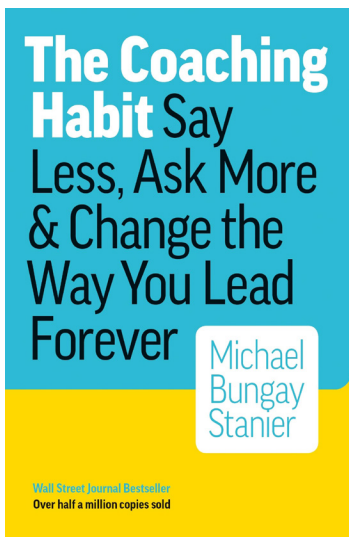


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Michael Bungay Stanier founded Box of Crayons, a learning and development company that helps organizations transform from advice-driven to curiosity-led. He currently leads MBS.works, a place where people find the clarity, confidence and community to be a force for change.

The Coaching Habit

THE SUMMARY

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You Need a Coaching Habit

The essence of coaching lies in helping others and unlocking their potential. But I'm sure you're already committed to being helpful, and that hasn't led to your coaching more often.

So let's look at why coaching others helps you. It lets you work less hard and have more impact. When you build a coaching habit, you can more easily break out of three vicious circles that plague our workplaces: creating overdependence, getting overwhelmed and becoming disconnected.

Building a coaching habit will help your team be more self-sufficient by increasing their autonomy and sense of mastery and by reducing your need to jump in, take over and become the bottleneck.

Building a coaching habit will help you regain focus so you and your team can do the work that has real impact and so you can direct your time, energy and resources to solving the challenges that make a difference.

Building a coaching habit will help you and your team reconnect to the work that not only has impact but has meaning as well. Coaching can fuel the courage to step out beyond the comfortable and familiar, can help people learn from their experiences and can literally and metaphorically increase and help fulfil a person's potential.

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At the heart of this book are seven questions that will break you of these three vicious circles and elevate the way you work. The questions work not only with your direct reports but also with customers, suppliers, colleagues, bosses and even (occasionally and, obviously, with no guarantees offered) spouses and teenage children. These questions have the potential to transform your weekly check-in one-to-ones, your team meetings, your sales meetings and (particularly important) those non-meeting moments when you just bump into someone between scheduled events.

How to Build a Habit

A Duke University study says that at least 45 percent of our waking behavior is habitual. Although we'd like to think we're in charge, it turns out that we're not so much controlling how we act with our conscious mind as we are being driven by our subconscious or unconscious mind. It's amazing; also, it's a little disturbing.

Happily, there has been an increase of grounded findings, based on neuroscience and behavioral economics, that have helped clear a path over the last few years. To build an effective new habit, you need five essential components: a reason, a trigger, a micro-habit, effective practice, and a plan.

Why would you bother doing something as difficult as changing the way you work? You need to get clear on the payoff for changing something as familiar and efficient (not the same, of course, as effective) as an old behavior.

Getting clear doesn't mean imagining success, funnily enough. Research shows that if you spend too much time imagining the outcome, you're less motivated to actually do the work to get there. Leo Babauta frames a helpful way of connecting to the big picture in his book *Zen Habits: Mastering the Art of Change*. He talks about making a vow that's connected to serving others. So think less about what your habit can do for you, and more about how this new habit will help a person or people you care about.

One key insight from reading Charles Duhigg's book, *The Power of Habit*, is this: if you don't know what triggers the old behavior, you'll never change it because you'll already be doing it before you know it. The more specific you can be when defining your trigger moment, the more useful a piece of data it is.

If you define your new habit in an abstract and slightly vague way, you won't get traction. If it takes too long to do, your big brain will find a way to hack your good intentions. B.J. Fogg's work at tinyhabits.com suggests that you should define your new habit as a micro-habit that needs to take less than sixty seconds to complete. It's about getting really clear on the first step or two that might lead to the bigger habit.

For his book *The Talent Code*, Dan Coyle researched why certain parts of the world were talent "hot spots" for certain skills. One key factor in each hot spot was knowing how to practice well—Coyle calls it "Deep Practice." The three components of Deep Practice are:

- Practicing small chunks of the bigger action (for instance, rather than practice the whole tennis serve, you practice just tossing the ball up).
- Repetition, repetition and repetition... and repetition. Do it fast, do it slow, do it differently. But keep repeating the action.
- And finally, being mindful and noticing when it goes well. When it does, celebrate success. You don't have to go buy the bottle of Moët, although you can if you wish. A small fist pump will do just fine.

