



Coach Approach Ministries Podcast

Episode 46: Bad Questions. Good Questions. Better. Best.

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[Intro Music]

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. Our podcast today is sponsored by our certificate in Christian leadership coaching. This is a nine-month, ICF approved, coach training program that will prepare you to coach those around you, to set goals, take action, and reach new levels of success. We have a cohort forming in July, so if you're interested, go to our website at www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow. I'm Brian Miller, strategic director for Coach Approach Ministries, CAM for short, and I'm joined here today by the president of Coach Approach Ministries, Chad Hall.

Chad Hall: Hey Brian. How's it going today?

Brian: It's going really well. This is hat day here at the podcast. Have you noticed that?

Chad: I noticed. You've got a hat on. I've got a hat. What is your hat? I can't quite...

Brian: It is a Saluki's hat, Southern Illinois University. It's where my daughter and my money went. What about you?

Chad: My daughter and my money went to Southern Illinois, and all I got was this lousy hat. Mine's for a travel baseball team that my boys play for, the Hickory Hurricanes.

Brian: The parents get a hat too?

Chad: If you pay for it, and trust me, I've paid for it.

Brian: Well, we're excited to be here with you all on hat day. So, this is our challenge. We try to bring a challenge to the coaching community every month, and this month, the challenge we're bringing to our coaching community is to improve your ability to ask better questions. Chad, there's a lot of things in coaching, a lot of skills, listening's certainly a key, but for people in coaching, improving their ability to ask questions seems to be the number one way people can do it.

Chad: Yeah. It is, and it's funny, Brian, because we've been training people to coach for a long time, and

one of the things I've noticed, I'm sure you've noticed this too, is boy, there's a promise and a curse when it comes to improving your questions. We want people to lean into improving their questions, but the curse part of it is, sometimes they can overthink it, and they get sort of this, "Oh, I've got to word it just right. I've got to craft it just so. It needs to be seven words instead of nine words." Pretty soon, their brain is so into crafting a question that they just really lost touch with the person they're coaching, and that's not the intent of today's podcast. We're not trying to improve your questioning but actually make you a worse coach. We want you to be a better coach because you have better questions.

Brian: It strikes me in coaching that the way you ask questions isn't like any other profession. It's not lawyering, it's not consulting, it's not counseling. The purpose, the way you ask questions, is so different than anything else, even natural conversation. So, it is an awkward skill to learn and to improve upon.

Chad: Yeah, you can really overthink it and diminish your ability as a coach, but if you don't think about it, if you don't give some intentionality to it, you'll just keep doing what you've been doing, and that's not really going to make you a better coach either, so maybe near the end of today's podcast, we can give a few tips and tricks for improving your questions. I've got a few of those up my sleeve if we need to talk about those.

Brian: All right my friend. Let's get started. The structure we're putting on today's conversation is going from bad questions, to good questions, to better questions, to the best questions, and I'm excited about that. There's going to be stuff to learn all the way through this, and so, let's start on bad, and let's make sure we don't run too quickly here, but what's the definition of a bad question? Where does that come from?

Chad: I guess a bad question's one that's not very good. How's that? That's something one of my kids would say to me. What's the definition? Well, it's not that. No, seriously, I think that bad questions are... I'm sure they take on a lot of different forms. The most common form I hear is it's questions that's really intended to show how smart the coach is. So, these would be leading questions, "Haven't you thought about this?" Any of the stuff we cover in the intro to coaching class. To me, they all fall under this umbrella of, "Look how smart I, as the coach, am."

Brian: "Have you ever thought about trying X, Y, Z?"

Chad: Exactly.

Brian: Terrible question.

Chad: "Don't you think it would be a good idea to..."

Brian: So, it does two things. One, the client is not the expert. The coach is the expert, and two, it does not bring any forward progress into the client's agenda, their ability to think. It doesn't do any of that. These are bad questions.

Chad: Yeah. The word you just used there was "think." Who's doing the thinking? So, a bad question reveals what the coach is thinking. So, the coach has their problem solving hat on, or their thinking cap, and they're going about doing some of the work for the client, and they're trying to fly it into the conversation under the disguise of it being a question, and I'll tell you, having trained one thousand, two thousand people in 15 years, I'm thinking at least half the people who come into coaching start right

here, and they think, “That’s good coaching. See how I asked a question? I got them to think it was their idea.” That’s a bad question if you’re trying to get them to think it was their idea, but it was really my idea. That is no good.

