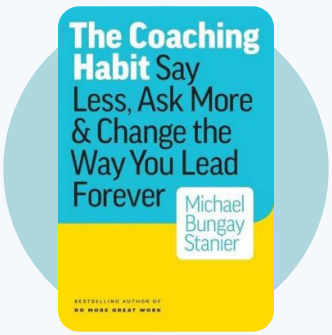

BOOK

The Coaching Habit

Say Less, Ask More & Change the Way You Lead Forever

Michael Bungay Stanier | Box of Crayons Press © 2016 | 242 pages

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getAbstract Rating

★ 9 | Innovative | Applicable

What You Will Learn

- Why asking questions is more effective than giving advice.
- How to develop a sustainable coaching habit.
- What the seven essential coaching questions are.
- How to transform conversations with strategic questioning.

Supported Skills

Coach People | Build Useful Habits | Develop Team Members | Manage Learning and Development

About the Author

Keynote speaker and founder and senior partner of Box of Crayons, **Michael Bungay Stanier** was the first Canadian Coach of the Year. He also wrote *Do More Great Work*. For videos and podcasts, visit thecoachinghabit.com.

Recommendation

Coaching involves much more than just talking to people; it requires posing intelligent questions that inspire your employees to talk about their thoughts, their work and their concerns. Michael Bungay Stanier, the first person honored as Coach of the Year in Canada, uses the construct of seven essential coaching questions to teach managers how to coach effectively.

Take-Aways

- Executive coaching gets a lot of publicity, but few managers do it – or do it properly.
- Most coaching training and coaching activities are ineffective. Most employees don't think coaching helps them much. Ten percent think it hurts them.
- Quality coaching depends on the development of a "Coaching Habit."
- Coaches should ask "seven essential questions" to help people reach their own solutions.
- The first question prioritizes the projects, people or patterns you'll discuss. Then ask, "And what else?" And, next, "What's the real challenge here for you?"
- The other queries are: "What do you want?" "How can I help?" "If you're saying yes to this, what are you saying no to?" And, to assess learning, "What was…useful for you?"
- Proper coaching helps employees enhance their skills and master their jobs.
- It can make teams less dependent on managers, free up managers' time and connect managers with their most important work.
- Managers can use coaching techniques to improve their relationships with their bosses, customers, colleagues and family.
- You can coach someone in "10 minutes or less," so make coaching a daily routine.

Summary

Coaching Challenges

Nearly 75% of managers have received training in how to coach their employees, yet 73% of employees never receive coaching. And, when they do, the coaching usually doesn't help them.

In fact, fewer than 25% of employees believe coaching benefited them, and 10% of employees report that the coaching their managers provided actually hurt them.

> *"As a manager and a leader, you want people to get stuff done. But you want more than that. You want them to learn so that they become more competent, more self-sufficient and more successful."*

One problem is that most managers receive inferior coaching training themselves, so most of the coaching they deliver is also inferior.

Often, coaching training is complex or dull or seems unconnected to the real world of business, so managers find it difficult to understand the relevancy and implementation in their day-to-day lives.

> *"Conveniently, they want that as well."*

Many managers don't do much or any coaching because it's a skill that they must learn. However, even managers who've been trained as coaches find themselves overwhelmed by the high-octane work pace at most organizations. As a result, they never get around to coaching employees.

Advice Is Cheap

Giving advice is easy. Because people value good advice, you like to give it and you regard your advice as worth hearing. Dispensing advice helps keep you in charge of the coaching conversation. However, quality coaching depends on asking the right questions, not on dispensing advice.

> *"Even though we don't really know what the issue is…we're quite sure we've got the answer."*

Asking questions can be disconcerting for the questioner. When you ask questions, you may wonder if you're really helping your employee in a valuable way.

Questions make conversations slower. And, asking questions means you are no longer in control of the conversation or situation.

Consider these coaching truths:

- Coaching someone doesn't take much time. You can coach an employee in "10 minutes or less."
- Coaching is not something to do occasionally. Make coaching your employees a routine, daily event.
- To coach people properly, develop a "Coaching Habit."

Your Coaching Habit

If you adopt a solid coaching habit, it will sustain you as a coach and help you avoid three common workplace problems that often burden managers:

1. **"Creating overdependence"** – Employees easily become dependent on managers to do their work for them. This is a common problem for managers who are always ready to step in and help. Coaching prompts employees to handle their responsibilities themselves.
2. **"Getting overwhelmed"** – As a busy manager, you have a mountain of work every day. The last thing you need is employees who try to unload their work on you.
3. **"Becoming disconnected"** – When employees aren't confident about their job abilities, they avoid challenging tasks and projects. Coaching enables employees to step up and ask for the toughest assignments.

Developing Your Coaching Habit

According to Duke University research, 45% of what people do is habitual. To become an effective manager and coach, you should build the right habits.

> *"It's no wonder that we like to give advice. Even if it's the wrong advice – and it often is – giving it feels more comfortable than the ambiguity of asking a question."*

Developing the Coaching Habit requires having five elements in place:

1. **"A reason"** – You need a motive for changing your behavior.
2. **"A trigger"** – To create a new behavior, you must know what triggers your previous behavior. Without this understanding, your current trigger will lead into your old behavior without conscious thought on your part. Be as specific as possible when identifying your triggers. Try to note when you generally default to a negative reaction.
3. **"A micro-habit"** – Make sure your new habit "takes less than 60 seconds to complete."
4. **"Effective practice"** – Break down your new habit into small segments and practice each one. This requires "repetition, repetition and repetition." When you practice, "do it fast, do it slow, do it differently." Then repeat everything again, again and again until your new habit becomes routine.