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When you stumble—and everyone stumbles—it’s easy to give up. We will miss a moment, miss a day. That’s a given. What you need to know is what to do when that happens. Resilient systems build in fail-safes so that when something breaks down, the next step to recover is obvious. Make your habit a resilient system.

In the Box of Crayons’ coaching skills workshops, we’ve increasingly focused on helping participants define and commit to specific habits (rather than to the broad and rarely acted upon action list). To help people do that, we’ve drawn from some of the insights above and, after testing it out in the real world, created the New Habit Formula: a simple, straight forward and effective way of articulating and kickstarting the new behavior you want.

Identifying the Trigger: When This Happens... Define the trigger, the moment when you’re at a crossroads and could go down either the well-trod road of the old way of behaving or the Robert Frost path less trodden. If you don’t know what this moment is, you’re going to continually miss it and, with that, the opportunity to change your behavior.

Identifying the Old Habit: Instead Of... Articulate the old habit, so you know what you’re trying to stop doing. Again, the more you can make it, the more useful it’s going to be.

Defining the New Behavior: I Will... Define the new behavior, one that will take sixty seconds or less to do.

Ovid said, “Nothing is stronger than habit.” That’s bad news and good news. It’s bad news in that your life can easily be a mass of less-than-ideal responses and reactions that you’ve grooved into your brain. And it’s good news because now that you understand the mechanics of habits, you can build your own structures for success.

1. The Kickstarter Question

An almost failsafe way to start a chat that quickly turns into a real conversation is the question, “What’s on your mind?” It’s something of a Goldilocks question, walking a fine line so it is neither too open and broad nor too narrow and confining.

Because it’s open, it invites people to get to the heart of the matter and share what’s most important to them. You’re not telling them or guiding them. You’re showing them the trust and granting them the autonomy to make the choice for themselves.

And yet the question is focused, too. It’s not an invitation to tell you anything or everything. It’s encouragement to go right away to what’s exciting, what’s provoking anxiety, what’s all-consuming, what’s waking them up at 4 a.m., what’s got their hearts beating fast.

It’s a question that says, *Let’s talk about the thing that matters most.* It’s a question that dissolves ossified agendas, sidesteps small talk and defeats the default diagnosis.

And once asked it, you can use a framework I call the 3P model to focus the conversation even further. The 3P model is a framework for choosing what to focus on in a coaching conversation—for deciding which aspect of a challenge might be at the heart of a difficulty that the person is working through. A challenge might typically be centered on a project, a person or a pattern of behavior.

A project is the content of the situation, the stuff that’s being worked on. It’s the easiest place to go to and it will be the most familiar to most of us. We spend our days finding solutions to challenges, and our eyes are almost always on

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the situation at hand. Often, the art is in knowing how to start here and then seeing whether the conversation would benefit from including one or both of the other two Ps.

When you're talking about people, though, you're not really talking about them. You're talking about a relationship and, specifically, about what your role is in this relationship that might currently be less than ideal.

Patterns is about looking at patterns of behavior and ways of working that you'd like to change. They are personal and challenging, and they provide a place where people's self-knowledge and potential can grow and flourish. And at the moment, these conversations are not nearly common enough in organizations.

When you use the three Ps, it may look like this:

"What's on your mind?" you ask.

"The [insert name of thing they're working on]" they say.

"So there are three different facets of that we could look at," you offer. "The project side—any challenges around the actual content. The people side—any issues with team members/colleagues/other departments/bosses/ customers clients. And patterns—if there's a way that you're getting in your own way, and not showing up in the best possible way. Where should we start?"

It doesn't matter which one they pick—it will be a strong start to the conversation. And when they're done discussing that P, you can just take them to one of the other two Ps and ask, "If this was a thing, what would the challenge here be for you?"

And you'll likely have a deeper, more robust and richer conversation.

2. The AWE Question

I know they seem innocuous. Three little words. But "And What Else?"—the AWE Question—has magical properties. With seemingly no effort, it creates more—more wisdom, more insights, more self-awareness, more possibilities—out of thin air. There are three reasons it has the impact that it does: more options can lead to better decisions; you rein yourself in; and you buy yourself time.

