



Master Questions

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Master Questions are the key to helping your client to achieve their goals more quickly and to enjoy the process more. Throughout the course you will hear me talking about the inside-out approach. Master Questions are the primary tool in your conversations for accomplishing this.

Master Questions create a **process** of assisting the client to more easily and quickly bring to awareness the deepest point of their motivation, the core truth of **why** they want change. From there, the **how** to affect that change comes more easily and readily. This is the crux of the inside-out approach.

Three Parts of a Session

Any session can be broken down to three main parts:

- 1) Motivation.** Using Master Questions you help the client identify what he or she wants and what motivates him or her forward. The Wellness Inventory scores are essential to this conversation, especially in the first few sessions.
- 2) Doing.** This is the problem solving exploration of how to move forward to get what the client wants. Here you might brainstorm, use powerful questions to help the client move forward in their thinking, integrate more insights from the Wellness Inventory or Wellness Wheel, or offer suggested experiments. When the client is clear about what he or she wants, this part becomes much easier.
- 3) Completion.** This is where you ask the client what they are taking away from your conversation together. It is here that you help your client design or edit their wellness plan with doable action steps.

Are master questions the same as powerful questions? Not exactly. A powerful question moves the client forward, which can often be in the doing (problem solving) part of the session or the doing aspect of your work together. Master Questions are a form of powerful questions that are specifically designed to help the client get deeper into learning mode about what he or she wants and what their true motivations are. This can actually take the bulk of the session if you both get fully engaged in the process.

Why don't we enter into the solutions sooner? It's been my experience that when you move too quickly into that phase, you can easily go in circles and not get where the client wants to go. It's exactly the same process as the stages of change, only compacted into

each session. If you don't mine the motivations first and if you move too quickly into action, the client will more than likely recycle in his or her thinking, feeling, and behavior.

The process looks like this:

Being (wanting, motivations) → **Doing** (problem solving, doing) → **Having** (action steps that actually move you toward achieving what you want)

Drilling Down

What question you ask really doesn't matter. It could be the obvious (and often best) question, "What do you want?" or something like "What about that matters most to you?" or "How is that important to you?" or "What about that is attractive to you?" It could be the questions that ask the client to imagine their end result and then drilling down into that vision to get more specific about what about that is so important. There are many ways to get there, but the goal is to help the client uncover their primary motivators in regards to the subject they are bringing to the session.

Just as we repeatedly choose to see our clients as already creative, resourceful, and whole, we understand that they know what they want, but most often they are coming to us because they haven't been able to achieve the clarity that will help them to get it. Our first job is to help them get very clear about what they want. Combined with the Wellness Inventory and the Stages of Change, we have hit the trifecta in powerful coaching tools.

As you may have experienced yourself, when we are asked a Master Question, after a stunned "deer in the headlights" moment our minds will usually offer one of these:

- 1) **What we don't want**
- 2) **Strategies for getting what we want.**

We are stunned because we are so rarely asked what we want. We're used to being told by others or our own thinking what we should want or do. When asked about what we want our minds immediately go to what we don't want or the means to get what we want because that's what has taken us into the conversation in the first place. We're asking for help because we want change.

I can't emphasize how important the understanding about how the mind works is. If you aren't watching for what the mind is offering ("don't wants" and "strategies"), you will get sucked into the story and want to move on to the problem solving too soon. This usually comes from your mind thinking you know what the solution is for this client and not allowing the client the space to process for themselves. As the coach, you have to be in learning mode – the willingness to be surprised – to create the safe space for the client to explore.

As coaches, we best serve the client by taking time to help the client to get to the purest experience of what they want as is possible. We do this by gently "drilling down" with

Master Questions until the client hits bedrock. When this happens there will usually be a shift that is very clear if we are paying close attention. If we are coaching on the phone, there may be a change in tone, intensity, or breathing. If we are coaching face to face, there may be the additional visual cues of a change in posture, facial expression, and skin tone. Sometimes there is laughter or tears. Sometimes it's just a sense of deeper resolution. Sometimes it's very subtle on the outside, but for the client inside its earth shaking. So as coaches we have to pay close attention and watch for it.

Without some finesse, the drilling down process can come across like an interrogation. To reduce the possibility it is perceived in that way simply explain to the client that you have found that putting extra attention on exploring what they want will make achieving it more easy. Then ask if they are interested in exploring it a little further. I've never found anyone who wasn't interested in making it easier to get what they want.

The best time to engage in this exploration is at the beginning of the session after you've had some time to discuss their Wellness Inventory scores. If you are looking for it, a natural opportunity to ask Master Questions will seamlessly present itself.

