The Art of Powerful Questions

A Coaching Toolkit for ICF-Aligned Practice

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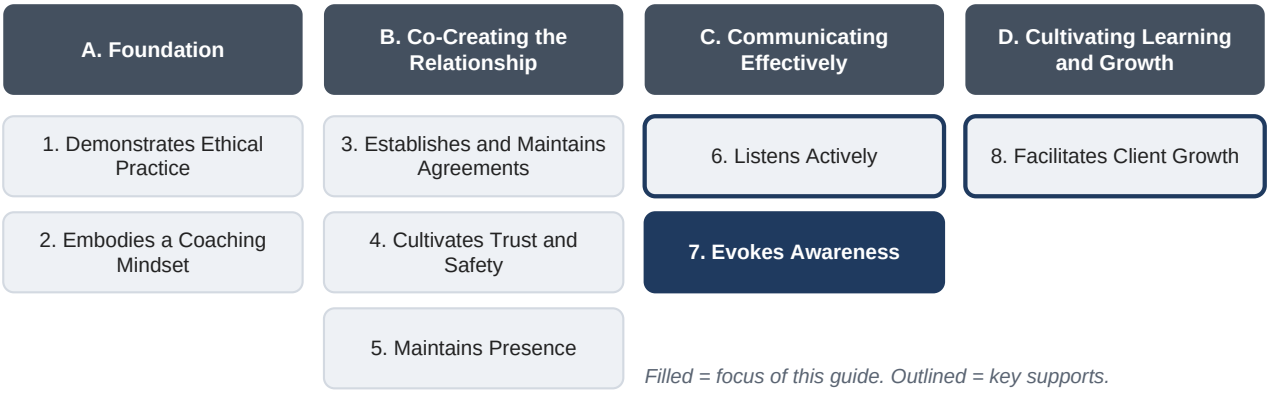
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About This Guide

A powerful question is one that evokes discovery, insight, commitment or action. It invites the client to look in a new place, think afresh and find their own answer. In ICF terms it lives mainly in Competency 7, Evokes Awareness, and works hand in hand with Listens Actively (6) and Facilitates Client Growth (8).

This toolkit organizes powerful questioning into ten areas: what makes a question powerful, how to build one, a map of question types, questions that open, deepen and shift, questions for vision and action, pitfalls, and delivery. Each area has subcategories with many sample questions to adapt in your own words, plus diagrams and practice tools. It is a menu, not a script: the best question is the one that grows out of what the client just said.

Where powerful questions fit in the ICF model



The eight ICF Core Competencies (2019 model). Powerful questions sit in Evokes Awareness (7), supported by Listens Actively (6) and Facilitates Client Growth (8).

What powerful questions do

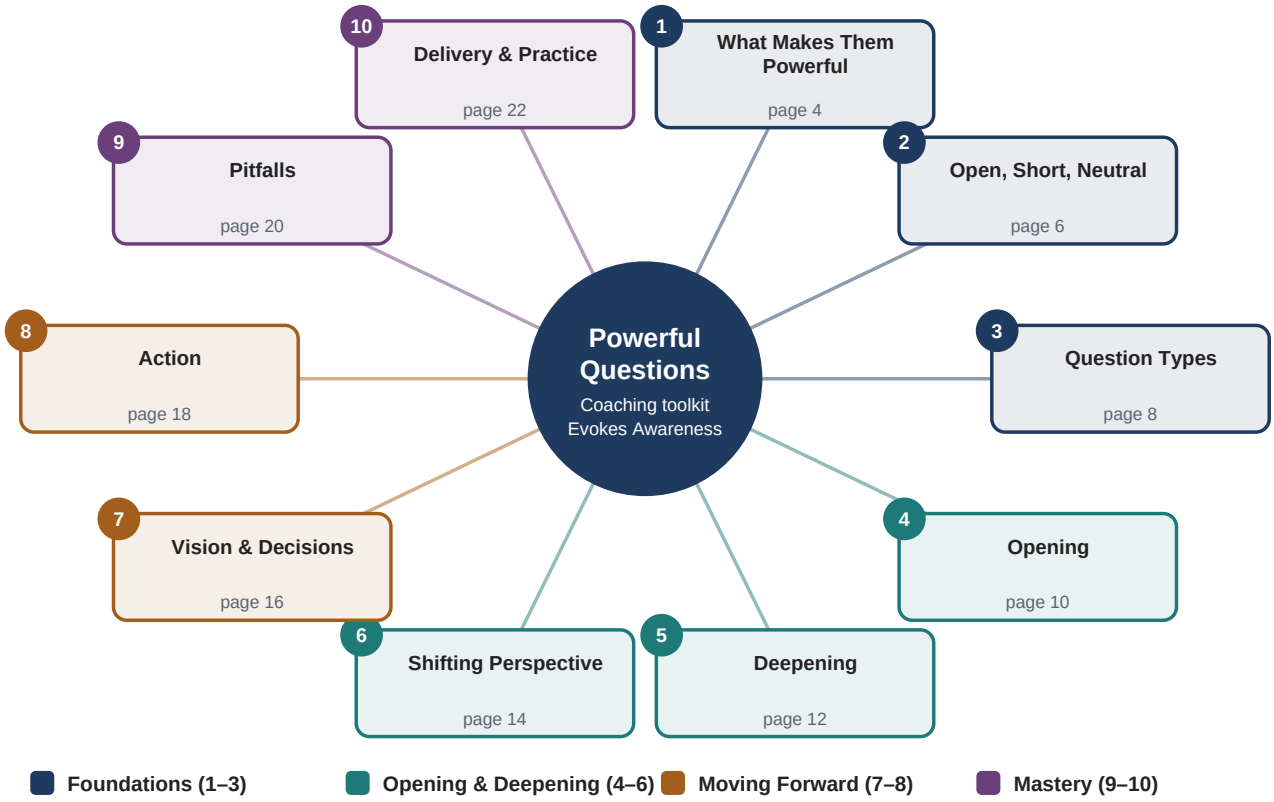
A powerful question…	Example	Area
Opens thinking rather than closing it	*“What would you like to explore?”*	2, 4
Goes deeper into meaning, feeling or values	*“What matters most about this?”*	5
Shifts how the client sees the situation	*“How would your future self see this?”*	6
Moves toward choices and options	*“What are your options?”*	7
Turns insight into action	*“What will you do, and by when?”*	8
Respects the client’s autonomy	*“What would you like to do with that?”*	2, 10

