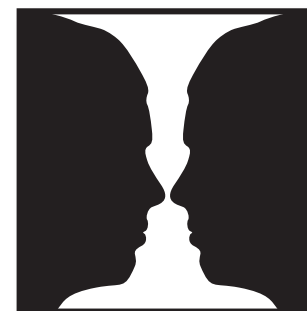


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Dialectic Questions in Coaching Psychology

An Invitation to Guided Discovery

By Ole Michael Spaten

Abstract

The article discusses the practice of dialectical questions in coaching and the associated basic methodological approaches that can be applied during coaching psychology work. The investigation concentrates on a description of three basic elements: 1) how to collect knowledge through questions 2) the importance of viewing knowledge from different angles in collaboration with the coachee, 3) to encourage the coachee to create a plan for future actions. Through a case study, a number of considerations related to dialectical questions are illustrated.

Keywords: *Dialectical questions, dialogue, guided discovery, third-person perspective and coaching psychology*

Coaching psychology can apply a fundamental method originally developed in cognitive behavioural therapy, which is referred to as a form of guided discovery (Padesky, 2012). The basic point of the method is to assume that the client already possesses the necessary resources and knowledge. When this is the circumstance, the coachee is thus able - in collaboration and through guided participation - to develop insight into their own thinking and behavioural patterns. The method is that the coach asks clarifying questions, both for understanding of a possible event or situation and for the benefit of the client, so that key aspects of the problem appear more visible to both parties. In the history of psychology, the method derives from

the early work implemented by, among others, Padesky, and which has been referred to as Socratic Questioning in a text written with Greenberger, (Padesky & Greenberger, 1995).

The Socratic dialogue takes place in a mood of mutual exploration and takes place in a space of openness and honesty between coach and coachee, as a necessary prerequisite for client development (eg Rogers, 1995; Berge, T., & Repål, 2004).

Padesky (1995) also calls this approach "guided discovery", as the questions guide the client's discovery of new clarifying aspects in a situation. After discovering their patterns of thinking and behaviour - change might be more possible. Thus, the key to guided discovery (and participation)

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is not to convince the client, but to guide the client to discover new insights and associations in a given situation.

The dialectical questions – also derived and known from Socrates – are primarily about: 1) collecting knowledge (data) 2) looking at this knowledge (data) from different angles with the client and 3) encouraging the client to devise their own plan for what must be done with the new information. The idea is that the interview is a discovery made by the client during a collaborative and participatory process. Thus, the problem is not solved by others or alone, but the client learns how to find solutions to future similar problems - in collaboration with the coaching psychologist.

The interviewer's tasks (e.g. the coach's) consists of maintaining focus and guide the client to a discovery of dynamics that link the problem together. Therefore, as with Socrates, the dialectical questions are open, exploratory, and neutral. The coach takes on the role of the interviewer and questions are asked in great detail and specifically, as illustrated in the example below.

The following fundamental areas illustrate the method used in a given coaching session with a client, where the coachee is supposed to describe the situation so clearly that both the coach and client can visualize the situation just as they viewed the same movie.

Fundamental areas for dialectical questions during coaching interviews:

- * Where were you when it happened? (The coach makes sure that an actual situation is taken into account and that the client describes it as lively as if relived).
“I was in a hotel room, the light wasn't on, I was standing in the middle of the room, there was a buzzing sound, it must be from air conditioning, but it was very hot and...”
- * Who was present? (The coach must gain insight into the meaning the person(s) present has for the coachee).
“I was alone in the room, but then ‘Y’ came and that meant I suddenly had to ...”
- * What happened? (The coach focuses on generating a precise and specific description of the actual episode).
“I was very tired after a very long day, first at work and then I spent time in several stores ...”

- * What do you do in the situation? (A precise and clear description of what exactly the person does is necessary. Then a clarifying insight could be achieved).

“When I had been standing still for a while, I took a very small step towards her, and at the same time she turned on the light ...”

