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A Good Mentor-Coach Asks Right Questions

Explore the four influence factors found in the background of every high achiever

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What Is a Mentor-Coach?

Many years ago we began using the term "mentor-coach" to describe the behaviors that must be present for someone to be consistently on a roll. The reason we combined the words in this way is because most people imagine a mentor to be a giver of good advice, just as most people look outside themselves for answers.

> ***Instead of rewarding this behavior, however, a good mentor-coach must be skilled at asking questions that help us look deep inside ourselves for answers.***

And, since no amount of good advice could ever enable someone to be consistently on a roll, a good mentor-coach never gives advice.

Another factor that supports being on roll is to have your locus of control based internally rather than externally.

> ***Having an internal locus of control means having a habit of***

looking deep within ourselves for the answers needed to guide our own lives.

It also makes it clear why we don't need an advice-giving mentor. Whenever we allow someone to give us "good advice," we inadvertently allow them to reinforce an unhealthy dependency on looking outside ourselves for answers. An easy way to spot advice givers, by the way, is listen for their use of the word "should," whether directly or by implication. Another is to note their eagerness to offer opinions.

Influence Factors

We'll begin by examining the four influence factors found in the background of every effortless high performer we have studied. These four factors provide a preliminary definition of the ideal mentor-coach. These factors, stated as outcomes, are simply:

1. Feeling believed in.
2. Being asked right questions.
3. Learning to fully trust ourselves.
4. Developing our own validation framework.

Feeling Believed In Comes from Being Asked the Right Questions

The ideal mentor-coach operates from the belief that the other person already possesses every answer they will ever need for guiding their own life. It certainly doesn't feed our ego to operate in this manner, but it is the truth. We must also remind ourselves that advice is the very last thing any of us needs.

The second influence factor is so closely tied to the first that we need to expand on it a bit before going into more detail on the first. Just because we already possess all the answers we ever need for guiding our own lives, doesn't mean we have full conscious access to them.

Gaining access to our inner knowing needs an outside supply of right questions.

Therefore, we must have good questions which help us to gain access to those answers rather than giving advice.

Remember, the desired outcome of all four influence factors is a locus of control firmly rooted inside of us, rather than outside. It seems that the best way to assure this result is through a special verbal communication process with someone who truly honors the strength of our inner knowing. In this way we can become deeply connected to the feeling that we are trusted, honored and believed in as a human being.

Yet, while feeling honored and believed in is profoundly empowering, it can only sustain itself if we are also being asked right questions. Only in this way can our answers from within be drawn out and brought up into our conscious awareness. Once we are consciously aware of these answers, we can then choose to act on them and have them validated through life's experiences. The longer we are exposed to the potent combination of having our feelings truly honored, and then being asked properly framed questions that help us put those feelings into words, the more self-sustaining the entire process becomes.

Learning to Fully Trust Ourselves

The third set of influence factors relates to self-trust. It has to do with the special support we need from another person in order for our conscious, rational self to become truly trusting of our inner, intuitive self. The easiest way to do this is to develop a mentor-coaching relationship in which we can be completely open with our innermost feelings. In other words, we need to experience a communication relationship in which we can be as open and vulnerable as needed without feeling threatened in any way.

The principle at work here is this:

We can only trust that part of ourselves which we have

revealed to another person and had validated instead of violated.

This prompts our next question. How much of ourselves do we wish to be able to trust? Ultimately, we need to be able to fully trust ourselves both alone and in the presence of others, and this is exactly what happens when this third set of influence factors is present. Most importantly, the more of ourselves we can trust, the better our chances for getting on and staying on a roll.

Developing a Validation Framework

The fourth set of influence factors is the development of a "validation framework," and must occur if we are to be able to validate our own insights and inner knowing—without being dependent on others for either permission or approval.

The most effective validation framework is an ever-evolving vision of an ideal "something."

This is simply a matter of choosing to wonder what an ideal (something) might look like. The item we decide to wonder about is most effective if it fully captures our imagination and takes years to completely fall into place. As you can probably see, it is technically possible to complete this step of establishing a validation framework on our own. In most cases, however, it will require the support of a good mentor-coach to make it happen. Once it is in place, we will feel amazingly free to move forward and take what others may see as huge risks without being unduly concerned over any apparent lack of support from others around us.

