



Coach Approach Ministries Podcast

Episode 7: Powerful Questioning

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Brian Miller: Welcome to the *Coach Approach Ministries Podcast* where we help people find their way with God by training the best Christian coaches in the world. I'm Brian Miller, strategic director for Coach Approach Ministries, CAM for short, and I'm joined here by Chad Hall, president of Coach Approach Ministries. Hey, welcome Chad.

Chad Hall: Good day, Brian. How is it going?

Brian: It's going fantastic. At the beginning of each month, we like to issue a challenge to our community. We want people to get better, so we want to urge you to grow in an area of your coaching life, and this month, our challenge is improving your questioning. You know, they say lawyers never ask a question that they don't know the answer to. I'd like to think that coaches never ask a question that they do know the answer to, and in fact, my preference would be to ask questions that the client doesn't know the answer to either. I hope that's kind of provocative. I hope that kind of makes people lean in and think about this. The hope is that the client will discover massive amounts of new awareness for their topic, and in fact, I, as the coach, will learn from the process as well. Asking good questions is different in coaching than in about any other field, and Chad and I hope to help you unlock some of the secrets of asking great questions. So Chad, what are the secrets that no one's ever heard before about questions? Maybe we should start with the ones people maybe do know rather than the secrets.

Chad: We might ease in before we get to some kind of secret vault where all the great ones are kept. Yeah, so maybe just some basics to begin with. First of all, love what you said about the attorneys never ask a question they don't know the answer to and that maybe the opposite is true for coaches. Probably 98% of the time, we really don't know the answer. If there is a secret to great questions, it's this, coaches don't ask questions that elicit answers. Coaches ask questions that elicit responses. A lot of times we think, "Oh, Q and A. There's questions, there's an answer." The thing about an answer is, it seems to imply there's like one right answer. I love the way Jane Creswell puts this. When she does the brain class, she talks about two different kinds of questions. One kind of question kind of sends your brain scurrying to the box where that answer is stored. What's the capital of Arkansas? Your brain just automatically starts searching through the files for the answer.

Brian: Right. I felt my brain doing it. I literally thought, "What is the capital?" Then all of a sudden, the box opened, and I heard the word in head.

Chad: Yeah. I don't remember the capitals so...

Brian: Little Rock.

Chad: My brain is uncluttered by state capitals.

Brian: Little Rock.

Chad: Good. The other kind of question is... She calls those test questions. So they're questions, and they test whether you know it or not. Do you have the right answer or not? The other kind of question is a discovery question. With a discovery question, your brain knows there's no file folder with that answer. It's a question that really sends you on a quest to connect things, to make something. I always call it... You're making something up. You're creating something in that moment, and that's a response. That's the kind of question that gets a person thinking out loud, or creatively exercising their energy to come up with something they haven't thought of before, and so the secret to great questions is to ask questions that elicit responses that create new awareness for the client versus just rehashing something that they already know. Of course, we could ask all kinds of questions that can get a client thinking something new. Of course as coaches, we discipline ourselves to ask those questions in a flow of coaching conversation. It's not just any question that elicits a response. It's a question that elicits a response that's relevant to what we're talking about.

Brian: A lot of people really like... Especially, there's a specific book. Tony Stolfa's book on questions. It's a whole book of questions, and I've talked to several people who really just love having that resource. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. However, you have to be able to make the question your own, and you have to ask at the right point, and Tony's book may not help you with that.

Chad: I think lists of questions are helpful to a degree. They, for a lot of people, especially when we're new to coaching... We did a webinar on this a few months ago, on how coaching is like learning a new language. In our everyday course of conversation, we don't tend to ask powerful, open-ended questions. So where I think a book like Tony's, or any kind of list of questions is helpful, is it just kind of helps to hear, "Oh. I'm permitted to ask those kinds of questions." So we learn by example. We get those questions. It sort of opens up our repertoire of what's possible in terms of what we can ask. Where we reach the limit of any kind of book of questions, or a list of questions, is when we start letting it bind us. Oh, those are the only questions I can ask, or I got to ask it just that way, or coaching somebody and we're sort of going down the list of questions. Which one of these questions should I ask right now? Of course, that tends to not be a very powerful question when you are picking from a list.