Principles that keep questions client-centered

- **Follow the client.** The best question usually grows out of their last words.
- **Ask one question at a time.** Then wait.
- **Keep it short.** Short questions leave room for the client's thinking.
- **Stay curious, not leading.** Do not hide your own answer inside the question.
- **Trust silence.** The answer often comes after the pause.
- **Let go of the result.** A question is an invitation; the client chooses what to do with it.

Map of Areas

The ten areas fall into four themes, shown by color. Each box links to its section when the PDF is opened in a viewer that supports links.



The four themes

Theme	The question it answers	Areas
Foundations	What is a powerful question, and what forms exist?	1 What Makes a Question Powerful, 2 Anatomy: Open, Short & Neutral, 3 A Map of Question Types
Opening & Deepening	How do I start, go deeper and shift views?	4 Questions That Open, 5 Questions That Deepen, 6 Questions That Shift Perspective
Moving Forward	How do questions lead to choices and action?	7 Questions for Vision, Options & Decisions, 8 Questions for Action & Accountability
Mastery	What goes wrong, and how do I get better?	9 Questions to Avoid and How to Fix Them, 10 Timing, Delivery & Practice

How to use this guide

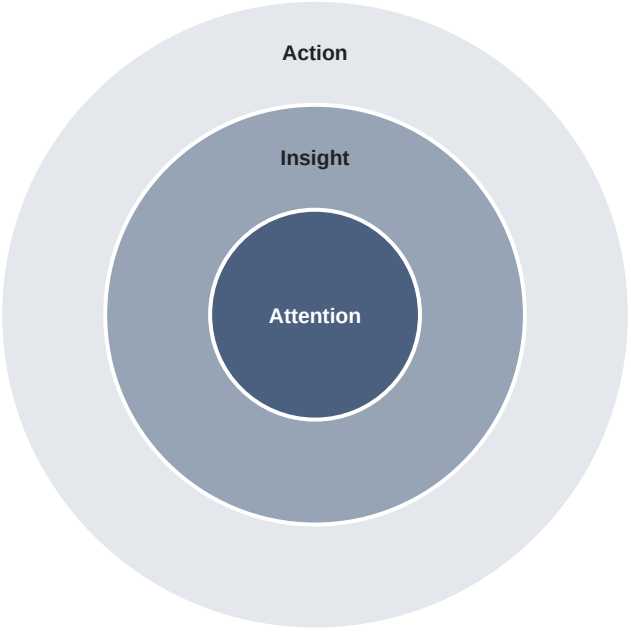
1. **Pick a few and practice.** Do not try to memorize everything; choose two or three questions per week.
2. **Adapt the wording.** Use your own voice and the client's own words.
3. **Use the bank as a menu.** The sample questions are starting points, not a script.
4. **Review your sessions.** Notice which of your questions opened things up.

1

FOUNDATIONS · WHAT MAKES A QUESTION POWERFUL

What Makes a Question Powerful

A question is powerful because of what it does, not how clever it sounds. It makes the client pause, look inward and find something that was not yet in their thinking.



Attention
A good question first captures the client's attention and turns it to a new place.

Insight
It then prompts fresh thinking: a connection, a belief or a possibility.

Action
Finally it can lead to commitment: a choice, a step or a change.

A powerful question works in layers: attention, insight and action.

Evokes discovery — the client learns something new.

- *"What are you noticing as you say that?"*
- *"What is becoming clearer?"*
- *"What do you see now that you didn't before?"*

Evokes insight — a connection or realization.

- *"What does this tell you about yourself?"*
- *"How does this connect to what you said earlier?"*
- *"What is the pattern here?"*

Evokes commitment — a decision to act.

- *"What are you ready to commit to?"*
- *"What will you do about it?"*
- *"How important is it to you, from 1 to 10?"*

Evokes ownership — the answer belongs to the client.

- *"What feels right to you?"*
- *"What would you like to do?"*
- *"What is your own sense of it?"*

Evokes possibility — new options come into view.

- *"What else is possible?"*
- *"What would you try if you knew you couldn't fail?"*
- *"What haven't you considered yet?"*

Creates safety to think — the question feels safe to answer.

- *"Take your time. There's no right answer."*
- *"What comes up for you?"*
- *"What would you like to say about that?"*

Signs a question landed

What you notice	What it may mean	What to do
A pause, a look away, a breath	The client is thinking	Wait. Do not rescue the silence
"That's a good question"	It touched something	Give space; ask what comes up
Energy changes	A nerve was touched	Reflect what you notice; ask what's there
A new phrase or word appears	A new frame is forming	Reflect the new language back
The client moves toward action	Clarity or commitment	Ask what they will do

> **Coach's note.** You cannot know in advance whether a question will be powerful. Ask, watch what happens and follow the client.

