust in the process than in themselves. Trusting the process involves meticulous planning of each step. The "consideration question" is one of the tools used to establish a framework that proves useful later in the session. The aspects the client believes need consideration act as stepping stones, guiding them through the process while allowing the coach to maintain an open, flexible, and confident approach. Skipping this question may result in both the coach and the client feeling uncertain about the session's direction, unsure of what to focus on next, struggling with designing actions, or even monitoring progress.

Alex Kudinov, MCC: We often face a dilemma: we might perceive connections where none exist. The world is more random than our rational, explanation-seeking brains are prepared to acknowledge. We may also be oblivious to situations that are interconnected in intricate and sometimes complex ways. Encouraging your client to consider whether there are connections between the elements they're evaluating is an effective way to broaden their perspective. This approach helps them step back, see beyond the immediate details, and adopt a more comprehensive view of their situation. Such a perspective shift can lead to new insights and awareness.

It's important to note that this involves a closed question, starting with "Is." This phrasing respects your partnership with the client without pressuring them to concede the existence of a connection, thereby allowing them the freedom to steer the conversation. If the client recognizes a connection, you and your client can then proceed to explore it further.

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Is there a connection between those?

Cherie Silas, MCC: For many coaches, the real challenge lies in resisting the urge to mentally draw connections for their client and then convey those connections. Instead, when you catch yourself identifying potential links, use that moment as a cue to remind yourself that your client might discover these connections on their own. Let this realization prompt you to ask, "Is there a connection between these elements?" This approach doesn't mean the coach becomes disengaged from the client. Rather, avoiding judgments and refraining from drawing conclusions for the client is a hallmark of masterful coaching. It embodies a commitment to empowering clients to explore and understand their own experiences and perspectives.

Cherie Silas, MCC: The primary aim of coaching is to enable the client to gain new insights and awareness that aid in problem-solving, decision-making, and fostering a changed perspective on situations. This learning process is crucial for effective coaching outcomes. As a coach, you can assist the client in cementing these learnings by encouraging them to articulate their realizations. When clients verbalize what they're discovering, it enhances their awareness and helps them make connections that might otherwise remain unnoticed.

Pay attention to cues from your client, such as verbal expressions or statements indicating new realizations. At these moments, slow down. Instead of moving on to the next prepared question, delve into that realization with them. Additionally, you can often detect when your client is experiencing a new insight through their body language, eye movements, and facial expressions. Employing silence is a powerful tool that provides clients with the necessary space to process their thoughts. Subsequently, ask them to describe what they're thinking or learning. As they articulate their insights, they'll likely uncover even more depth to their understanding.

What are you realizing?

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Alex Kudinov, MCC: I've observed that many coaching sessions seem to merely skim the surface, with both coach and client quickly moving from one question to the next without pause. This constant rush mirrors the hectic pace of our lives, and this very inability to maintain focus on a single topic for an extended period may be at the root of the issues clients bring into coaching. By intentionally slowing down and encouraging clients to contemplate the new insights they are gaining, the coach plays a crucial role in helping them step out of this relentless cycle. This allows clients to consider their newfound understanding in a more meaningful way. Introducing this pause for reflection is a vital initial step in the learning loop, significantly enhancing the overall effectiveness of the coaching process.

Alex Kudinov, MCC: As your coaching mastery begins to show its effects, leading to new realizations for your client, it's crucial not to become complacent. Now is the time to encourage further exploration by asking how they plan to apply these new insights or learnings outside the coaching session. This inquiry aligns with the "Now What" component of the "What, So What, Now What" structure, known to those familiar with Liberating Structures. It's not only about digging deeper into the realization but also about linking these discoveries to the session's goals and desired outcomes. In the realm of masterful coaching, this question might not explicitly be about action and accountability but can naturally lead to discussions around co-designing actionable steps and establishing accountability mechanisms. Encourage the client to identify potential actions stemming from their new understanding, weigh the pros and cons, define what success looks like, and brainstorm accountability strategies. By integrating this question into your approach, you transition smoothly into planning actions and accountability, enhancing the session's effectiveness and ensuring the insights gained are translated into meaningful change.

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How does this realization help you?

Cherie Silas, MCC: When a client first shares a realization, they're often describing what's immediately come to their mind because it's the most accessible thought at the moment. Framing a question as a variant of the "what else" question can deepen their exploration, enabling them to delve beneath the surface to understand how they can utilize what they're learning in the present.

This approach is also valuable for action planning. By encouraging the client to articulate their realization, reflect on it, and consider how it applies to their situation, they can more easily identify ways to leverage this new awareness. This not only enriches the client's understanding but also paves the way for actionable steps toward achieving their desired goal.

