

Lesson 14

Open-Ended Questions

One of your initial goals as a coach is to draw your client out. While some clients may be chatty and eager to share profusely, others may be more shy, less expressive, or not have the vocabulary or skills to express their ideas, feelings, and wishes.

At this juncture, open-ended questions will be a huge asset. Closed-ended questions can be answered in a word or two, and send the ball of conversation back to the coach's court. Open-ended questions require the client to share in depth about his situation or feelings, which leads to progress in a coaching session.

Here are some examples of closed-ended questions:

“Do you like your job?”

“When did you meet your husband?”

“Where are you living?”

“Have you tried going to an employment agency?”

“How long did the doctor say you would have to take medication?”

All of these questions can be answered with a word or two, or a “yes” or “no.” If you are lucky, the client will say more. If you are not lucky, the client will answer with a short phrase and either clam up or wait for you to ask another question or give advice. But a good coach does not depend on luck. A good coach depends on skill. Open-ended questions provide a skill that invites the client to look deeper, express herself, and help you learn more about what is going on inside your client.

Here are some examples of open-ended questions:

“Please tell me about your relationship.”

“How are you feeling about your divorce?”

“What is your vision of what you would like to be doing when this job ends?”

“What do you appreciate about what your son is doing with his life?”

“What are your options, and which one is most exciting to you?”

You can see how these kinds of questions open doors and stimulate the client to explore what she is feeling and wants. Certainly there are times when you may need to ask a closed-ended question to get necessary information or to fill in a piece of the conversation. But avoid them in general. Keep probing your client to share more about what is real and important to her.

One open-ended question to be put at the bottom of the list: *“Why. . . .?”* If you’re not careful with “why” questions, they can lead to hyperanalysis and keep your client in his head. Most clients get stuck in their head and they need a dose of heart. “Why?” is a head question. “How do you feel about that?” or “What would you like to do?” are heart questions. Keep the client in his experience more than in his intellect, and he will go to valuable places.

Exercise:

1. Formulate 3 open-ended questions you might use with a particular client or clients:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

2. During your day (when appropriate) ask your co-workers, friends, and family open-ended questions and observe what they come up with.

Affirm:

I encourage my clients to speak from their heart, express themselves, and discover more about who they are, what they feel, and what they want.