



## Coach Approach Ministries Podcast

### Episode 83: When to Use an Outlandish Question

Published: January 18, 2018

**Brian Miller:** Are you someone who people come to for guidance? Do you ever think, “There has to be a better way to get people unstuck.” We’ve trained over 1,500 Christian coaches who help people get from where they are to where they want to go. You’ve got natural gifts, and we’ve got the mindset and the tools. Fill in your guidance gap with your certificate in Christian Leadership Coaching. It’s easy as 1, 2, 3. One, learn to coach in live, interactive classes. Two, practice coaching and receive helpful feedback. Three, join our practicing, community of coaches. You can find out more at [www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow](http://www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow). That web address again is [www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow](http://www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow).

#### [Intro Music]

**Brian:** 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, mister, I mean Dr. Chad Hall. How you doing today, Chad?

**Chad:** I’m doing well. That whole doctor thing is going to get kind of old, so...

**Brian:** Expect it to ramp up then.

**Chad:** Okay. I knew I should have said the opposite.

**Brian:** Yeah. If we can drill that into the ground, then that’s what we’re going to do with it. That’s for sure. You know, it doesn’t make you any smarter than anybody else. You know that, right?

**Chad:** I was already smarter.

**Brian:** I didn’t need the moniker to know that I was smarter than everybody else.

**Chad:** It did really add to my humility.

**Brian:** It’s not a clue for me. It’s a clue for you. That’s right. Hey, we’ve got a great topic today, Chad. It’s something that came up in a class I was teaching where I was talking about coaching the person, not the problem. We just covered that a couple weeks ago in a podcast, but sometimes, I think you need an outlandish question to get outside of the question, to get outside of the context, to create some more

perspective. Sometimes you need to ask, what I'm calling, an outlandish question.

**Chad:** I love that term, Brian. One, that's a really intelligent sounding term. Outlandish. It's interesting, you and I have both been around enough beginner coaches, and if you're not careful, those beginner coaches can sound kind of like robots. They just ask kind of like, "What would you like to talk about? What part of that's important to you? Where would you like to be when we finish? What could you do about that? What else?" Gosh, you know, those questions are kind of the meat and potatoes of coaching. We should ask those kind of questions, but boy, there are times when a client is just not getting anywhere with those questions, and they're either stuck in their own head or they're out of ideas. It's like we need to take some jumper cables to their brain just to really kickstart it into living into its potential. To get the creativity and the resourcefulness out of this client, they need a jolt. They need an outlandish question.

**Brian:** For certain, and it made me think about Barbara Walters, one of the best interviewers in broadcast history, I think. She takes a lot of flack. She gets made fun of all the time. She's not very... If you're under 40, you may have to look up Barbara Walters, which is worth doing, but one question she asked, and she did ask it, but she got just a ton of flack for it was, "What kind of tree are you?" If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?

**Chad:** Outlandish.

**Brian:** It's outlandish, and I looked it up, and interestingly enough, it was in context. So, the context was, she was interviewing Katherine Hepburn, one of these glorious actresses of the 30's, 40's, 50's, and Katherine Hepburn in some other question answered that she's like a tree, and from that, Barbara Walters said, "Really? You're a tree. What kind of tree are you," and she said she was an oak. It really did expose this kind of new awareness. It was a great question, but that would be an outlandish question right there. If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?

**Chad:** Yeah, and here's what I love about that question in the Barbara Walters interview. I love that it pings on something that the client's already said, or the person being interviewed has already said. So, while it is outlandish, it's not this from left field ink blot test that's just threw in front of somebody. I think that's why a lot of coaches resist the outlandish question is they're afraid, "My client's going to respond weird to that. They're not going to know what it is. What kind of new-age hooaha is this?" When you can relate it to something they're already familiar with and then go outlandish, boy, to me, that's just a right balance.