2

FOUNDATIONS · WHAT MAKES A QUESTION POWERFUL

Anatomy: Open, Short & Neutral

Most powerful questions share a few features: they are open, short and neutral, and they begin with words that invite exploration (what, how, who, when) rather than closing the door.

WEAKER	STRONGER
Open, not closed	
"Is this important to you?"	***"What makes this important to you?"***
What and how, not why	
"Why did you do that?"	***"What led you to that?"***
Neutral, not leading	
"Don't you think you should talk to her?"	***"What options do you see?"***

Three small changes that make a question stronger.

Open questions — invite more than yes or no.

- *"What would you like to talk about?"*
- *"How are you feeling about it?"*
- *"What does that mean for you?"*

When closed questions help — to confirm or check.

- *"Is that right?"*
- *"Would you like to continue with this?"*
- *"Is it okay if I share a thought?"*

What and how over why — why can sound like judgment.

- *"What was behind that choice?"*
- *"How did you decide?"*
- *"What mattered most when you chose that?"*

Short questions — fewer words, more room.

- *"What else?"*
- *"And then?"*
- *"What's the real issue?"*

Neutral questions — free of the coach's opinion.

- *"What are your thoughts on that?"*
- *"How do you see the options?"*
- *"What feels right to you?"*

One question at a time — avoiding stacking.

- *“(Ask one, then wait.)”*
- *“What do you want here?”*
- *“(Then, only after the answer) What else?”*

Using the client’s words — their language carries meaning.

- *“You said ‘trapped.’ What does that word mean for you?”*
- *“You called it ‘a mountain.’ Tell me more.”*
- *“What is ‘enough’ for you?”*

Question starters

Starter	Tends to invite	Example
What	Facts, choices, meaning	*“What matters most here?”*
How	Process, feelings, ways forward	*“How would you like it to be?”*
Who	People, roles, support	*“Who else is affected?”*
When / Where	Timing, context	*“When do you feel most confident?”*
Tell me about…	Stories and detail	*“Tell me about a time it worked.”*
Why (use sparingly)	Reasons; may feel judging	*“What is the reason that matters to you?”*

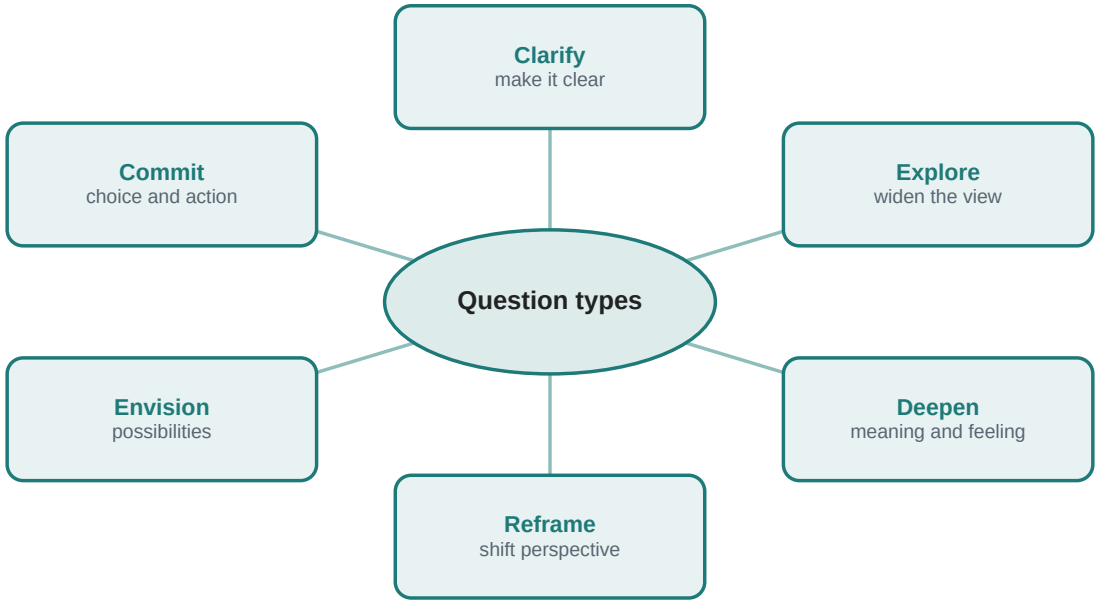
> **Coach’s note.** Rules of thumb, not laws. A closed question can be exactly right when you check a fact or ask permission.

3

FOUNDATIONS · WHAT MAKES A QUESTION POWERFUL

A Map of Question Types

Different questions do different jobs. Knowing the main types helps the coach choose the right one for the moment instead of asking the same kind over and over.



Six families of questions. Most conversations move through several of them.

Clarifying questions — understanding what the client means.

- *"What do you mean by…?"*
- *"Can you give me an example?"*
- *"What does that look like?"*

Exploring questions — opening up the topic.

- *"What else is going on?"*
- *"Who or what is involved?"*
- *"What have you tried so far?"*

Deepening questions — going beneath the surface.

- *"What is underneath that?"*
- *"What matters most to you about this?"*
- *"What are you feeling as you say that?"*

Reframing questions — shifting how it is seen.

- *"How else could you look at this?"*
- *"What would someone you admire see here?"*
- *"What is the opportunity in this?"*

Visioning questions — imagining what could be.

- *"What would you like instead?"*
- *"What would be ideal?"*
- *"What does success look like?"*

Scaling questions — measuring and finding small steps.