Brian: Because when you’re taking the trek into coaching questions, like I said at the beginning, there’s no analogy for it. There’s no comparison. You can’t say, “Oh, this is like when you...” There really isn’t. It’s very different, so you’re going into a new place, and you can even listen to someone asking good questions, and you’re thinking, “How did that work? Why did that even work?” Now, there’s a word, certainly in bad questions, there’s no curiosity. Talk about curiosity for a second, Chad.

Chad: Yeah, the coach being curious is really a coaching presence thing, and it shows up all throughout coaching, whether you’re asking questions, or how you listen, giving feedback, everything. It’s really this open, exploratory notion that reality has not yet been created, and we will create it together. To me, that’s curiosity. So, I’m in this conversation to see what happens, and the bad questioner, the coach who asks bad questions, I’m not saying you’re a bad coach, but a coach who asks bad questions, typically, the curiosity really is lacking. They think that everything that is going to happen has already happened, and they’re probably the one who’s going to make it happen. So, it’s their good thinking that’s going to show up in the conversation that’s going to help things move forward.

Brian: Sure. They’re not curious. The answer to this problem is one of three things. It’s either boundaries, or it’s leadership, integrity, whatever. They’ve got this list of things. It’s one of the five dysfunctions of a team. I don’t even get to think very hard about this. It’s going to fall out.

Chad: It’s something I’ve encountered before.

Brian: It’s something I’ve encountered before, but instead, to have that curiosity that this is unique, and this is interesting. You’ve definitely got to bring that for sure. So, let’s move from bad questions just to good questions. Let’s don’t ramp it up too high, but what’s the next step up? So, now it’s not... A bad question doesn’t do anything for the client. A good question will do something for the client.

Chad: It does. I think a good question contrasts to a bad question. A good question lets the client reveal their thinking. Sort of the tell-tale sign, to me, is when I hear a coach begin their question with, “Tell me.” Which, by the way, isn’t really a question. It’s a command. I command you to tell me what are you thinking? Tell me blah, blah, blah, but it’s this idea that I’m going to ask a question so that the client will put into the conversation what they’ve already thought, or what they’re already thinking. It’s not necessarily a curiosity to get somewhere new in your thinking, which we’ll get to in just a minute. It’s more just a curiosity for them to share what they’re thinking. Again, that’s way better. By the way, the contrast between bad and good is significant. From here, we’re just scaling it up to different increments of goodness. That’s really good. It’s good to invite the client to share what they’re thinking about the issue. That’s a whole lot better than a bad question.

Brian: So, I’m trying to think of how you would work through that. You could certainly say, “Tell me what the topic is. Tell me about the topic, what you’ve got so far. As you reflect on that, tell me what’s coming to mind as you consider all the options.” That’s still all in the “tell me” format.

Chad: A lot of times, for me, these are around things that have already happened. They’re questions that ask the client to reveal what they already know, so a coach who tends to ask about the past, those

are going to be good questions, but that's it. They're limited in that way. Coaches who can only ask good questions, where they really struggle, is when the client doesn't know, or what they know, doesn't really move them forward to a solution or success. For instance, when a client comes in, and I say, "So, what do you want to talk about today," and they say, "I want to talk about my career. I'm really not happy with my career. I'm really dissatisfied. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," and then I as the coach say, "So, when you've thought about your career, what's missing," and the client says, "I don't know." Well, thanks for coming. My only arsenal of questions are those designed to pull out what the client has already thought of, is already clear on. That's really going to be the limited effect.

Brian: I might go a little farther to say if you have really keen powers of observation, so that's another skill, observation, I definitely have had clients say things, and then I might repeat back to them what they say, and they're shocked to hear what they just said. So, there certainly is this aspect of getting people to begin to process their current thinking. It's not quite as laid out perhaps. There are some holes, and what I'm not hearing you say. You can definitely make some observations. "I hear you saying this, but I also hear you saying that, and it seems like there's some contradiction in there." I don't think I'm moving from good to better quite yet.

Chad: Well, I think what you're doing, Brian, is you're reinforcing the contrast between bad and good.

Brian: Because you said there's a big spectrum there, so I'm just trying to pull that out a bit.

Chad: So, when you invite a client to share what they have been thinking, that's good, not bad. Is it all the goodness you need to move forward in an especially complex or kind of tricky conversations? No, but it's good in that it adds to the conversation. It adds to client clarity. There's a lot of good that can come from those kind of questions. Where they tend to get stuck, a coach who only has those good questions, they get stuck when reiterating, or covering, what they already know can't move them forward. You and I do a lot of this where we listen to coaches practice their coaching with clients, and to me, boy, just the real signal of this is when a client says, "I don't know," and then the coach gets stuck. "Well they said they don't know. What am I supposed to do?"