Brian: You've created an image for me. The image for me is my father-in-law is this... He's just this genius who repurposes all this old stuff into new stuff. First of all, he's a packrat. He has like five pianos in his shed. Who has five pianos? He just has all this different kind of stuff. When you talk about asking powerful questions, or discovery, I think about him when he wants to start a project. He's just going to kind of walk through all his stuff, just kind of have his hands out, looking around, see what catches his mind there as he's opening his mind up, and then getting some stuff out and setting it on the table, and then looking at it all and saying, "What could happen here?" Not a perfect analogy, but there's this idea that you're not just writing the answer down on a test sheet. You're getting a lot of stuff out. You're looking at everything, making connections that you've never made before. This is where creativity really begins to stimulate. Can you talk a minute about the connection between creativity and discovery?

Because it makes me think about... Creativity makes it sound like it's going to be fake, like I'm making something up, and you even said... How do those two connect?

Chad: That's interesting. It sounds like creativity has this like ink blot test for you, Brian. You think it means making stuff up, but I didn't think creativity... I think of the creation story where God creates the world by speaking. He speaks something, and it creates something new out of either nothing, or essentially already there. I think creativity and discovery, when it comes to coaching, especially with our questions, is... We're asking these questions to prompt, to facilitate the person. Like you talked about your father-in-law, pulling stuff out and connecting it in new ways for a new purpose, and that's different than sort of fantasizing, making something up that's really not true. It's the creativity that takes things that are true, connects them in new ways that are equally true, so we can apply them to the challenges, the opportunities that we face. That's why that kind of discovery is a lot of work for the client, and so our questions really are prompting them to do a lot of work. Mostly mental energy, but it's not easy. It's not as easy as remembering the capital of Arkansas, that's for sure.

Brian: Sure, and I think this is a great use of coaching that I don't know that any other field does this, that you take a truth, something you know to be true, something about leadership, I mean there's 21 irrefutable truths that John Maxwell has, or whatever. Boy the irrefutable took him some time. That's you know... Anyway, so you have these truths, but then when you try to apply them in your own situation, whether it's relationship truths or leadership truths, there's all kinds, how to grow a church in general, there's some truths to that, but when you try to apply to your unique situations, with your relationships, with your leadership situation, with your community, I just see it breaking down all the time. "I don't know how to apply this. So I've got a truth, but I don't know how to apply it," but these discovery questions allow me to pull out... Having a greater awareness of what my relationships look like in the first place, and how to apply these truths to them. So whatever the topic is, there's some things that we can draw out from the client. We can draw out some truths they know. We could also speak a few truths into them. I think that's a big distinction. We can say what's true, we just can't give them a solution.

Chad: I think what kind of trips up a lot of early coaches especially is we think of truths that are true for everyone. So if I say, "Pull out some truth and reconnect it in new ways," we tend to think principles, laws, irrefutable laws, that kind of stuff. A different kind of truth is a more personal truth. What do you value? What motivates you? What are your interests in this? What are your concerns or fears about a particular goal or project, or whatever's going on? What's your level of confidence? That's a truth that you could pull out. The coach is creative in the types of questions we ask and why we ask questions. Sort of draw out all the relevant truth that can be applied here and then helping the client access that, maybe see it in a different way in order to make use of it, and it's that kind of digging to relevant truths that aren't necessarily on the surface for everybody. I think that some of us find challenging when we get into coaching.

Brian: I remember you and I were doing a demo. This has been a couple years ago now, and in fact, we just started hanging out just a little bit right then, so we didn't know each other very well, and I had a coaching topic that was really important to me, something that I was really trying to figure out. I'm saying this was two or three years ago, and I remember where I was, and I remember what the first question you asked me... The first question you asked me was, "What do you want this to look like in three years?" and it just literally blew my mind. Sounds like such a simple question, but I was so focused

on getting it right, right in the moment, in the present. I think what you did was apply a truth which was start with the end in mind. That kind of truth, and then start thinking about it through that lens, but that was so helpful. What are some other things that are just really helpful when we're talking about discovery?

Chad: I think you're trying to help the client just stretch, and that kind of question just stretches your thinking from sort of the myopic moment of the now to not just sort of begin with the end in mind, but also, what about this is most important to me. Sometimes we can get trapped and needy. Looking farther out can actually kind of bring up those interests and values that are most salient to the topic. So I think you're always trying to stretch the client. I think you also... Great questions are in a rhythm. You can't just keep stretching, and stretching, and stretching. You also have to help a client get to kind of practical matters of what are you going to do? So questions that kind of match where we are in a coaching conversation. Is it time to explore, or expand, and stretch, and discover? Is it time to narrow, and focus, and leave some stuff behind so we can focus on other things? The key is that there's discovery all along the way. A lot of people, they look at that hourglass model, and they think, "Oh well the discovery is in the bottom half when we expand to new options and new ideas." The truth is, there's discovery throughout. Discovering what part of this is most important and that we need to focus on is a narrowing, but still discovery. So there's discovery all along the way, but savvy coaches know, "Ok. Where are we in the conversation? What type of discovery is most needed right now by the client, and we tailor our questions to that."