- *“On a scale of 1 to 10, where are you?”*
- *“What would take it from a 4 to a 5?”*
- *“What puts you at a 4 and not a 1?”*

Commitment questions — moving to choice and action.

- *“What will you do?”*
- *“When will you do it?”*
- *“What support do you need?”*

Choosing a question type

If the client is…	Try this type	Example
Vague or unclear	Clarifying	*“Can you give me an example?”*
Stuck in one view	Reframing	*“What would you see from the outside?”*
Surface-level	Deepening	*“What is this really about?”*
Overwhelmed or scattered	Exploring, then narrowing	*“What is most important right now?”*
Unsure what they want	Visioning	*“What would you like instead?”*
Ready to move	Commitment	*“What will you do first?”*

> **Coach’s note.** Types overlap. A single question can clarify and deepen at once. Use the map to widen your choices, not to classify every sentence.

4

OPENING & DEEPENING · START, GO DEEPER AND SHIFT

Questions That Open

Openers begin the conversation and each new topic. They invite the client's agenda, set a spacious tone and help the client find their own starting point.

Opening a conversation



Opening a conversation, from welcome to a shared focus.

Opening a session — arriving and starting.

- *"How are you arriving today?"*
- *"What would you like to focus on today?"*
- *"What would make this time valuable?"*

Following up — continuing from last time.

- *"What has happened since we last spoke?"*
- *"What did you notice about the action you chose?"*
- *"What would you like to build on?"*

Setting the outcome — what the client wants.

- *"What would you like to have by the end?"*
- *"What would be a good result today?"*
- *"How will you know this was worth your time?"*

Exploring the topic — widening the view.

- *"Tell me more about that."*
- *"What is the situation?"*
- *"What else is relevant?"*

Finding the heart of it — narrowing.

- *"What is the real issue?"*
- *"If you had to name one thing, what is it?"*
- *"What is at the center of this?"*

Choosing among topics — setting priorities.

- *“Which of these matters most?”*
- *“Where is your energy?”*
- *“What would you like to leave for another time?”*

When the client is unsure — helping them begin.

- *“What is on your mind?”*
- *“What has been taking your attention lately?”*
- *“Where would you like to start, even if it’s messy?”*

Opening questions by situation

Situation	Opening question
First session	*“What brings you to coaching, and what do you hope for?”*
Regular session	*“What would you like to work on today?”*
After a hard week	*“How are you, really? What do you need from this time?”*
The client talks a lot	*“Of everything you’ve told me, what matters most?”*
The client says ‘nothing’	*“What small thing has been on your mind?”*

> **Coach’s note.** Even a good opener is only an invitation. If the client brings a different topic, follow them.

5

OPENING & DEEPENING · START, GO DEEPER AND SHIFT

Questions That Deepen

Deepening questions move below the story to thoughts, feelings, needs, values and identity. They help clients understand why something matters and who they are within it.

Going deeper: five levels



Five levels of depth. Move down only as far as the client wants to go.

Thoughts and beliefs — what the client tells themselves.

- *"What are you telling yourself about this?"*
- *"What do you believe about what's possible?"*
- *"What assumptions are in play?"*

Emotions — naming and exploring feelings.

- *"What are you feeling right now?"*
- *"Where do you feel it in your body?"*
- *"What is this feeling about?"*

Needs and wants — what lies beneath the position.

- *"What do you need here?"*
- *"What is the want underneath that?"*
- *"What would meet that need?"*

Values — what matters most.

- *"What matters most to you in this?"*
- *"Which of your values is at stake?"*
- *"What would honoring that value look like?"*

Fears and risks — what the client is protecting.

- *"What are you most afraid of?"*
- *"What would you lose if this went wrong?"*
- *"What is this protecting?"*

Meaning and purpose — why it matters.

- *"Why is this important to you?"*
- *"What does this mean for your life?"*
- *"What is it in service of?"*

Identity and self-concept — who the client is within it.

- *"Who are you in this situation?"*
- *"What does this say about the person you want to be?"*
- *"What part of you is speaking?"*

Patterns — what repeats.

- *"Where else does this show up in your life?"*
- *"What keeps happening?"*
- *"What is familiar about this?"*

Going deeper, with permission

Moment	A permission question	A deepening question
The client touches an emotion	*"Would it be okay to stay with that?"*	*"What is this feeling about?"*
A story repeats	*"May I share what I'm noticing?"*	*"What is the pattern here?"*
A value surfaces	*"Shall we explore this further?"*	*"What does it ask of you?"*
A fear appears	*"Is it okay to look at this?"*	*"What are you protecting?"*