**Brian:** Yeah, we'll talk more about that, the right context for that question. That's a great issue. Let's look at some examples here. I think the one example, that maybe people are familiar with, I think this is the parent of all outlandish questions, and when I was first exposed to this question, I thought it was not outlandish. If outlandish, I meant in a stupid way. It was the dream question.

**Chad:** It was a stupid question to you.

**Brian:** It seemed like a stupid question to me. If money and time were no object, what would you do? I thought, "Money and time are always an object." What happens when you ask that question is they just kind of release their brain and think more broadly for a minute, and then I've never ever had anybody say, "Well, I would take the billion dollars..." They don't do that. They come up with good solutions. It

frees their mind in a way that an outlandish question should.

**Chad:** Yeah, and I think it does it because what's happening when our brains are kind of shutting down, or not being as creative and resourceful as they could be, is we think we see things the way they are, and that limits our perspective. It limits what we think is possible. It limits the scope of reality, you might say, and you ask the billion-dollar question, money and time are no object, however you want to ask it, you ask it that way because you want them to suspend their disbelief. When they do that, even when they come back to reality, reality's bigger now, it now encompasses more possibilities. We're not asking the money and time are no object question because that's a possible reality. It's just to stretch them into a new place in their brain that they couldn't have gone otherwise.

**Brian:** Yeah. Let me give you a couple more examples that I know that I've used in the past, and I don't know, this may be helpful, may be not helpful, because they do need to be in some context, and we should probably talk about context. In one context of where I was coaching a client, and she just felt stuck, couldn't seem to take some next steps into something broader, I asked this question. I asked, "If Jesus were to give you a new name, like he did to Simon Peter, what name would he give you?" Now, again, you're right. You don't want that to be your first question before you have a topic.

**Chad:** Right. How are you doing today? I'm fine. Great.

**Brian:** What's your new name?

**Chad:** What's your new name? Uhhhh.

**Brian:** I don't think you want it to be your second question either. What's your topic? It can come out of this sense of identity, of seeing yourself in a new situation. It was just fascinating when I asked that question. First of all, a rule that I like to say about questions is don't ask the client a question they know the answer to. You want your client to think. If your client's responding quickly, it's likely you're not asking... It could be they're just processing out loud, but it could be you're not asking questions of any depth, and I guarantee if you ask somebody, "If Jesus were to give you a new name, what would it be," they say, "Oh, I've thought about this. I know the answer to this one."

**Chad:** Right. I actually have a nametag with this already on it. It's interesting. I think one of the reasons we sometimes resist the outlandish question, again, we don't want people to be uncomfortable, and there's a little bit of discomfort in asking someone a question they don't yet have a response for because it requires them to work, and that's something that we just have to be comfortable with as coaches. We have to be comfortable making our clients uncomfortable for the purpose of helping them grow and move forward in life, and those questions that you've asked so far, they have that purposeful uncomfortableness to them which I think is part of what makes them outlandish.

**Brian:** And sometimes that's necessary. I can think of one client I had, and I may get my brain backwards here. You may have to correct me, but I would say he's pretty back, left brain. He's very logical, very process oriented, and he knew what he wanted to accomplish, and it wasn't working. So, any ideas of new awareness, he was really stuck in that groove of this is the way I've done it before. This is the way I want it to work. I don't know what else I could do, what else I could try. Actually, it wasn't right off the bat. It was well into the conversation and probably after multiple conversations, I think I asked an outlandish question to which he responded, "I don't do really good with questions like that," and I said,

“I know, but for you to make this shift, to get out of this rut, I’m going to have to ask some questions like that.”