Putting Questions in Context

Before we offer guidelines for asking right questions, we must point out there are many different domains within which questions can serve us. In addition, to succeed in the world of asking intuition-engaging questions, we must learn to see our questions as "gifts" given freely and without strings to others. For some of us, this will take some adjustment. For most of us, it will be paradoxical.

Mentor-Coaching Questions Access the Intuition

Since the primary processing language of our intuition is feelings, mentor-coaching questions work best when we feel totally free to put our most deeply felt feelings into words—without the slightest concern over having those feelings analyzed or judged. Our most valuable insights are most effectively drawn out and put into words in response to the following types of questions:

- What are you feeling right now?
- What does that feel like?
- Talk more about what you are feeling.
- What are you feeling about _____?
- What were you feeling at the time?
- When have you ever felt that way before?
- What did it feel like then?

From these questions, we can quickly see that the goal of an effective mentor-coach is to patiently ask feeling questions and then listen… listen… and listen some more. We can also make it easier for others to continue putting their feelings into words when we disclose some of our own feelings in a non-judging manner.

Silence, too, is a wonderful gift that can often allow others to finish feeling their most deeply felt feelings. Finally, we can consider it a high compliment to our mentor-coaching skill when we allow others to purge their feelings of discomfort by verbalizing those feelings and crying in our presence.

Value-Finding Questions

> ***The most effective mentor-coaching question is one which allows the person responding to it to feel more valued while searching their innermost feelings to find new value.***

It is therefore useful to think of them as “value-finding” in nature.

It is next to impossible to process a value-finding question with our analytical mind. Value-finding questions must, by definition, be processed in our intuitive mind.

This means we can count on them to generate fresh supplies of creative energy every time they spark new insights.

This is how they produce the creative energy we must have in abundance to put ourselves on a roll. The more skill we develop in asking value-finding questions of others, the more we strengthen our own internal habits of asking value-finding questions of ourselves.

The questions below meet our criteria of inviting people to find value in the past and present.

1. What was the best thing that happened to you today?
2. What was the highlight of your _____ (day, week, trip, etc.)?
3. What is the primary value you are getting from this discussion?
4. What two things did you like best or appreciate most about _____?
5. What was the best, most meaningful or most useful part of your (meeting, etc.)?
6. What would you do more or less of another time?
7. What feelings are you having right now about the decision or project you are considering?
8. With what aspects of it are you feeling most comfortable? How about least comfortable?
9. What message or insight is waiting for you in these feelings?
10. What would it take for you to feel more comfortable?
11. What are your uncomfortable feelings telling you? Can you see any special patterns in these uncomfortable feelings?
12. In what ways could I be most helpful to you right now?
13. Talk to me about what you are feeling or thinking right now.
14. What are you learning from listening to your feelings right now?
15. What other question could I ask that might be helpful?

What's the first thing you notice about nearly every question? Most of them start with "what," don't they? That's a good rule to remember for learning to ask value-finding questions. If you always discipline yourself to begin your question with the word "what," your chances of framing a useful question will go up tremendously. Notice how each question could also be looked upon as a gift to the person being asked the question.

Success Stories Tell It All

Sarah and Her Teenage Daughter

This first story was told to us by Sarah, a professional woman and single-parent mother. Sarah began by telling us how the previous day's dialogue had caused her to take a serious look at how judgmental she had been with her fifteen-year-old daughter, Jodi. Sarah then related what happened when she asked the question, "What's the best thing that happened to you today?" Her first two efforts were met with a belligerent, "Nothing," which she told us she probably deserved. Her third try was met with an even more belligerent, "Mom, I said nothing!"

At this point, Sarah realized it would be necessary to ask her question in a different way. Her next two efforts went something like, "What's the least bad thing that happened to you today?" Finally, after the third try with her insightful, "least bad" question, Jodi began to cautiously test the water with a "safe" response. Much to her surprise, she discovered an entirely new attitude had replaced her mother's previously judgmental one. The next morning, Sarah reported with tears in her eyes, that the two of them continued on with several hours of the most meaningful communication they had experienced for months.