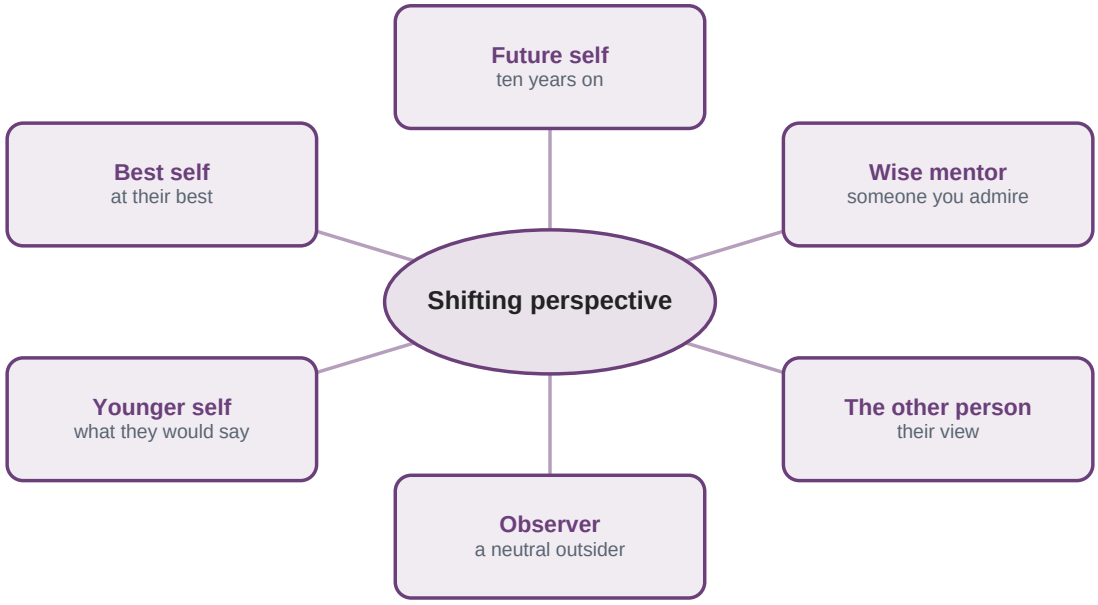
> **Coach's note.** Depth is not always better. Ask whether the client wants to go deeper, and respect a "not now." Coaching is not therapy; know when to refer.

6

OPENING & DEEPENING · START, GO DEEPER AND SHIFT

Questions That Shift Perspective

When a client is stuck, the situation often has not changed, but their view has hardened. Reframing questions loosen it by inviting a new vantage point, a new meaning or a new belief.



Six vantage points a client can take. Each invites a different answer to the same situation.

Other people's views — stepping into another's shoes.

- *"How might your colleague see this?"*
- *"What would they say is going on?"*
- *"What might they need?"*

Time perspective — past and future.

- *"How will this look in a year?"*
- *"What will you wish you had done?"*
- *"What would your future self say?"*

The observer view — seeing from outside.

- *"If you watched this on video, what would you notice?"*
- *"What would a neutral observer see?"*
- *"What advice would you give a friend?"*

Reframing the problem — a new meaning.

- *"What is the opportunity here?"*
- *"What else could this mean?"*
- *"What if this were a gift in disguise?"*

Testing beliefs — gently challenging.

- *"What evidence supports that? What doesn't?"*
- *"Is that always true?"*
- *"What would you have to believe to see it differently?"*

Exceptions and strengths — what already works.

- *“When has this been different?”*
- *“What did you do that worked?”*
- *“What strengths helped you then?”*

Imagining the opposite — a different assumption.

- *“What if the opposite were true?”*
- *“What if there were no obstacle?”*
- *“What would you do if you were certain you’d succeed?”*

Challenge with care

Too confrontational	Challenge with care
“That’s an excuse.”	*“What else might be going on beneath that?”*
“You’re avoiding it.”	*“What makes this hard to look at?”*
“That makes no sense.”	*“Help me understand how those fit together.”*
“You’re wrong about that.”	*“What would change your view?”*
“Stop being negative.”	*“What would you like to see instead?”*

> **Coach’s note.** Ask permission before challenging, such as “May I offer a different angle?”, and let the client decide what fits.

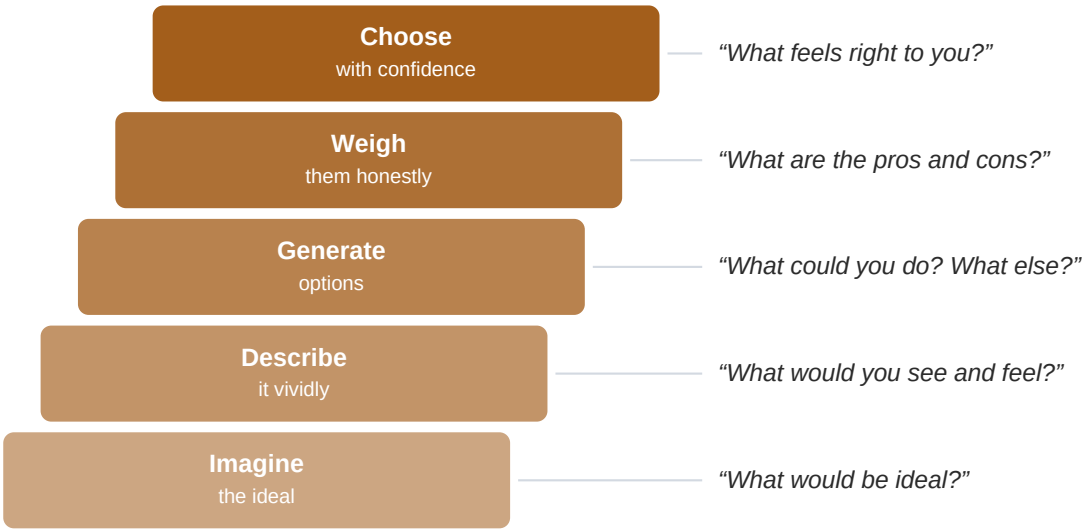
7

MOVING FORWARD · VISION, DECISIONS AND ACTION

Questions for Vision, Options & Decisions

Once the client sees their situation more clearly, questions help them imagine what they want, widen their options and choose, without the coach making the choice for them.

From vision to decision



From vision to decision. Generate many options before weighing any.

Visioning — imagining the ideal.

- *"What would you like to see happen?"*
- *"If everything went well, what would that look like?"*
- *"What would a great outcome feel like?"*

Defining success — making it concrete.