The first answer someone gives you is almost never the only answer, and it's rarely the best answer. You may think that's obvious, but it's less so than you realize. When you use "And what else?" get more options and often better options. Better options lead to better decisions. Better decisions lead to greater success.

We've all got a deeply ingrained habit of slipping into the advice-giver/expert /answer-it/solve-it/fix-it mode. That's no surprise, of course. When you take the premium that your organization places on answers and certainty, then blend in the increased sense of overwhelm and uncertainty and anxiety that many of us feel as our jobs and lives become more complex, and then realize that our brains are wired to have a strong preference for clarity and certainty, it's no wonder that we like to give advice. Even if it's the wrong advice—and it often is—giving it feels more comfortable than the ambiguity of asking a question.

There's a place for giving advice, of course. This book isn't suggesting that you never give anyone an answer ever again. But it's an overused and ineffective response.

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Even though we don't really know what the issue is, or what's going on for the person, we're quite sure we've got the answer she needs. "And what else?" breaks that cycle. When asking it becomes a habit, it's often the simplest way to stay lazy and stay curious. It's a self-management tool to keep your Advice Monster under restraints.

Finally, when you're not entirely sure what's going on, and you need just a moment or two to figure things out, asking "And what else?" buys you a little extra time.

The power of "And what else?" is that it's the quickest and easiest way to uncover and create new possibilities. But having lots and lots and lots of options isn't always best. It's generally assumed that four is actually the ideal number at which we can chunk information. In some ways, it's as if our unconscious brain counts like this: one, two, three, four... lots. That probably explains why we can remember the names of people in four-person bands, but not of those in bands of five or more.

So as you ask, "And what else?" the goal isn't to generate a bazillion options. It's to see what ideas that person already has (while effectively stopping you from leaping in with your own ideas). If you get three to five answers, then you've made great progress indeed.

3. The Focus Question

If your organizational culture is like every organizational culture I've ever seen (and it is), then it's a place that loves getting things done. Making it happen. Crossing it off the to-do list. And if you're like most of the managers I've ever worked with and for (and, for that matter, been), then you genuinely do want to figure it out.

The challenge is that with the years of conditioning you've had, as soon as you start hearing what a doctor might call "the presenting challenge," every fiber of your body is twitching with a desire to fix it, solve it, offer a solution to it. It's Pavlovian. Which is why people in organizations like yours around the world are working very hard and coming up with decent solutions to problems that just don't matter, and why the real challenges often go unaddressed.

When people start talking to you about the challenge at hand, what's essential to remember is that what they're laying out for you is rarely the actual problem. And when you start jumping in to fix things, things go off the rails in three ways: you work on the wrong problem; you do the work your team should be doing; and the work doesn't get done.

You need a way to manage the temptation to jump into fixing that opening challenge. You need to stop yourself (and your team) from getting entangled in the first problem that's put on the table. Slow down just a little and you'll get to the heart of the issue. And here's the question that makes all the difference: What's the real challenge here for you?

This is the question that will help slow down the rush to action, so you spend time solving the real problem, not just the first problem. It's no accident that it's phrased the way it is. Here's how it builds to become such a useful question:

- What's the challenge? Curiosity is taking you in the right direction, but phrased like this the question is too vague. It will most likely generate either an obvious answer or a somewhat abstract answer (or a combination of the two), neither of which is typically helpful.
- What's the real challenge here? Implied here is that there are a number of challenges to choose from, and you have to find the one that matters most. Phrased like this, the question will always slow people down and make them think more deeply.

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- What's the real challenge here for you? It's too easy for people to pontificate about the high-level or abstract challenges in a situation. The "for you" is what pins the question to the person you're talking to. It keeps the question personal and makes the person you're talking to wrestle with her struggle and what she needs to figure out.

Now that you know how the Focus Question is constructed, you'll see how it can cut through some of the well-practiced but ineffective patterns that show up between you and the person coaching. These are the patterns that keep things misty and vague when you're trying to bring the challenge into focus. At Box of Crayons, we call them the Foggy-fiers, and we call the three most common ones the Proliferation of Challenges, Coaching the Ghost, and Abstractions & Generalizations.

Proliferation of Challenges. Have you ever made popcorn? One "pop." Then another. Then another. And then the popping goes crazy. Problems proliferate in the same way.

Resist the temptation to do the work and to pick one of the many challenges as the starting point (even though, no doubt, you'll have an opinion on which one it should be). Instead, ask something like this: "If you had to pick one of these to focus on, which one here would be the real challenge for you?"