If your client is open to it, it is very helpful if they can pay attention to their felt sense (body sensations that open them to a deeper level of personal truth) as they explore what they want. For some people, it may take establishing more trust before they are able to attend to their felt sense. That's fine. The process will still work just from the thinking level.

The Trap

The trap for us all (trust me, I still get caught) is when we are so fully engaged in the client's story that we're not doing our job. What I mean by that is when the client says what she wants (for instance she wants support from her family) and we relate with that and say "Yea! That's what she wants. I want to help her to get it!" But we don't notice that she really hasn't answered the question about what she wants. She's only identifying the surface level, the perceived thing she wants from the outside-in. Perhaps she's identified her family's actions that she wants to be different. But she has no control over what others do so what she's been doing (outside-in angry manipulations) hasn't worked and has only made her feel unsafe and out of control. By helping her identify her deeper wants (such as that she wants to feel safe), she now has a chance to make different choices to get more of what she really wants – from the inside out. Getting to what we want is always an *inside-out process*.

Anchoring the Wants

When your client is able to clearly identify what it is they want, give the client space to savor and anchor it. You might want to use reflective statements to help them anchor it. You might say, "You want to know you've done all you can." Or "You want to learn to trust yourself." Or "You want to learn how to take care of yourself." Allow silence, if

appropriate, to allow them to soak it in and savor the realization. When they are done, they will automatically start looking at the doing/solutions part of the session. If you rush into the doing, you will miss an important part of the process. You might also want to ask them if there is something they would like to do to honor this awareness and anchor it, like put a note somewhere to help themselves remember, or identify an object they will carry in their pocket to help them remember, or associate a piece of jewelry or piece of clothing with what they want and wearing it will help them remember.

Inquire Into What Is Not Wanted

Instead of asking what the client wants first, you might want to explore asking what the client **doesn't want** first. This is particularly useful if it is clear that the client is emotionally charged and has what they don't want uppermost on his or her mind. Most often a person is first going to run through what they don't want and strategies for getting rid of what they don't want before they are ready to explore what they do want, so it's often a more direct route to just ask them to list everything they don't want. It gives them an opportunity to emotionally discharge. Once that is done and they feel heard, then the client's mind will be freer to entertain what they do want.

If the client is having difficulty in identifying what they want, it may be useful to recall what they said in their "don't want list" and then ask them what the converse of that would be for them. It might start out as a semantic exercise, but if you can help them bring it into their body's felt sense or in their internal vision of what they want, it can shift into something quite profound. Be sure to give them a lot of space to really consider all of this. Silence is golden when clients are really looking inside themselves. Don't rush it.

Deepening the Process

I've recently realized that what I do in the first part of a session (being or motivations) is kind of subconsciously track where the client is on the wellness wheel. I regularly find that in looking at the client's bedrock wants, the biggest shifts happen (Transcending) when they get to the Finding Meaning dimension, which will often also correlate with the Self-Responsibility & Love dimension.

There's often what an old friend of mine calls "the audible thunk," referring to the sense of the little ball falling cleanly into the hole. Thunk! There's a feeling of rightness, correct fit, when we get to our Meaning dimension.

That's when a client might say, "Ohhhhh, what I really want is to love my own body. It's not at all about how he feels about it!" Or "I want to trust myself, to trust my own heart. I want to know that I'm OK just as I am." Or "I want to feel a connection at work! That's what I really want. I want to know I'm part of something greater than just me." Or "I want to trust that I will know what to do when the time comes!" The Meaning dimension will often be something less specific, something intangible. But it will have the most meaning to the client. They will completely understand what it means **even if you don't!**

From there, the specific “hows” and “whats” will emerge much more easily. When we find the why of any problem, the how becomes easier. That’s not to say that Why questions are helpful. They usually aren’t. It has to be more of a process. Using master questions tends to get us to our meaning very quickly. If that “think” hasn’t happened, then it’s a safe bet that there may be something underneath it. Sometimes during this process, if it has a good flow, a simple question like, “Is there anything underneath that?” will lead the client to the mother lode realization.

Important Note

If you aren’t getting anywhere using Master Questions, don’t persist and frustrate yourself and your client. Just move on to the Doing (solutions) phase using the wants they have identified. Very often a deeper awareness of wants will occur to them by the end of the session rather than at the beginning. Just keep following your client and opening the space for exploration. Remember it’s all about making the space for learning mode to carry your relationship and exploration deeper. Without learning mode, not much will happen.

The examples below are mostly real coaching conversations that lead to major breakthroughs for the clients. I hope this is helpful to you as you experiment with Master Questions.



Example Dialogue 1

Coach: I notice that your lowest wellness score and your lowest satisfaction score is in playing and working.