**Chad:** Yeah because what you’re doing’s not working.

**Brian:** I know it’s uncomfortable, and we’re going to have to shift you into some levels of discomfort.

**Chad:** One of the ways I like to imagine this is create like a playing field, in bounds, out of bounds. Metaphorically I’m speaking here. When we do that, we’ve got this kind of boundary, and say, “We’re just going to do this for a few minutes, and here are the rules.” You kind of game-ify it a bit so that the client, like the one you’re talking about, says, “Okay. This isn’t going to be something we carry on for 20 minutes. This is going to serve a purpose. There’s some boundaries to it. There’s some rules to it. I can engage it now that I know what the rules and stuff are.” Now, these outlandish questions or thought experiments can serve their purpose, and I find that it doesn’t necessarily help the person feel more comfortable. It at least shows them how to show up in it, how to engage it more fully. Maybe more comfortable, but certainly with more confidence.

**Brian:** I was thinking about the opposite of the back-left brain, the front-right brain person who’s so creative, and they love the outlandish question. What’s your new name? It’s unpronounceable. It’s all vowels. I know that. It’s at least a thousand letters long.

**Chad:** It’s actually the symbol that Prince used, like a swirly mark. I send those people to Bill Copper to be coached.

**Brian:** Oh sure. Absolutely. Rarely you find these two extremes. I think that’s rare. I think this idea of an outlandish question is sometimes exactly what the coaching needs to shake it up a little bit, to make it fresh.

**Chad:** If we’re going to create awareness, we’ve got to do something creative.

**Brian:** So, let me give you another question that was asked to me when I was teaching a class. I was teaching a class. I had a student just doing a practice run, and it was uneven, so I said I’d be the client, and I brought up a real topic that I was struggling with that I wasn’t sure what direction to go. He asked me, and I think he probably had a little context to it, something like this. Jesus is here, and he wants you to succeed. What are three things he could do that would make this easier for you? Honest to goodness, I started crying. It was such a serious topic to me. It involved something at least in ministry that I find maybe the most important thing. It had to do with my family. It had a lot of intersections to it, and I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, Chad. I wasn’t bawling.

**Chad:** I wasn’t judging at all.

**Brian:** I think you had me pictured bawling.

**Chad:** I imagined you actually huddled in the corner, crying profusely.

**Brian:** No. There was some moistness in the corner of my right eye.

**Chad:** I know you, Brian. You thought about shedding a tear.

**Brian:** It could have just been something else, but anyway... An outlandish question often, just by the

way it's asked, it can humble you. It can change your perspective just in the question itself. That one in particular... I use them sparsely. Very rarely do I ask a question like that, but when I do, usually, the client's like, "That's a good question." They identify it right off.

**Chad:** Which is a euphemism for, "I need to think about that for a minute because it's got me thinking. I don't have a ready response." You reminded me, I had a coach. I was being coached, and the coach asked me about the topic, something along the lines of, "What part of this topic really resonates not in your head, but in your heart," and I'm a thinker. My very first response was, "Let's not go there." For a millisecond, it was, "Let's keep it above the neck." Just the kindness with which the question was asked, the sincerity, and the, "I'm not going to let you off the hook," nature of it. Boy, it just very quickly helped me get to a new insight about the topic, and it was really powerful.

**Brian:** I think that's where you need to set up a... So, you said, "Let's don't do that." Whether you said that or didn't, it's very likely that the client might say that to you, and you've got to hold things very lightly in coaching, but if you've built enough trust, and you've got a gut feeling about it, I do think there's a, "I won't make you do this, but would you allow us to just play here for like two minutes?"

**Chad:** Yeah, and I think you're hitting something super important which is none of this is some sort of automatic, absolutely going to work, guaranteed every time. Part of what makes the question outlandish is it's risky, and the client could just say, "I don't know. That didn't do anything." So, the risky part of it is, I think, always about the outlandish question. If you get that client who says, "I don't know what to do with that. What kind of dumb question is that," don't back off immediately is what I hear you saying, Brian, and I'm going to agree with that. Be willing to back off eventually, but don't back off immediately. Just press a little bit for the good of the client. By the way, not for the good of you as a coach, not so that you don't get embarrassed or, "What's wrong with you, client? Don't you know all my questions are great?" It's not that kind of persistence. It's really longing for the client to get the most from this coaching relationship, and sometimes that means you being a bit persistent.