5. **“A plan”**– Don’t give up when you accidentally revert to an old habit instead of using the new habit you want to inculcate into your daily routine. Create a plan to build a new habit by “identifying the trigger, identifying the old habit and defining the new behavior.”

Coaching’s “Seven Essential Questions”

Training yourself to ask people you’re coaching seven essential questions is an important new behavior you should develop as a habit. Use these questions with employees you supervise and with “customers, suppliers, colleagues, bosses, and even…spouses and teenage children.” These questions can transform your scheduled one-on-one sessions with employees, your business and team meetings, as well as reshaping unplanned conversations in the hallway.

> *“You’re going to change the way you have conversations with the people you manage, influence and engage with.”*

The seven essential questions are:

1. The “Kick-Start” Question

Ask, “What’s on your mind?” to initiate a focused conversation. This question directs the conversation to the most important issue, as defined by the other party. Asking it puts that person in charge of the direction of the conversation. This question makes it clear that you want to talk about your employee’s most pressing issue, not your own. After opening with this question, use the “3*P* model” to focus the conversation. The three *P*’s are:

- **“Projects”** – Determine what your employee is working on and discuss current assignments.
- **“People”** – Consider the employee’s relationships with “team members, colleagues, other departments, bosses” and “customers.”
- **“Patterns”** – Exploring your employees’ habitual behaviors can reveal how you can help them approach and accomplish their jobs more effectively.

2. The “AWE” Question

Ask, “And what else?” This is the single most effective coaching question. By asking it, you generate greater understanding, improved mindfulness and enhanced self-knowledge, which increase the potential for meaningful two-way communication. The AWE question grants you more time to shape the conversation in a productive way. It enables the employee to discuss candidly whatever is on his or her mind. The AWE question moves you away from turning into an “Advice Monster.” The following haiku explains effective coaching: “Tell less and ask more. /

Your advice is not as good / As you think it is." While this coaching philosophy makes sense, it's not easy to implement. The AWE question helps you remember to listen before you speak.

3. The "Focus" Question

Ask, "What's the real challenge here for you?" This question helps you uncover a deeper issue worth addressing, not "just the first problem" your staffer cited. Many managers try to solve problems as soon as they arise. Instead, "tamp down the 'Advice Monster' and help people quickly figure out their own paths."

> *"The essence of coaching lies in helping others and unlocking their potential."*

However, the way people first characterize a problem often has nothing do with the underlying issue. "Instead of moving into advice-giving, solution-providing mode," ask the Focus question. Its phrasing conveys your understanding that the employee faces numerous challenges and that one of them matters more than the rest. The words "for you" personalize the issue and make the employee responsible for determining which concern is a priority.

4. The "Foundation" Question

Ask, "What do you want?" Like the focus question, the foundation question – and its companion question, "But what do you really want?" – take you directly to the main challenge. Think of this as the "Goldfish Question," because it can cause people to react by staring at you while their mouths open and close soundlessly. This question won't be easy for employees to answer.

> *"There's being helpful, and then there's being 'helpful,' as in stepping in and taking over."*

The foundation question deals directly with the common illusion that those participating in a conversation know what everyone wants to achieve. You and your staffer must determine the need that underlies the want. For example, if a worker wants to leave early one day, try to ascertain why leaving early is important. "Recognizing the need gives you a better understanding of how you might best address the want."

5. The “Lazy” Question

Ask, “How can I help?” This question saves a great deal of time. It cuts through all the hemming and hawing. It requires your employee to make a direct request of you concerning what matters most to him or her. The lazy question prevents you from immediately jumping into action and trying to solve a problem before you fully understand the situation.

> *“Building a coaching habit will help you and your team reconnect to the work that not only has impact but has meaning as well.”*

The wording of this question proves critical to its effectiveness. A blunter version is “What do you want from me?” If you decide to use the more direct version, preface it with “Out of curiosity…” You could also start with, “Just so I know…”, “To help me understand better…” or “To make sure that I’m clear…”

6. The “Strategic” Question

Ask, “If you’re saying yes to this, what are you saying no to?” This is a complex question. You’re asking the employee to commit to the previous yes. This precludes the popular excuse, “I never said I was going to do that.” The strategic question asks employees to examine the implications of their choices. It can also clarify the “boundaries and form” of the employee’s no.

> *“Coaching can fuel the courage to step out beyond the comfortable and familiar, can help people learn from their experiences, and can literally and metaphorically increase and help fulfill a person’s potential.”*

Here again, the 3P model of projects, people and patterns can be useful: What projects should you delay or stop working on? What connections with other people should you sever? What lapsed ambitions should you attempt to fulfill? “What habits do you need to break?”

7. The “Learning” Question

Ask, “What was most useful for you?” Along with the initial kick-start question, the learning question is a “Coaching Bookend.” This question guarantees that everyone will find these meetings and sessions meaningful. Asking this question enables the employee to achieve a valuable “learning moment.” It focuses the staffer to pause, think and pay attention to the most important new information that emerges from the conversation.

Better Coaching Conversations

Usually, conversations between managers and their employees contain superfluous detail. They often rest on inappropriate certainty. They veer off course easily, and getting back on track is hard. Such conversations often go nowhere and just exhaust the participants. Quality coaching can put an end to low-wattage, meandering and unproductive conversations.

> *"People occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing ever happened."*

If you make these seven essential questions the core of your Coaching Habit, they can help "you work less hard and have more impact." As you enrich your coaching habit, develop a set of questions that work best for you. To be an effective coach, nurture a strong sense of curiosity; it will stand you in greater stead than any advice you may want to dole out to others. Recognize and develop your idiosyncratic voice, the one you feel most comfortable using all the time as a manager and a coach.

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