Coaching The Ghost. They're talking on and on about another person (complaining about the boss, going on about a customer interaction, worrying about someone on the team) or perhaps a project or a situation (complaining about the new processes, going on about the project creep, worrying about the impact of the business unit reorganization).

Bring the focus back to the person you're talking to. Acknowledge what's going on and ask the Focus Question. It will sound something like this: "I think I understand some of what's going on with [insert name of the person or the situation]. What's the real challenge here for you?"

Abstractions & Generalizations. You're in the midst of a big-picture, high-level conversation about what's going on. It's almost as if the person talking isn't involved in it herself but is an observer. Quite often there's talk about "us" but there's no talk of "me" and "I."

If you feel yourself drifting, you need to find a way to ground the challenge and connect it to the person you're talking to. Just as with Coaching the Ghost, it's about bringing the focus back to the person at hand. To do that, you'd ask something like this: "I have a sense of the overall challenge. What's the real challenge here for you?"

Someone once said that everything tastes better with bacon. As a fallen vegetarian, I can attest to that. Equally, every question gets better when you add, "And what else?"

These first three questions can combine to become a robust script for your coaching conversation. You'll be surprised and delighted at just how often these are exactly the right questions to ask.

- Open with: *What's on your mind?* The perfect way to start; the question is open but focused.
- Check in: *Is there anything else on your mind?* Give the person an option to share additional concerns.
- Then begin to focus: *So what's the real challenge here for you?* Already the conversation will deepen. Your job now is to find what's most useful to look at.
- Ask: *And what else (is the real challenge here for you)?* Trust me, the person will have something. And there may be more.

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- Probe again: *Is there anything else?* You'll have most of what matters in front of you now.
- So get to the heart of it and ask: *What's the real challenge here for you?*

4. The Foundation Question

"What do you want?" We often don't know what we actually want. Even if there's a first, fast answer, the question "But what do you really want?" will typically stop people in their tracks.

But even if you do know what you want, what you really, really want, it's often hard to ask for it. We make up reasons about why it's not appropriate just now to make the request; it's because the timing's not right, or the person's only going to say no, or who are you anyway to make such a boldfaced ask? What we want is often left unsaid.

You can see there are many reasons that the ship of "What do you want?" might never make it out of the harbor. George Bernard Shaw put it succinctly when he said, "The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place." The illusion that both parties to the conversation know what the other party wants is pervasive, and it sets the stage for plenty of frustrating exchanges.

Not all is lost, though. One of the ways to ensure smoother sailing is to understand the difference between wants and needs. A want could be anything from getting a report done by a certain date to understanding whether you need to attend a meeting or not. This kind of information is what typically shows up in response to our question, "What do you want?"

Needs go deeper, and identifying them helps you pull back the curtain to understand the more human driver who might be behind the want. Drawing on the work of economist Manfred Max-Neef, there are nine self-explanatory universal needs: Affection, creation, recreation, freedom, identity, understanding, protection, subsistence and participation.

When you ask someone "What do you want?" listen to see if you can guess the need that likely lies behind the person's request. For example, when someone says, "I want you to talk to the VP for me," he might really be needing protection (I'm too junior) or participation (I need you to do your part in this project). When someone tells you, "I want to leave early today," she might really be asking for understanding (it's difficult at home) or creation (I need to go to my class). When someone says, "I want you to do a new version of the report," the base need might be freedom (I don't want to do it), identity (I want you to know I'm the boss here) or subsistence (my success depends on your getting this right).

You can see that recognizing the need gives you a better understanding of how you might best address the want. And there's a flip side to that as well. As you frame your own request for what you want, see if you can articulate what the need is behind the request.

The "fundamental organizing principle of the brain"—neuroscientist Evan Gordon's words—is the risk-and-reward response. Five times a second, at an unconscious level, your brain is scanning the environment around you and asking itself: Is it safe here? Or is it dangerous?

And there's the challenge for you as a busy and ambitious manager. You want those you interact with—your team, your boss, your customers, your suppliers—to be engaging rather than retreating. You want your people to feel that working with you is a place of reward, not risk. And you also realize that you want to feel like you're safe so that you can stay at your smartest, rather than in fight-or-flight mode.