**Brian:** I think it's okay with these kind of awareness questions where I definitely had to learn shifting from pastor to coach. I start to sniff out the problem, and I might try to dig into the problem a little bit. I had this happen really early, and my client said, "Let's don't go there." I went there again. "Let's don't go there." So, I asked just one more time. "Let's move on." I had that happen to me just the other day when I was mentor coaching. So, someone's coaching me, and I had to tell them three times, "Uh. No. Let's don't go there."

**Chad:** That's not what I want to talk about, thank you.

**Brian:** That's prying for sure as opposed to, "Let's play for a second."

**Chad:** That's the thing. I think the playfulness is a confidence that this question could reveal something, but I don't know what it is, and the prying is, "You client, don't you understand? This really is where you need to focus." That's not very good coaching. The playfulness is really good coaching. The prying isn't. I'll give you an example about when an outlandish question was needed. I was being coached recently, and I made the request of the coach. I said, "I think I need to brainstorm on this, so maybe we could just do some brainstorming," and the coach said, "Good. Go ahead. Do that. Brainstorm."

**Brian:** What would you say first? I don't like those questions typically.

**Chad:** One, it wasn't a question. It was, "Brainstorm." That's not really helpful. There's a question that helps the client brainstorm. It may be an outlandish, or it's at least a creative question to get those juices flowing, to get the ideas going, to get stuff happening, but it reminded me of so often our coaching questions are, "Okay. Well, come up with a new idea." As the client, if I could just come up with a new idea, I would. I need the creative questions from you as the coach to get me thinking and get things connected in a new way so I can get to the new idea. It's not just, "What's a new idea?"

**Brian:** Being creative certainly is a big part of being outlandish, and as you said that, my first thought was, "Well, I don't know what to ask you about brainstorming, but then I started to get a picture of a storm in your brain, and you can here the rumbles. There's a lot of stuff there, powerful. It's a little dark, and all of a sudden, there's a lightening strike. It brightens up that part of your brain. What part of your brain got lit up? What's a glimpse of maybe something you saw?"

**Chad:** I was thinking good brainstorming questions help the client generate just terrible ideas en route to decent ideas, and who knows? You might have a strike of lightening that's a really good idea. What we're doing as coaches is we're nurturing that process.

**Brian:** We should hold it wider, I think, to help them brainstorm more broadly. We get caught up as coaches on two or three and want to dig into those two or three, and if you wanted to brainstorm, you want a wide selection of possibilities.

**Chad:** I think as the coach, then, you have to see the clouds, so to speak. You have to put something in there to generate the electricity, to help get things moving around. I'm using that just as an example of when an outlandish question could really be helpful.

**Brian:** So, an outlandish question gets seeded.

**Chad:** Exactly. One of my favorite questions, it's not that outlandish, but I like to start with, "What's the worst idea ever?" One, I think it signals to the client, of course you're not going to do this, and so, we're not looking for a good answer right now. We're just looking around.

**Brian:** I'm getting really creative now that I'm thinking. So, something's cooking, and the smells begin to rise up. What is it you smell? Now, you know what? That might work, and it might not.

**Chad:** Yeah, and you're asking me this right about dinner time here in North Carolina. So, I'm thinking lasagna. It smells like lasagna.

**Brian:** There's a lot of layers to lasagna, so what's in those layers.

**Chad:** There you go. I'll give you a different one. Lasagna made me think of this one. Sometimes I've asked clients, "What's your favorite comic strip?" Peanuts, Blondie, or Garfield. Garfield's the one that made me think of lasagna, and then you just ask the question, "How would Garfield approach this?" That's outlandish. Garfield is not going to approach this issue. It's just, "Hey, look at it from a different angle." Be playful with it. That's going to loosen things up so we get somewhere new.