Brian: How could you know what's missing? How could you know? You get kind of stuck in that. So, let's move it up a step. We went from bad, the coach is the expert, to good, where the coach is saying tell me which still has that sense of, "Maybe I can help. I'm not going to be an expert right off the bat, but if you tell me enough, maybe..." Moving to better. What's a distinction for better?

Chad: I think where a good question invites the client to share their thinking on the issue, a better question invites the client to have new thinking on the issue, and I'll tell you, that's a whole different level of questions. So, I don't just draw out what you've already been thinking. I don't draw out from you just what you've kind of known but not known that you've known. I actually only ask questions now that get you to new thinking. Our colleague, Jane Creswell, talks about these discovery questions. You're inviting the client to go somewhere new in his or her brain to create new thinking, and the limitation here, why this isn't the best question, is this tends to be narrowed on new thinking about the issue. Whatever the topic, the opportunity, the challenge, the problem, getting the client to get to new thinking on that, those are what I would think of as better questions.

Brian: That's huge. That would be huge to get new thinking on the topic. I think the education word that wasn't there when I was growing up in school, but is making connections. So, you read this story, how

can you connect that to your own life? There's definitely this idea of some new thinking that you didn't have before based on that. So, Chad, something I've done with my students to help them get there is to set an expectation up front. I think not only for the client, but for the coach as well, and I try to do this as well, so when I start a coaching conversation, I say, one, this is confidential. We know that. We learn two rules at the beginning. One is the Las Vegas rule. What happens in coaching, stays in coaching, but the other is the Star Trek rule, which is I'm going to take your thinking where it hasn't gone before. So, by making the statement up front that it's confidential, but two, I'm going to take your thinking some place it's not been before. That sets an expectation up for them, and for me as well, that I think helps me ask questions at a better level than just at the good.

Chad: One of the ways I talk about that, Brian, is, these are the kind of questions that invite the client to work.

Brian: How many times have I asked a question and my client says, "I don't know. I'd have to think about that."

Chad: Yeah, but that's what we're doing here.

Brian: That's why we're here.

Chad: One thing we have to really reinforce is that these better questions don't just sort of drop out of the sky and create magic. They happen in the context of a really good coaching relationship where we create space, we're really listening well, there's trust, there's safety, there's intimacy, all of those things. So, when we ask the question that spurs new thinking about the issue, the client actually feels new safety to go there. They feel okay to be quiet while they think the new thought, and the thing with a new thought is you don't know if it's good or not, so that safety piece is really important because they're going to think a new thought about their issue, and if they feel really safe, they're going to say it out loud, and one out of three times, it's going to be crap because it's new. Why would you think that just because it's a new idea, it was a good idea? A lot of times they're not very good ideas. So, that safety and that partnership to not just think a new thought, but to have new thinking about their issue until they actually get to better thinking. Boy, that's a real partnership between coach and client, but it requires a lot of work on the part of the client.

Brian: So, up front, you talked about some tips and tricks, and I think this is probably where our listeners are saying, "Tip me and trick me."

Chad: Trip?

Brian: No, not trip me.

Chad: Don't trip.

Brian: But show me something here that would help me to ask questions like this.

Chad: I'd say one of the most powerful teachers of how to ask good questions is to write out a coaching conversation. Just script it. Just make it up. Don't try to rehash a conversation you've already had, just make it up. That's safe because you are the coach and you're the client, and literally, write out the questions, and what kind of response would that bring from the client? Write that response out, and

what's the next question? There's something about writing out those questions, or typing them, or whatever that allows you a really safe place to practice, and really helps you think, "Now what is this question designed to do?" You'll start to type those questions out, and you'll realize, "Wait a minute. That question is about me being smart. Let me do that over." So, you have this infinite number of do-overs by writing those out, and anybody listening to the podcast, you'd be surprised how much better of a coach you're going to be if you would just write out about five coaching conversations from beginning to end. Your questions will improve dramatically, unless you're weird.

Brian: I thought you were going to say they would improve grammatically.

Chad: They'll improve grammatically too. I like that. It's a little early on a Tuesday morning for that, but I appreciate it.

Brian: I'm thinking about one thing that I bring to this area of thinking is a perspective shift. So, I want the client to look at this in a way they haven't looked at it before, and you're right. This is certainly a place where it could be, "Look how smart I am by the way I ask the question," as opposed to but still getting the perspective shift in there. So, perspective shift can be from making them see it from somebody else's point of view. How is somebody else seeing this, whether it be my antagonist, my spouse, my kids, God. How does somebody else see this? It can really open up the perspective for them. Not only that, but some people would be really creative and say, "You're a bird flying 40,000 feet over this. How does it look now," or I suppose the opposite, "You're an ant, and you're seeing everything huge. What sticks out to you?" Different things and different ways just to spur some new thinking.