- *"How will you know you've succeeded?"*
- *"What will be different?"*
- *"What would you notice, see or hear?"*

Generating options — widening before narrowing.

- *"What could you do?"*
- *"What else? And what else?"*
- *"What would you do if there were no limits?"*

Weighing options — pros, cons and fit.

- *"What are the benefits and risks of each?"*
- *"Which option best fits your values?"*
- *"Which one do you keep coming back to?"*

Decision criteria — what matters in choosing.

- *"What matters most in this decision?"*
- *"What would a good decision look like?"*
- *"What would make you feel good about this choice later?"*

Overcoming indecision — when the client is stuck.

- *“What would help you decide?”*
- *“What is the cost of not deciding?”*
- *“What do you already know about what you want?”*

Testing the decision — checking it fits.

- *“How does this choice feel in your body?”*
- *“What would you tell a friend who chose this?”*
- *“What would make you change your mind?”*

Questions by decision type

The client faces…	Useful questions
A big life choice	*“What matters most in your life right now?”*
Two good options	*“What does each one say yes to, and no to?”*
A fear-driven choice	*“What would you choose if fear were not in the room?”*
A reversible step	*“What is the smallest experiment you could try?”*
A choice others influence	*“What do you want, apart from what others expect?”*

> **Coach’s note.** Resist advising here. If you have a suggestion, ask permission first and offer it as one option among many.

8

MOVING FORWARD · VISION, DECISIONS AND ACTION

Questions for Action & Accountability

Questions that turn insight into action are specific, client-owned and honest about obstacles. They keep momentum without pressure and make follow-up a partnership.

“On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you in the plan?”



Why a 4 and not a 1? (strengths and resources)
What would make it a 5 or 6? (the next small step)
What would a 7 look like? (the client’s own target)

A scaling question. Starting from where the client is, not from zero, builds on strengths and shrinks the next step.

Committing to action — what, when and how.

- *“What will you do?”*
- *“When will you do it?”*
- *“How will you do it?”*

Starting small — reducing the first step.

- *“What is the smallest step you could take?”*
- *“What would make this easier?”*
- *“What could you do in the next 24 hours?”*

Anticipating obstacles — planning for what gets in the way.

- *“What might get in the way?”*
- *“What will you do if that happens?”*
- *“What would help you stay on track?”*

Support and resources — who and what can help.

- *“Who can support you?”*
- *“What resources do you need?”*
- *“What would you like to ask for?”*

Accountability — the client designs it.

- *“How would you like to be held accountable?”*
- *“How and when would you like to report back?”*
- *“What would help you follow through?”*

Checking commitment — honest readiness.

- *“On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely is it that you’ll do this?”*
- *“What would make it a higher number?”*
- *“Is this the right action for you?”*

Following up — curious, not judging.

- *“How did it go?”*
- *“What did you learn?”*
- *“What would you do differently?”*

Closing the session — capturing learning.

- *“What are you taking away?”*
- *“What stood out for you today?”*
- *“How are you leaving this conversation?”*

From wish to commitment

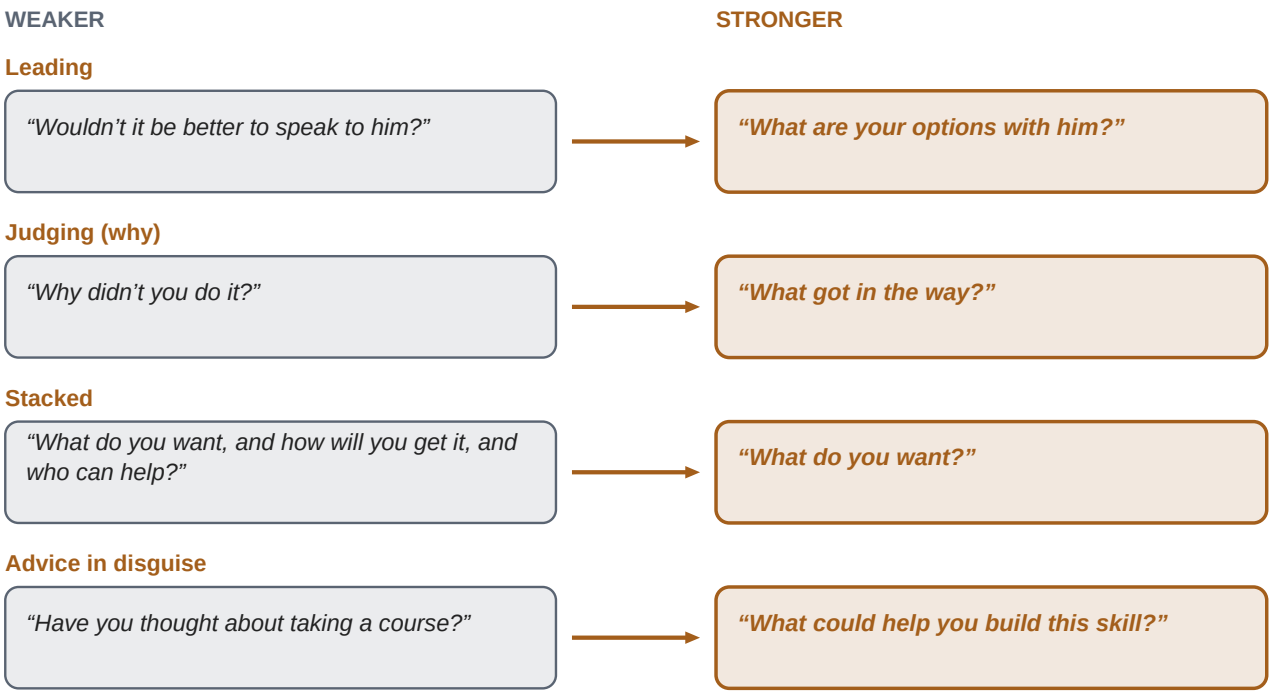
Wish	Question to firm it up	Commitment (client’s words)
“I should exercise more.”	*“What exactly will you do, and when?”*	*“A 20-minute walk, Tuesday and Thursday.”*
“I need to talk to my boss.”	*“When and how will you do it?”*	*“Ask for 15 minutes on Monday morning.”*
“I want to finish the report.”	*“What is the first step?”*	*“Write the outline before lunch.”*
“I’ll try to relax.”	*“What would relaxing look like this week?”*	*“No email after seven, three evenings.”*