**Brian:** For sure. I love it. So, one other thing we talked about, Chad, is give them a story. What would be an example of that, of how to give them a story, just maybe how to set up the context of an outlandish question.

**Chad:** Yeah, and typically, we're telling new coaches, especially, keep your questions short and concise, all that kind of stuff. This is advanced. Before we get into this, we recognize this is in contrast to the advice, "Keep your questions concise." It's concise because it's clear. A story is clear even though it's longer. So, take, for instance, the question from earlier, "If money and time were no object, what would be possible?" We could just kind of create more of a story around that and say, "Let's imagine, because you're not a gambler, your wife came home, and had won the lottery, and is going to share this with you."

**Brian:** Oh, I like this.

**Chad:** "Instantly, you have 127 million dollars, and if that weren't enough, you also happen to find a device that could slow down time. So, all of a sudden, you've got all the money you want and all the time you need. What would you do about this?" One, it creates a little more of that playfulness, but it's got them already in a narrative that they can kind of finish off. It feels less like a question and more like an adventure. It just kind of invites them into that. I love stuff like that with clients. It's collaborative. It really engages them. Anyway, it just really gets them... I think it gets the momentum going for them.

**Brian:** It seeds the clouds, as you said earlier. Here's one I used the other day, I was coaching a client, and he just was stuck, and change was coming again, and he was just sick of the change. He didn't see how this was going to work. So, I stopped, and I told him a story about my mother who goes into Walmart, sees all these self-checkouts, and refuses to use one because it's putting someone out of a job. I'm like Walmart's not going to take the self-checkouts out because you don't like them. It's not going to happen.

**Chad:** Mistress Miller has protested, therefore...

**Brian:** This is going forward. So, what would you tell my mom? I did use that. Actually, I did not have the highest hopes that this was going to be that helpful, and it was. It changed the context. It put it in a different story, different context, to be able to talk and think about change.

**Chad:** That's neat.

**Brian:** Yeah, it worked, but you've got to keep that story ultra short.

**Chad:** You've got to be ready for, "Now wait a minute. Your mom's just being a luddite."

**Brian:** This is your choice. You can become Amish. You can get off the train. I think I actually said that.

**Chad:** If the client were to push back on that and say, "Well, I don't see myself being that resistant to change?" That's great. You can ask the follow-up question of, "How resistant are you? What would be different?" "Well, I'm open to change as long as X, Y, Z." Now you're into a conversation. You're exploring. You're getting somewhere new. That's fine. It doesn't have to be that they drop to their knees and say, "Forgive me Father for I have resisted change."

**Brian:** That's always the goal, to get them to drop to their knees and ask for forgiveness at the end of the coaching conversation.

**Chad:** We do have to give up being pastors, don't we?

**Brian:** Chad, this has been a lot of fun talking about the outlandish question. I thank you so much for joining me today.

**Chad:** It's been fun, and I hope that the listeners will experiment with this and ask some outlandish questions. Just remember, it's a risk, but I think it's worth taking.

**Brian:** I do too, and thanks so much for the listeners for joining us. Don't miss any of our podcasts. Subscribe to our podcast at iTunes. I'm more recently trying to use Overcast. Stitcher is out there. Google Play, and you can search for Coach Approach Ministries Podcast. We'll see you next week.

Are you someone who people come to for guidance? Do you ever think, "There has to be a better way to get people unstuck." We've trained over 1,500 Christian coaches who help people get from where they are to where they want to go. You've got natural gifts, and we've got the mindset and the tools. Fill in your guidance gap with your certificate in Christian Leadership Coaching. It's easy as 1, 2, 3. One, learn to coach in live, interactive classes. Two, practice coaching and receive helpful feedback. Three, join our practicing, community of coaches. You can find out more at [www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow](http://www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow). That web address again is [www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow](http://www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow).

**[Outro Music]**