- * What do you think during this episode? (It is aimed to get a detailed and accurate description of cognitions, supplied by clarifying elaborate questions when needed or when something is unclear).

“I thought, ‘She looks angry, is she angry with me?’

- * What do you feel in the situation? (Description should be detailed, accurate, etc.)

“It was a little difficult to understand exactly what it meant and I felt a little uncertain. It was something I could feel in my stomach, like a slight uneasiness or something that was not completely at ease”.

- * What is the consequence of the investigated episode? (The coach must gain insight into the behavioural, emotional etc. consequences of the circumstances).

“I hesitated to go closer to her and therefore ...”

The fundamental areas presented above can all be part of a coaching session with unfolding application of dialectical and Socratic questions - with an approach of guided discovery. However, the areas of questions should not be applied and mastered in a particular order or should be understood as a manual in which all questions should be used in any and every coaching session.

The following case example seeks to illustrate the practice of dialectical questions - guided discovery, expending the above elements. During the coaching sessions, the coach has a conversation with Karen, who has (too) high expectations for her own performance - in this situation concerning the written assignments that Karen hands in at the University.

CASE study with Karen seeking to be a top student:

K: My work at university simply has to be top notch.

Coach: So, you think your work should be top notch.

- K: Yeah, it is important to me so people know that what I am doing is top notch
- Coach: What happens if your assignment does not become so?
- K: Then people think I am not good at my study and that I am lazy.
- Coach: Can you think of a situation where you had an experience like that?
- K: Yeah, the last time we graduated.
- Coach: Would you tell me about how it was there?
- K: I did not get a good grade for my assignment, we had a week to deliver it and it simply did not become a good enough grade.
- Coach: What happened?
- K: I got sick so I could not work as much on the task as I would have done otherwise.
- Coach: So what did you do in the situation?
- K: I worked as much as I could in the last days when I had recovered.
- Coach: What was the consequence, what did it mean?
- K: That meant I got a an average grade instead of the highest one and I was not happy with the result at all.
- Coach: Could you have done something to make the result different?
- K: I could have worked more, so I just did not want to get sick
- Coach: Do you have any influence on yourself if you get sick or not?
- K: No, but I got a mean character that I am not happy with.
- Coach: What would you say to a good friend if he told you that he was very unhappy with his grade and that he had been ill while writing the assignment?
- K: Then I would say it was nice he finished even though he was sick.
- Coach: What if I told you it was nice you finished your assignment, even if you were sick?
- K: That is something else, because it was me.
- Coach: What is the consequence of you saying, well, "that was me"?
- K: That ... that, there is a difference between him and me.
- Coach: What is the difference?
- K: It might not be that much either
- Coach: Why is it not so nice that you were finished even if you were ill?
- K: It might actually be

Discussion of the case and the dialectical questions approach

The case example shows a number of factors to keep in mind for the coach. For example, patience and timing are central - it is furthermore important to follow the client through the guided discovery and not push on with (too) quick questions. The case above points to a range of other basic questions: The coach asks clarifying questions, uses active listening, summarizes, synthesizes, and asks ongoing analytical questions, all of which primes Karen to discover her own role and attitude in the high performance setting. In the case example, the coach also uses the downward arrow technique that will be elaborated in another journal article.

Additional and central dialectic and reflective questions in the coaching session are:

Have you tried something similar before? What did you do?

What do you know by now; you did not know back then?

What would you recommend to a friend who is in a similar situation?

Concluding comments

It is important to emphasize once again that the coach should look at the individual coachee / client in its own right and use a suitable dialogue. The above description just does not have to be trailed as a manual: Staying in contact with the client in the present moment is the central point of departure for the session and vital for the client's discovery and development during sessions. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that the dialogue is not about verifying the irrational thinking and behaviour of the client, but on the other hand, to allow the client to become aware of alternative thinking and behavioural patterns and options in relation to the problem in question. Thanks to Padesky (2012) for permission to use her framework and ideas regarding the case and the overall use of the concept of guided discovery and participation throughout this article and long-time inspiration for my coaching psychology work.

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