Cherie Silas, MCC: This question emphasizes the importance of partnering with the client to let them determine the direction and focus of the session. It's a versatile tool that can be utilized in various stages of the coaching conversation. For instance, when a topic appears to be reaching its natural conclusion, this question encourages the client to reflect on what they alone know best—what would be most beneficial to focus on next. Similarly, this question seamlessly aligns with moments after reviewing progress or learning during the session. By checking in and asking the client about their progress or insights gained thus far, you can then hand back control to the client with this question, allowing them to indicate their preferred focus area moving forward.

It's crucial to remember that the client should always be in control of the conversation's focus and direction, as they are uniquely equipped to identify what the next constructive step for them will be. Whenever you reach a juncture in the conversation where the way forward is unclear or multiple paths seem possible, this question helps maintain alignment with the client's needs and goals, ensuring the coaching process remains client-centered and effective.

**Where do you
want to go
from here?**

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Alex Kudinov, MCC: Coaching is essentially a partnership between the coach and the client, with the client taking the lead on where to go, and the coach providing the structure and methods to make the collaboration more effective. This approach helps the coach to work with ease, making the session flow better. By focusing on the process rather than trying to control the direction, the coach can comfortably embrace uncertainty. Letting the client direct their own journey enhances the partnership. It builds trust and rapport, giving the client the freedom to explore and discover on their own terms.

Alex Kudinov, MCC: It's rare for a client to come into a session completely content with every aspect of their life. Many are seeking solutions to their problems, looking to make progress or bring about improvement either for themselves or for others. As coaches, our role is to assist them in taking that crucial first step. However, it's equally important to ensure that by the time our engagement concludes, clients are equipped to stand on their own, not reliant on our support between sessions. A key strategy in achieving this independence is helping clients identify the resources and support they need to implement the solutions they seek for the outcomes they desire.

Using broad, open-ended "what" questions can effectively empower clients to explore their options and make their own decisions. Keeping the question open-ended grants the client the autonomy to consider a wide range of choices. Narrowing the focus too much, such as by asking specifically "who" might assist them or what specific actions they need to undertake, can limit their thinking. Offering them a broad path encourages a wider exploration of possibilities, fostering their ability to achieve their goals independently.

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What might help you move forward?

Cherie Silas, MCC: This question can also act as a variation of the "what do you want/need" inquiry. Often, clients find themselves in a state of being stuck, caught in a spiral of uncertainty about how to progress. Their focus on the dilemma of being stuck can obscure their view of potential solutions. Dwelling on past knowledge, uncertainties, and attempted solutions only perpetuates this cycle. What they require is a shift in perspective towards the future, to envision what a solution might entail. By asking this straightforward question, you steer them towards thinking ahead once more. This can be a potent catalyst, propelling them towards innovative solutions and out of their current standstill.

Cherie Silas, MCC: This question encourages clients to delve deeper into the actions they plan to take following their session. Often, clients will devise a plan of action but may not think beyond their initial, optimistic “happy path” scenario. Your role is to help them prepare more comprehensively for success by extending their thinking. This inquiry prompts them to shift their focus from mere activities [outputs] to the desired achievements [outcomes]. Highlighting the importance of recognizing indicators of success or failure not only prepares them for the journey ahead but also equips them to pivot their strategy if they’re not seeing the anticipated results.

Moreover, a deeper exploration of their planned actions helps clients solidify their intentions, resulting in a stronger commitment to their plan. There’s a motivating factor in visualizing the success that could come from executing their plan effectively. By specifying the outcomes they’re aiming for, clients also lay the groundwork for developing alternative strategies, ensuring they’re better prepared should their initial route prove less successful than hoped.

How will you
know it is
working?

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Alex Kudinov, MCC: Thinking of this question, I’m reminded of the hypothesis-driven approach to experimentation. I often help clients to first articulate a hypothesis to test, action to be taken, the expected outcome, and crucially, the metrics for measurement—which are frequently neglected. Then, we work together to design quick and cheap experiments to test these hypotheses. This question focuses on the “How will you measure success?” of the hypothesis acting as a litmus test for the viability of the experiments they plan to conduct. It’s also an effective method for sifting through ideas that might initially seem promising but fall short under closer scrutiny. This approach not only sharpens the focus on actionable insights but also ensures that the experiments are grounded in objective criteria for success.

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The program encompasses a broad range of components, including coach training, mentor coaching, and coach supervision, among others. Each element of the program is tailored to ensure that participants gain a deep understanding of coaching principles and practices, as well as the ICF Core Competencies. Through this rigorous training, you will be well-prepared to embark on a professional coaching career, meeting the high standards set by the ICF for Associate Certified Coaches.

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