Brian: I love what you're saying about the hour glass. So even at the top, when we're just getting into the relationship, maybe even just saying good morning, hello, there's some discovery done on the coaches part to see where the clients mental state is, and maybe to bring some awareness to the client of how they're feeling and how they're doing today, and on the opposite end of the hourglass, you have the accountability. There's so much we can do with the awareness there, and it's become a pet peeve of mine that I find the most common accountability question is, "You don't want me to hold you accountable, do you?" Just tremendous discovery there. "No, I don't. I don't want you to hold be accountable," but there's so much discovery we can do of what's worked before, and who you are as a person, and how you lean into that. I was also thinking about another side of this is I think a mistake I make a lot is that I only ask positive questions. So if somebody's thinking about, you know, "I'm thinking about putting my name in for this new job," and then as coaches, we just seem to ask questions like, "Well what would be the benefits of..." Maybe, "What's holding you back?"

Because really, we're not asking a negative question there. We're thinking, "Nothing's probably holding you back," but I read a book a couple years ago called, *The Power of Negative Thinking* by Coach Bobby Knight. I would not encourage this as a purchase. Maybe a Christmas gag gift. Just a terribly written book. Anyway... I grew up here in the basketball belt. I know you think North Carolina's the basketball belt, but I think Illinois, Indiana is, and so being around Bobby Knight in his hay day and such growing up. But this idea that we should ask questions to say, "If you took this new job, what would be the reason you quit?" You know, just really get at the negative side of it. How would you speak to that?

Chad: I think what we've got to do as coaches is watch our assumptions. What I hear you saying, Brian, is sometimes we assume, "Oh this would be a good thing, so we've got to try to figure out how to help the client get it," and true curiosity, true neutrality is, "I don't know if it's a good thing or bad thing," and we're not trying to talk them into it, talk them out of it. We're not trying to make it happen, keep it from

happening. We really are here to facilitate what's best for the client, and that requires discovery because heck, we don't know what's best. So your kind of question talking about positive and negative, I tend to think about we want to go sometimes against the grain of the client's thinking, so if they're kind of selling themselves on this, it might be a good opportunity to throw in that against the grain question of imagine you get in this job and hate it. What would you hate about it? What would make you quit? What we've got to do is those questions can't get thrown into any old coaching conversation. We better have created a sense of safety, and trust, and a client who knows how to be coached and knows not to misinterpret the question because, again, coaching's a different kind of language. In ordinary, everyday conversation if you ask me that, I think you are trying to tell me something which is, "This is a bad fit." In coaching, that's not it. We genuinely don't know. We're inviting the client to discover something about that, so that they will know, not so we can teach them something we think we know.

Brian: And I don't think you want to over explain the process. I think you want questions to stand by themselves, but I do tend to say, "Not that I'm saying you're going to quit, but just imagine yourself five years from now quitting this job. What would be the reason?"

Chad: And the key is you don't want to explain the question. In the intake process, when you're onboarding a client, you better have educated them about why you ask questions, how to engage the questions you ask, not to misinterpret questions as you advocating for something. There's a huge difference between advocating and inquiring. Coaches inquire most of the time. Rarely do we advocate for something, but the rest of the population, in ordinary conversation, the inverse is probably true. Even our inquiries are really us advocating for something. If you haven't laid that foundation early, early, early in the relationship, then those questions get misinterpreted or you feel like you have to explain every question which really is terrible coaching.

Brian: Bad mistake. You said we might see the client leaning one direction, and we need to be careful for them. I actually find the opposite. I find a lot of times if it's a new possibility, a lot of times the clients are leaning away from it, and the coaches, including me, are thinking, "No man. Get out there. Take a chance. You know, you need to go for this," and we really have to check ourselves because we want to come off positive and encouraging. I've heard coaches say that. I want people to feel encouraged and positive from my... And I hate to give Bobby Knight any sense of credibility.

Chad: Please don't.

Brian: But there is a sense of really knowing the accuracy of your situation, the reality of it so then you can come to true, new discoveries.

Chad: Yeah. I think you're on to something there, and we're using our questions to help people think well about whatever it is they're thinking about. It's not glowing sunshine and always if you can dream it, you can do it. I don't even know who came up with that, but there are plenty of things I can dream that I cannot do, and my coach should help me discern that. So it's not a we always go negative, we always go positive. It's really just trying to help the client facilitate forward movement, and sometimes that requires positive, sometimes it requires... I don't necessarily think of it as negative. It's just what's the counterbalance?