The true power of this story was revealed 6 weeks later. After that first discussion, Sarah and Jodi made a commitment to share with each other every night. After 6 weeks of consistent practice, Jodi came bouncing down the stairway one morning with the following announcement, "Mom! I already know the best thing that's going to happen to me today." Sarah responded with warm expectation, "What's that?" She told us Jodi virtually radiated as she continued, saying, "I woke up looking for the best thing that was going to happen to me today." What a transformation—and in only six weeks' time!

That's just a tiny sample of the true power of value-finding questions.

The Questions Keep Working

The setting for our next success story was a small hotel out in the middle of nowhere. This location was chosen by our client to allow his team to abandon even more barriers by keeping us together over dinner and throughout the evening between two days of focused dialogue. The homework assignment for the group was to ask someone not in the group the question, “What’s the best thing that happened to you today?” And, because we were out of town the team members would have to go to some extra effort to find someone to ask.

The next morning as we discussed our successes, one team member, Anne, reported what she thought was a complete failure of her experiment. She told us how, as we all walked into the restaurant the evening before, she recognized the piano player and decided this was the perfect person on whom to practice her question. Unfortunately, the piano player had had an extremely bad day. From the way the story unfolded, in fact, it may have been much worse than just a very bad day.

In any case, the piano player’s sharply worded response was, “How thoughtless of you to ask me such a question on a day like I’ve just been through!” As you can imagine, Anne made a hasty retreat and proceeded to report to us the next morning the utter failure of her efforts.

At this point another surprised team member, Joe, spoke up and asked, “Didn’t you speak with her later in the evening?” Anne responded, “Are you kidding?” It turns out that after dinner Joe still needed to find someone with whom to practice his question. Just before everyone got up from dinner, he walked over to the piano player and asked, “What’s the best thing that happened to you today?” She smiled and said it was having been asked that same question by Anne earlier in the evening.

The piano player went on to describe how disappointed in herself she had felt over her inappropriate response to Anne’s question. While thinking about that, she had somehow switched her mind around to counting her blessings and her entire attitude had changed. She attributed the change to Anne’s question and was truly grateful it had been asked.

The Ultimate Power of Value-Finding Questions

The person who brought us this next story was visibly hesitant to relate her experience. As Peggy’s story unfolded, we quickly learned why she felt reluctant. At 10 P.M. the previous evening Peggy received a phone

call from someone she knew only casually from work. Since Peggy's phone was unlisted, this person had obviously gone to some trouble to figure out how to reach her.

Shortly into the conversation, Peggy's intuition told her this person was preparing to commit suicide and planned to use the phone call as a suicide note. With absolutely no experience in dealing with such a crisis, Peggy felt overwhelmed with uncertainty about what to do. Suddenly she remembered her practice assignment. All she could think of was to begin asking this young man questions about what was going well in his life.

After some 45 minutes of answering these questions, the young man felt safe enough to admit that he had called with the full intention of committing suicide that very night. Peggy's questions had helped him turn the corner, and when we checked back two weeks later, we learned this young man's life had continued its remarkable turn for the better.

Closing Questions

Since this whole article is about value-finding questions, let's close with some questions for you:

> ***What two ideas did you find most useful from this article?***
> ***What would be the greatest benefit for you to learn to master asking these questions?***
> ***What would be the most useful question we could ask you now?***

(And since we're not there, how about asking it of yourself?)
www.its-all-about-quesions.com
www.clearpurpose.com

Kurt Wright, authors of *Breaking the Rules* says: There's an old saying that we teach what we need to learn. My career has been one of teaching people how to bring out the best in themselves and others. This focus of attention grew out of a decision made in 1970 to spend the rest of my life seeking to understand what each of us is like at our very best. I observed that there were far too many studies of what is wrong with people and too few about what is right with people. Breaking the Rules thus summarizes the findings from this 33-year study of what each of us is like when we are at our very best, and how to be that way more often.

During the study it became clear that people who operate at their best most of the time didn't learn to do so by looking outside themselves for answers. For this reason, I resisted the idea of writing a book about my findings. It seemed to me that it would be too easy for a book to reward readers for looking to me for answers. I was unwilling to do that.

Eventually I found a way to write so there is not a sentence of advice in the entire 320 pages of *Breaking the Rules*. In lieu of advice, I have attempted to capture and model throughout the book a unique mentor-coaching process that shows up in the background of every visionary leader I have studied. I hope you enjoy the book and benefit richly from reading it.