> **Coach’s note.** Actions the client designs are more likely to happen than actions the coach suggests. Ask rather than assign.

MASTERY · PITFALLS, DELIVERY AND PRACTICE

9 Questions to Avoid and How to Fix Them

Even experienced coaches slip into questions that close, lead or judge. Spotting the common patterns, in yourself first, is the quickest way to improve.



Four common pitfalls and a stronger alternative for each.

Leading questions — the answer is hidden inside.

- *“Instead: What are your options?”*
- *“Instead: What do you think?”*
- *“Instead: What feels right to you?”*

Why questions that judge — they can sound like blame.

- *“Instead: What led you to that?”*
- *“Instead: What was important about that choice?”*
- *“Instead: What got in the way?”*

Stacked questions — several at once confuse.

- *“Pick one question and ask it.”*
- *“Wait for the answer.”*
- *“Then ask the next one, only if needed.”*

Advice in disguise — I suggest… asked as a question.

- *“Instead: What could you do?”*
- *“Instead: What would you suggest to a friend?”*
- *“Ask permission: Would you like an idea?”*

Rapid-fire interviewing — no space between questions.

- *"Instead: Pause. Reflect what you heard."*
- *"Instead: What are you noticing as you think about it?"*
- *"Let the silence work."*

Questions for the coach's curiosity — not the client's growth.

- *"Ask yourself: Whom does this question serve?"*
- *"Instead: What is most useful to explore?"*
- *"Instead: What would you like me to ask?"*

Overly clever or abstract questions — confusing the client.

- *"Instead: use plain words."*
- *"Instead: What do you want?"*
- *"If it takes a paragraph to ask, trim it."*

Quick fixes

Pitfall	Why it hurts	A fix
Closed question	Ends the thinking	Start with what or how
Leading question	Takes the client's choice	Remove your preferred answer
Why question	Can feel like blame	Swap why for what or how
Too many questions	Overloads the client	One question, then silence
Interrogation	Puts the client under pressure	Reflect first, then ask
Jargon	Creates distance	Use the client's own words

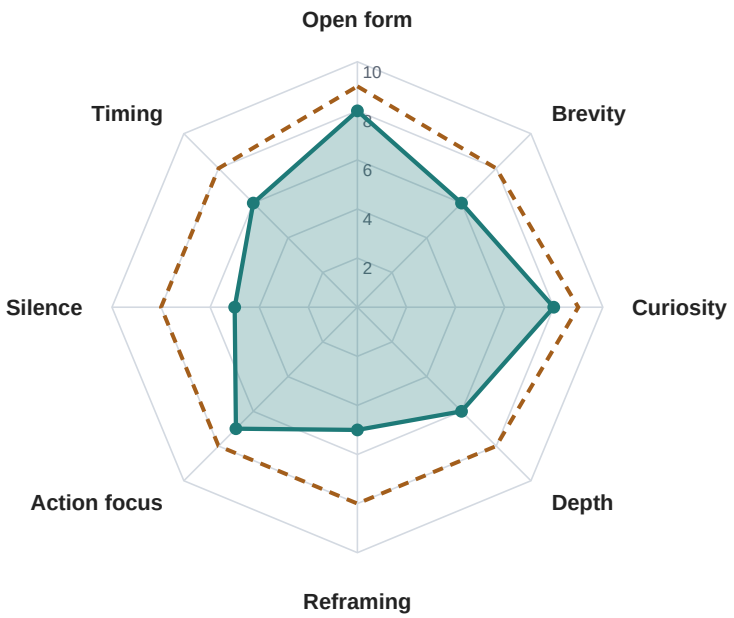
> **Coach's note.** Notice your own favorite pitfall. Most coaches have one. Catching it in a recording is the fastest way to change it.

10

MASTERY · PITFALLS, DELIVERY AND PRACTICE

Timing, Delivery & Practice

A good question asked badly, or at the wrong time, falls flat. Delivery includes tone, pace, silence and timing, and the habit of practicing deliberately.



A questioning self-assessment (sample scores). A conversation starter, not a test.

How to use the wheel

Rate yourself from 0 (center) to 10 (outer ring) in each area, today and where you want to be.

Choose one or two areas to practice for a month, and review a recorded session.

Scores here are samples for illustration only.

Today (sample)

Goal (sample)

Tone and pace — how it sounds.

- *"Is my tone curious, warm and unhurried?"*
- *"Am I speaking slowly enough?"*
- *"How does my voice invite or pressure?"*

Timing — when to ask.

- *"Is the client ready for this question?"*
- *"Should I reflect first?"*
- *"Is this the moment, or should I wait?"*

Silence after the question — the work happens here.