Brian: And I don't know if it's truer today, but I think I have more awareness today that your client may well be having to make a choice between four or five terrible choices. We do have that sense of... I do at

least, even as a Christian coach, the sense of God's got a path for you that's lined with rose petals, and we just have to look around until we can walk barefoot through this beautiful garden into your life, but the reality is, and I think I can say this without too much hesitation with the upcoming presidential election, we've got about five horrible choices you can make there. You can vote for one, you can vote for the other. You can find someone you could vote for who's not going to win. You could not vote. There's all these options, and you could talk about this forever to try to think of, "Oh. I'm so glad you brought new awareness to me. I've figured it out. I know exactly what to do. I'm going to move to the moon," but no. Very often, we have to make a choice that's tough, that's difficult.

Chad: I didn't think... I love your picture there of we're looking for a path forward, and we have this mistaken notion of this perfectly, well-paved, rose petal lined path that God has prepared for us. It's slightly downhill. It's really the easy, perfect path. I think most of what we do in life, and therefore in coaching, is we help people discern, what's the vista, what's the view that you are looking for? And it's like this mountaintop whatever, and the path to it is very difficult. I'm willing to hike this difficult terrain knowing where I'm going, and that it matters, and that I'm motivated, and I talked to my coach, not just to figure out what's the next step to take, but also to embolden my courage, and commitment, and energy to take a step, and doing it not because it's downhill and petal-lined and easy. I'm doing it because where it gets me really matters, and the where I want to go in life that really matters, that's probably the biggest thing we help clients discover, what really matters? What's worth working for? We don't hire a coach because the coach can help us find the easy path. We hire a coach because the coach is going to help us discern the worthwhile goal. Unless it's different on some other planet, everywhere I've been, the worthwhile goal takes work, and effort, and commitment, and that's really where coaching comes in is to help us make it through that tough terrain, and questions help really forward the progress for the client.

Brian: I would say it's the most powerful thing. It's hard to pick. Hey, this is our challenge month. Our challenge for the month is improving your questioning. Chad, I want to give you the opportunity to speak to America, speak to the world here, to those listening in from Rigel V. Give them a challenge here on improving their questioning.

Chad: Gosh. I'd be interested in what you'd say too, Brian. I've come up with a few things here in terms of a challenge. I'd say ask some questions that you're uncomfortable asking. They feel a little risky. They feel a little like the client might think, "Well that sounds kind of woo-woo," or, "That makes me work too hard," or whatever. A challenge to improve your questions, one would be look for some opportunities to take a risk, and ask those risky questions that require a response, not an answer. I think another challenge, way to maybe manifest that challenge, is to ask some questions... See how I can put this. I totally lost my train of thought because of your space reference. It's getting real in here. I had something in mind, and then I think Little Rock got in the way. It just breaks that folder. Now I don't have room for whatever I was going to share, taken up by the capital of Arkansas.

Brian: Well people have to be willing to risk asking. You have to practice asking questions, and we see a lot of people say, "Boy, I'll never be able to do that the way you guys do," and that's not true. It takes practice. It takes a rhythm. It's different. I think just practicing more and thinking about your questions. My challenge would be however long your questions are now, shorten them. A little bit.

Chad: I'll give you this challenge. This isn't what I was thinking of earlier, but I did this with a mentor coaching client recently, and I invited students to do this through the years, and that's to write out

coaching scenarios. If you really want to improve your questions, write out five or ten coaching conversations. Just totally make them up. You're the coach and the client. Typing those out, or writing them out, like a screenplay almost. Coach, colon, and then what the coach would say. Client, colon, what the client would say, and respond. Just make up those coaching conversations because it allows you to practice those risky questions in an incredibly safe environment. I mean talk about having a safety net under you, but it also helps you know your questions should always, not always, but typically they should ping off of what the client just said, and maybe, if there's another secret to great coaching questions, that's it. If you really hear what the client just said, gosh, they're going to give you 80-90% of what the next question is, and where I see coaches really just botch it is they don't listen, and therefore, their questions...

Brian: They've already got their next three questions figured out. Chad, I so appreciate you joining me here today. Let me just thank you, the audience, for joining us. You can find out more about us by going to coachapproachministries.org, and downloading our free eBook, *The Beginners Guide to Christian Coaching: How to Have Powerful Conversations that Really Make a Difference*. See you later.