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So how do you influence others' brains and your own so that situations are read as rewarding, not risky? There are four primary drivers—they spell out the acronym TERA—that influence how the brain reads any situation. TERA is a handy acronym, as it brings to mind “terroir”—the influence that a specific location has on the taste of the wine made from the grapes grown there. When you focus on TERA, you're thinking about how you can influence the environment that drives engagement.

T is for tribe. The brain is asking, “Are you with me, or are you against me?” If it believes that you're on its side, it increases the TERA Quotient. If you're seen as the opposition, the TERA Quotient goes down.

E is for expectation. The brain is figuring out, “Do I know the future or don't I?” If what's going to happen next is clear, the situation feels safe. If not, it feels dangerous.

R is for rank. It's a relative thing, and it depends not on your formal title but on how power is being played out in the moment. “Are you more important or less important than I am?” is the question the brain is asking, and if you've diminished my status, the situation feels less secure.

A is for autonomy. Dan Pink talks about the importance of this in his excellent book *Drive*. “Do I get a say or don't I?” That's the question the brain is asking as it gauges the degree of autonomy you have in any situation. If you believe you do have a choice, then this environment is more likely to be a place of reward and therefore engagement. If you believe you don't have a choice so much, then it becomes less safe for you.

Your job is to increase the TERA Quotient whenever you can. That's good for the person you're speaking with, and it's good for you. Asking questions in general, and asking “What do you want?” specifically, will do that.

It increases the sense of tribe-iness, as, rather than dictating what someone should do, you're helping him solve a challenge. And in doing so, you're increasing not only his sense of autonomy—you're assuming that he can come up with answers and encouraging him to do so—but his rank as well, because you're letting him “have the floor” and go first. The question “What do you want?” strongly affects the drivers of rank and autonomy.

Expectation, the other factor, may be a little depressing (a question contains more ambiguity than an answer), but that's OK. Your goal is to raise the overall TERA quotient, and by asking questions you do just that.

5. The Lazy Question

You're a good person, and you're doing your very best to let your people thrive. You want to “add value” and be useful. You like to feel that you're contributing. However, there's being helpful, and then there's being “helpful,” as in stepping in and taking over. And way too often, you get suckered into doing the latter. Then everyone—you, the person you're “helping,” the organization—pays a price for your attempted helpfulness. Your good intentions often end up contributing to a relentless cycle of exhaustion, frustration and, ironically, reduced impact.

Transactional Analysis (TA) is the slightly-out-of-fashion therapeutic model that has given us the labels of “parent-child and “adult-adult.” It's intriguing, but almost impossible to apply directly in organizations. It involves too much therapy-speak.

The Drama Triangle, a practical interpretation of TA developed by Stephen Karpman, is one way to make TA practical

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and useful. The Drama Triangle starts by assuming that, at least some of the time, we're playing less-than-fantastic versions of ourselves with most of the people with whom we interact. If you've ever found yourself playing one of the Seven Dysfunctional Dwarfs (Sulky, Moany, Shouty, Crabby, Martyr-y, Touchy and Petulant), even when you know you should know better, you get the point. When this happens, Karpman says, we're bouncing around between three archetypal roles—Victim, Persecutor and Rescuer—each one as unhelpful and dysfunctional as the other.

These three labels aren't descriptions of who you are. They're descriptions of how you're behaving in a given situation. No one is inherently a Victim or a Persecutor or a Rescuer. They are roles we end up playing when we've been triggered and, in that state, find a less-than-effective version of ourselves playing out.

We all play all of these roles all the time. Often, we'll cycle through all of the roles in a single exchange with someone, lurching from Victim to Rescuer to Persecutor and back again.

Seeing the pattern of the Drama Triangle is a strong first step in breaking the working-too-hard pattern of the time-crunched manager. Once you understand the triggers, you can start to reshape the habit. The bad news is that you are in fact destined to fall into the Drama Triangle for the rest of your life. The good news is that you'll get better and better at recognizing it and breaking the pattern, faster and more often. Samuel Beckett put it best: "Go on failing. Go on. Only next keep-failing time, try to fail better." You'll fail better by recognizing more quickly that you're in the Drama Triangle and by asking the Lazy Question—"How can I help?"—to pull yourself out of the triangle faster.

The power of "How can I help?" is twofold. First, you're forcing your colleague to make a direct and clear request. That may be useful to him. He might not be entirely sure why he started this conversation with you. Sure, he knows he wants something, but until you asked the question, he didn't know that he wasn't exactly clear on what he wanted. Unless he was, in which case the question is useful for you, because now you can decide whether you want to honor the request.