Chad: You're wise to connect it to the bad question. It's interesting because the bad questions often have this idea of, "I'm going to help them think in a new way about this, and the new way is my way," and then we let go of that and start asking good questions, but if we're not careful, we're not really asking them to think about it in a new way. We're just saying, "Oh, I'm going to pull out what they're thinking."

Brian: If I'm curious about a perspective shift in somebody else, and this is where I've seen... Somebody might say, "Well, what's God think about this?" We're Christians, that's what we should ask, but there's probably a curious question in there somewhere else of, "Who sees this differently?"

Chad: What we're all getting to is, "How could you see this differently?" The bad questioner thinks there's a wrong and a right way to see it, and I've got to get you from the wrong way to the right way. The better questioner, using our terminology here, is to invite a perspective shift for the client where they can see things in a different way where there are better options, there are more options. There's more freedom, and flexibility, and fluidity. They can exercise choice and intentionality, and they can see the path toward success. The old perspective, from here you can't see the path toward success. We're trying to get a different perspective where you can get there, but that's a creative thing, and that's where the curiosity comes in, so again, it's not that the coach sees that pathway, "And now I've got to get the client to see it." It's that the coach is very curious, trying to help the client shift the perspective, but it's going to take a lot of work on the client's part.

Brian: So, let's jump to the best, the very best, Chad.

Chad: The very best. To me, and I want to be really clear, that if you only ask these kinds of questions,

you're probably not doing very good coaching. The best kinds of questions are what you might call transformative, and now, we're not just inviting the client to have new thinking about the issue, we're inviting the client to have new thinking about the client. So, we talk about this sometimes, internal shifts. Not just new awareness, but new self-awareness. You might think about these kinds of questions as like icing on the cake. Honestly, I'm going to eat cake even if it doesn't have icing on it. It's going to be good. Thank you very much. I like cake. When you have these questions added, now you've got just transformative coaching because not only is the client seeing their issue differently, they're seeing themselves differently, and they might even become different. That's really at the heart of what we mean by transformation.

Brian: I like your analogy because some people will just eat icing but very rarely, and people can't eat a lot of icing, so there's cake, I'll eat cake. If there's icing, better, but you've got to be careful not just to have icing here because you have to work your way to that. You have to look for those moments, for those internal shifts. You have to be very aware of the right time and right spot for that, don't you?

Chad: Yeah, that's right. So, if we think about the better questions begin helping them where they can see a new path to success, this kind of shift is, "I have to see myself differently in order to get to success." By the way, I still have to walk the path. I'm still going to need coaching around what to do, actions to take, strategy, all that kind of stuff, but I actually have to become a different person in order to walk that path, and so it's a both-and. This isn't always necessary or required. Although, I think a lot of coaching conversations have opportunity for at least subtle internal shifts. Heighten a value that's important to me, hold a standard that maybe I've been holding too loosely. Those kinds of internal tweaks and adjustments are almost always a part of a coaching conversation, but they are not the whole conversation, and if all you do is coach around internal shifts, actually, your client's never going to get anywhere new, and they probably should fire you after three or four sessions.

Brian: Can you give us an example of a coaching situation where this really stood out?

Chad: Yeah, I remember, and I used it sometimes in our training, I talked about the only coach I've ever fired. So, it was my coach, and for the first three or four sessions, he was probably the best coach I've ever had. We did some future story stuff, some really reimagining who I am, getting to those deeply held values and perspectives, and then, I was ready to operationalize this. Man, I feel like a new person. I'm ready to put this into practice, and the coach couldn't help do that. It was always about internal shifts. It was always internal shifting, but never externally living that out, and it didn't take long to realize, well I'm never going to live as this new person if I can't operationalize it, to use a 50-cent word today, and so that was really the limitation. That was an all icing kind of coaching relationship, and it didn't bear a lot of fruit.

Brian: That's a great example. Well, Chad, I really appreciate you walking us through bad, good, better, best today, and I want to thank those who are listening today, too. Thanks so much for joining us. This podcast was sponsored by our certificate in Christian leadership coaching. This is a nine-month, ICF-approved, coach training program that will prepare you to coach those around you, to set goals, take action, and reach new levels of success. We have a cohort forming in July, and we would love to have you be a part of that, and if you'd like to, go to our website at

www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow. We'll see you next week.

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