Client: Yes, I was working very hard on an important project, really giving it my all. After the project was completed, I just kept going at the same pace. I’m really feeling the effects of it.

Coach: So what’s most important to you concerning this area of your life?

Client: I don’t want to feel so stressed. I’m noticing that my stomach has been acting up as a result of it.

Coach: If you weren’t so stressed, what would that give you?

Client: Well maybe I could meditate or take yoga or something like that.

Coach: Is it OK with you to explore this question of what you want more deeply? I’ve found that spending time on this important question can really speed up the process to you getting what you want.

Client: Yea, sure!

Coach: OK, we're just going to see what comes up. There are no "shoulds" or "oughts." It's all good.

When I ask a question, see if you can notice any feeling sensations in the trunk of your body and let them inform your thoughts. Sometimes you can just put your focus on the sensations and wait just a moment to see what comes up when I ask the questions. Just be open to whatever comes up. Does this make sense?

Client: Yes. That feels good.

Coach: If you could meditate or take a yoga class, what would that give you?

Client: Hmmmm. (Very deep breath and long pause – breathing slows and deepens) I noticed that I hadn't been breathing before. As I relaxed and breathed, I got calmer, less sense of pushing. I realized that I've been pushing for sooooo long, it's become my normal. When I looked at the question of what meditating or yoga would give me, an image of a clear circle came up.

Coach: So a clear circle appeared when you relaxed and breathed more deeply.

Client: Maybe it was more like a clear sphere or a bubble that floated.

Coach: If you allow this sphere or floating bubble to speak, what would it say to you?

Client: (Pause) I want lightness! I want to lighten up! Yes, that's what I want. I want to feel more alive and light. I want more humor and fun and playfulness in my life. Whew! I don't want to meditate and do yoga. I want to play!

Comments: This client could have been directed into the "hows" of meditating or taking a yoga class, but it wouldn't have addressed her real want and she would be frustrated and dissatisfied. From this initial discussion about her wants (the first phase of the process, The Master Question), we went into a conversation about what play was for her and how she could integrate it into her life even while working hard. All of the "hows" and "doingness" unfolded easily (the second phase of the process, The Doing).

The session had an aliveness and flow that came from this brief initial discussion. The client ended the call saying that she got so much more than she expected from the session. Her life changed dramatically in the next couple of months and she was able to actually get more done than before, while feeling more relaxed and confident. The image of the floating sphere became her guiding image while she was making the changes.

Please notice that the Wellness Inventory was the initial conduit that enabled her to very quickly identify what she was most motivated to change. Without it, we could have spent the entire session just getting to that awareness. On her focus form, she mostly spoke about being overweight and wanting to fit into her clothes better. As a result of her clarity about feeling lighter, her food choices changed and by the end of her third month of coaching, she was at her target weight – effortlessly.



Example Dialogue 2

Coach: What would you like to focus on in today's session?

Client: I want to look at my financial well-being.

Coach: What is most important to you in regard to your financial well-being?

Client: I'm so tired of feeling scared and ashamed about money and getting nowhere with my new business. I feel paralyzed by it. I know I have to get my website up and market myself. I have a whole list of things that I should be doing, but I just can't get myself moving on it.

Coach: Would you like to explore what you want more deeply before we go into finding solutions to your problem?

Client: Yea, it would be good to know what I want. Sometimes I'm not at all sure what that is. <laughing>

Coach: <laughter> Yea. It is helpful to know where you're going before setting out on a journey. So just take a moment and notice your breathing and sensations in your body. <pause> When I ask a question, see if this internal awareness can help you to get more clarity. OK?

Client: So far so good.

Coach: Imagine that you no longer felt scared, ashamed, and paralyzed in regards to your financial situation. What would that give you?

Client: Hmmmm...I would feel excitement about doing what I want to do and really helping people. I know I'm a good coach. It's just all this business stuff that has me going in circles. I'm afraid of making a mistake.

Coach: If you were feeling excitement and no longer afraid of making a mistake, what would you be, do, or have?

Client: Wow! That's an interesting question. <voice brightens> I would be my true adult self. I would do what competent adults do – get the job done. And I would have a viable business. I would really feel like an adult.

Coach: Great! So is there anything underneath this wanting to feel like an adult?

Client: <long pause> <tears> Yes. I would know that I deserve to be here. I think I would feel more welcome. Wow! I had no idea this is where I would go. But it's true, my whole life I've felt like an imposter. But this is really what I want. <voice full of intention and clarity> I want to know I belong here and that I can make a contribution to people's lives.