Second (and possibly even more valuably), it stops you from thinking that you know how best to help and leaping into action. That's the classic Rescuer behavior. Like "And what else?" this question is a self-management tool to keep you curious and keep you lazy. Too much of your day is spent doing things you think people want you to do. Sometimes you're completely off base, but that's not the worst of it because that gets sorted out relatively quickly. More dangerous is when you're only slightly wrong. That's when you find yourself kind of doing what they want, but not enough so it's really useful, and not so wrong that someone tells you to stop.

What's essential to realize is that regardless of the answer you receive, you have a range of responses available to you.

- "Yes" is one, of course. You can always say Yes. But you don't have to say Yes.
- "No, I can't do that" is another option. Having the courage to say No is one of the ways you stop being so "helpful."
- "I can't do that... but I could do [insert your counter-offer]" is a nice middle ground. Don't just give them a No; give them some other choices.

And finally, you can just buy yourself some time. "Let me think about that." "I'm not sure—I'll need to check a few things out."

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6. The Strategic Question

“If you’re saying Yes to this, what are you saying No to?” This question is more complex than it sounds, which accounts for its potential. To begin with, you’re asking people to be clear and committed to their Yes. Too often, we kinda sorta half-heartedly agree to something, or more likely, there’s a complete misunderstanding in the room as to what’s been agreed to. (Have you ever heard or uttered the phrase, “I never said I was going to do that!”? Me too.) So to ask, “Let’s be clear: What exactly are you saying Yes to?” brings the commitment out of the shadows. If you then ask, “What could being fully committed to this idea look like?” it brings things into even sharper, bolder focus.

But a Yes is nothing without the No that gives it boundaries and form. And in fact, you’re uncovering two types of No answers here—the No of omission and the No of commission. The first type of No applies to the options that are automatically eliminated by your saying Yes. If you say Yes to this meeting, you’re saying No to something else that’s happening at the same time as the meeting. Understanding this kind of No helps you understand the implications of the decision.

The second type of No you’re uncovering—which will likely take the conversation another level deeper—is what you now need to say to make the Yes happen. It’s all too easy to shove another Yes into the bag of our overcommitted lives, hoping that in a Harry Potter magical sort of way it will somehow all be accommodated. This second type of No puts the spotlight on how to create the space and focus, energy and resources that you’ll need to truly do that Yes.

For most of us, there are two groups of people to whom it is easiest to say No. Those closest to us—spouses and kids—and those distant from us—hello, evening telemarketers. It’s much harder to say No to everyone else. Which, unfortunately, tends to be everyone we work with. That difficulty is exacerbated by most corporate cultures, where the default answer is “Yes” or, at the bare minimum, “Probably.”

Bill “Mr. Simplicity” Jensen taught me that the secret to saying No was to shift the focus and learn how to say Yes more slowly. What gets us into trouble is how quickly we commit, without fully understanding what we’re getting ourselves into or even why we’re being asked. Saying Yes more slowly means being willing to stay curious before committing. Which means asking more questions:

- Why are you asking me?
- Whom else have you asked?
- When you say this is urgent, what do you mean?
- According to what standard does this need to be completed?
- By when?
- If I couldn’t do all of this, but could do just a part, what part would you have me do?
- What do you want me to take off my plate so I can do this?

Being willing to stay curious like this will likely provoke one of four types of responses, three of which might be helpful. The first response, and the one that’s not useful, is that the person tells you to stop with the annoying questions and

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just get on with the task. Depending on the person, the culture and the urgency of the task, sometimes it's clear that you're expected to do what you're told.

The second response is that he has good answers to all your questions. That's a win for you because it means that the request was thoughtful, and he's not asking you just because you have a pulse and yours was the first email address that started to populate the "To" address line.

Third, he doesn't have the answers but might be willing to find them for you. That's good. That buys you time, at a minimum, and it's quite possible that he'll never get back to you.

And finally, he may just say this: "You're too much like hard work. I'm going to find someone who says Yes more quickly than you do."

It's awkward saying No to something, because actually you're saying No to someone. And now people are involved, so we're into the messy awkwardness of dashing hopes, stomping on toes and having people think that you've let them down.