- *"Can I wait five seconds, or more?"*
- *"What do I do with my discomfort in the pause?"*
- *"How will I know the client is done thinking?"*

Asking permission — for sensitive or challenging questions.

- *"May I ask you something personal?"*
- *"Is it okay to explore this?"*
- *"Would you like me to challenge you here?"*

Repeating or rewording — when a question misses.

- *"Let me ask that differently."*
- *"Was that clear? What did you hear in it?"*
- *"I'll try again: what I mean is…"*

Reviewing your questions — learning from sessions.

- *"Which questions opened the conversation?"*
- *"Which closed it, and why?"*
- *"What would I ask differently next time?"*

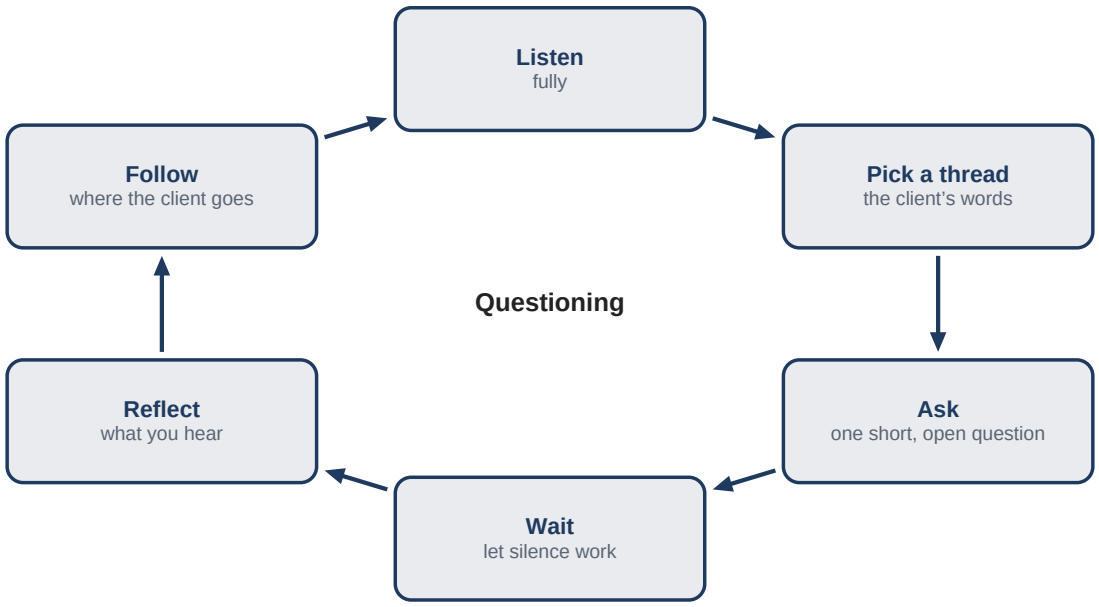
Practice drills

Drill	How	What it builds
One question only	Hold a conversation using only questions, for five minutes	Curiosity and brevity
Count to five	Wait five seconds after each question	Comfort with silence
No why	Avoid the word why for a week	Neutral, open phrasing
Echo and ask	Repeat the client's key word, then ask about it	Using the client's language
Question audit	Review a recording; mark each question open, closed, leading	Self-awareness
Peer practice	Practice in triads: coach, client, observer	Feedback

> **Coach's note.** Aim for progress, not perfection. Mastery in questioning comes from listening more than from cleverness.

Putting It Together

Powerful questioning is a loop rather than a list. Listen, pick up a thread, ask one short open question, wait, and listen again. The skill is in what you notice and what you leave out.



The questioning loop.

Question bank by situation

The client is…	Questions to try
Stuck	*“What would you do if you weren’t stuck? What is one small step?”*
Overwhelmed	*“What is most important right now? What can wait?”*
Unclear about a goal	*“What would you like instead? How will you know?”*
In conflict	*“What does the other person need? What do you need?”*
Facing a decision	*“What matters most here? What does your gut say?”*
After a setback	*“What did you learn? What will you do now?”*
Afraid	*“What is the fear protecting? What would help you take a step?”*
Celebrating progress	*“What did that take? What are you proud of?”*

Pocket card: ten questions to keep handy

#	Question	Use it to…
1	*“What would you like to focus on?”*	Open
2	*“What else?”*	Widen
3	*“What is the real issue?”*	Narrow
4	*“What matters most to you here?”*	Deepen
5	*“What are you telling yourself?”*	Explore beliefs
6	*“How else could you look at this?”*	Shift perspective
7	*“What would you like instead?”*	Envision
8	*“What are your options?”*	Choose
9	*“What will you do, and by when?”*	Commit
10	*“What are you taking away?”*	Close

Practical notes

- **Listen first.** The best question usually comes from the last thing the client said.
- **One question, then silence.** Count to five.
- **Keep it simple.** Plain, short words beat clever ones.
- **Use the client’s words.** Their language carries their meaning.
- **Offer, don’t impose.** A question is an invitation.
- **Practice deliberately.** Pick one skill, record yourself and review.

Practice Checklist

A quick review after a session, or before the next one.

- [ ] I listened first and let my questions grow from the client’s words.
- [ ] I asked mostly open questions, starting with what or how.
- [ ] I asked one short question at a time.
- [ ] I waited through silence after asking.
- [ ] I avoided leading, stacked and judging questions.
- [ ] I used the client’s own language.
- [ ] I asked permission before going deeper or challenging.
- [ ] I shifted perspective when the client was stuck.
- [ ] I asked questions that led toward choice and action.
- [ ] I chose one questioning skill to practice next time.