One secret from the world of facilitation is to create a "third point"—an object that you can identify as the thing you're saying No to, which isn't the person. For instance, if you write down someone's request on a bit of paper or a flip chart, you can then point to it and say, "I'm afraid I have to say No to this," which is a little better than "I'm afraid I have to say No to you." Say Yes to the person, but say No to the task.

7. The Learning Question

As a manager and a leader, you want people to get stuff done. But you want more than that. You want them to learn so that they become more competent, more self-sufficient and more successful. Conveniently, they want that as well.

But helping people learn is difficult. Sometimes it feels like even though you've hit them across the head repeatedly with an obvious concept (or a shovel perhaps), somehow the point you've been trying to make hasn't stuck. Here's why: People don't really learn when you tell them something. They don't even really learn when they do something. They start learning, start creating new neural pathways, only when they have a chance to recall and reflect on what just happened.

But we know how to make the learning experience more successful, thanks to insights from neuroscience and psychology. Josh Davis and colleagues from the Neuro Leadership Institute have created the AGES model to explain the four main neurological drivers of longer-term memory. "AGES" stands for Attention, Generation, Emotion and Spacing. What's useful here for us is the G: Generation. This is "the act of creating (and sharing) your own connections to new and presented ideas. When we take time and effort to generate knowledge and find an answer rather than just reading it, our memory retention is increased."

This is why, in a nutshell, advice is overrated. I can tell you something, and it's got a limited chance of making its way into your brain's hippocampus, the region that encodes memory. If I can ask you a question and you generate the answer yourself, the odds increase substantially.

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There are a number of questions you could ask to help drive this generative and retrieval process to embed the learning. “What did you learn?” “What was the key insight?” “What do you want to remember?” and “What’s important to capture?” are some of the more obvious ways to help people do that, and they’re all good questions.

But “What was most useful for you?” is like a superfood—kale perhaps—compared with the mere iceberg-lettuce goodness of the other questions. “What was most useful?” helps hit the spot in at least six ways.

It Assumes the Conversation Was Useful. There’s wisdom to be found, but only if you hang around for a moment to take a look. The Learning Question immediately frames what just happened as something that was and creates a moment in which to figure out what it was.

It Asks People to Identify the Big Thing That Was Most Useful. Less, rather than more, is often better when you’re giving feedback. If you list twelve things that could be improved, everyone moves into overwhelm mode. More effective is finding the OBT—the One Big Thing—that’s worth remembering.

It Makes It Personal. Adding “for you” to the question takes it from the abstract to the personal, from the objective to the subjective. Now you’re helping people create new neural pathways. And of course, people are telling themselves what was useful, rather than you’re telling them what you think should be most useful. The former will always sound like better advice.

It Gives You Feedback. Listen to the answer you get, because it’s useful not just for the coachee but for you as well. It will give you guidance on what to do more of next time, and it will reassure you (if you need it) that you’re being useful even when you’re not giving advice but are asking questions instead.

It’s Learning, Not Judgment. You’ll notice that you’re not asking, “Was this useful?” That question sets up a Yes/No answer, and it doesn’t actually prompt insight; it just elicits “What was most useful?” forces people to extract the value from the conversation.

It Reminds People How Useful You Are to Them. Come the annual performance appraisal, and an employee is staring at the questionnaire, with the cursor hovering over the upward-feedback part of it. “Is my manager useful?” the question asks. And thinking back over the last year, he’s struck by the fact that every single conversation with you has proven to be useful. Top marks.

With this question, you now complete the pair of questions known as the Coaching Bookends.

You start with the Kickstart Question: What’s on your mind? That takes you quickly into a conversation that matters, rather than meandering through small talk or spinning your wheels on data that’s more distracting than it is useful.

As you look to complete your conversation, before everyone rushes for the door, you ask the Learning Question: What was most useful for you about this conversation?

Answering that question extracts what was useful, shares the wisdom and embeds the learning. If you want to enrich the conversation even further—and build a stronger relationship, too—tell people what you found to be most useful about the exchange. That equal exchange of information strengthens the social contract.

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Conclusion

I believe that if you can make just these Seven Essential Questions part of your management repertoire and everyday conversations, you'll work less hard and have more impact, and your people, your boss, your career and your life outside work will thank you for it.

But the real secret sauce here is building a habit of curiosity. The change of behavior that's going to serve you most powerfully is simply this: a little less advice, a little more curiosity.

Find your own questions, find your own voice. And above all, build your own coaching habit.