<She has reached her bedrock of what she wants in the first part of the process, The Master Question, now we can move into the second part of the process, The Doing>

Coach: <pause to allow the client to fully experience her insight> So now that you are very clear that what you want is to know that you belong here and that you can make a contribution, how does this relate to your financial well-being?

Client: <laughter> Well it certainly puts it into perspective. I'm realizing that the money and all the marketing stuff is just a tool that enables me to make a contribution. That sense of heaviness in my gut when I thought about marketing and money is just gone! I can do this! Oh my God, I can do this!

Coach: Yay! So knowing that you can do this, what is your next step?

Client: Hmmm, the specifics, eh? <laughter> Let's brainstorm about that to see what my possibilities are.

From there, the session very easily moved into a very productive brainstorming. We ended the session early because the client was so eager to get to work on her website. She had an effective plan mapped out with specific SMART steps to accomplish in the next week. I coached and mentored her off and on for about a year. She went on to create a viable coaching practice that enabled her to make a sizeable contribution to her community.



Example Dialogue 3

Coach: So how did you do with your action steps from last week?

Client: I did pretty well with the walking and eating journal. I feel like I'm on a roll in that department. I'm noticing that without a lot of effort, by just being aware of what I'm eating,

I'm gravitating toward the healthier stuff. That visualization we did last week is really sticking with me. I'm going to keep those action steps for a while. But today, I'd like to talk about a situation at work that has me buffaloed.

Coach: Great. Congratulations on your wins with your action steps! Good work.

Client: Yea, thanks.

Coach: Tell me more about your situation at work.

Client: My supervisor is really riding me and I'm not sure what to do about it. He's going through a divorce and I feel like he's taking it out on others, but I can't really confront him on it. He's a real stickler for being professional so everything is behind this professional veneer. He thinks he's a very rational person, but my co-workers and I see him as being quite irrational lately. Every day I go to work, my stomach is in knots. This just isn't how I envisioned losing weight. <chuckle>

Coach: What do you want out of this situation?

Client: Well I know I don't want to feel this kind of tension at work. My gosh! It's 8 or 9 hours out of my day. That's a lot of tension.

Coach: Would you like to explore more deeply what you want?

Client: Yea, OK. It's been helpful before when we did it.

Coach: So you feel tense at work because of negative interactions with your supervisor.

Client: Yep. That's about the size of it.

Coach: If you were to find a resolution in this matter, what about it would be most important to you?

Client: I want to resolve it without getting into a testosterone pissing match with him. <laughing>

Coach: <laughing> Got it. You don't want to be butting heads with him.

Client: Yea. <laughing> That wouldn't be "professional."

Coach: So what do you want?

Client: Hmmmm, I don't know.

Coach: You know how we did that body scan in the session before last? Are you willing to try that again and see if anything comes up?

Client: Yea, OK.

<Brief scan of bodily sensations and breathing – not doing just noticing.>

Coach: So paying attention to your felt sense, what do you want in regards to this situation with your supervisor?

Client: <long pause> I've got nothing. I just know that I don't want to feel the tension I feel when my supervisor criticizes me.

Coach: OK. See if you can create the experience you would like to have in your body. Can you help me to have that experience with you?

Client: You want me to pretend the experience I want and then describe it to you?

Coach: Yes, that's right.

Client: Interesting. OK. <long pause> Well my stomach is relaxed and my breathing is a little deeper. I'm noticing that I can help my stomach relax more with my breathing.

Coach: OK, I'm with you.

Client: <long slow breaths> My mind feels pretty calm. I feel OK about myself. I can think clearly now as I breathe deeper. My body feels relaxed and open, ready for action. Nothing can get to me. It all just runs off like water off a ducks back. I can imagine my supervisor's critical remarks just not penetrating.

Coach: Hmmmm, nice visual. I'm with you.

Client: It feels good. I like it. This is what I want.

Coach: Is there anything more primary under this want?

Client: <laughing> Well I want world peace, but in this situation, I think this is it.

Coach: <laughing> So it's like world peace begins with one person at a time.

Client: Yea! That's it.

Coach: Is there a succinct phrase that encapsulates this experience that you want?

Client: Hmm. <pause> You know what comes up? <laughing> Happy Duck. That's what I want: a Happy Duck Experience! <voice happy and full of intention>

<This is the end of The Master Question phase of the process. Now we move effortlessly into The Doing.>

Coach: <laughing> That works for me if it works for you. So now that you are clear about what you want, knowing what you know about yourself and your supervisor, where do you go from here?

Client: Well I think that having this as a clear direction is what I've been looking for. My tendency was to try to fix him for my comfort, but I knew that wouldn't work. In fact it would only make things a lot worse. The question that comes up for me is how do I remember the Happy Duck Experience and take it with me to work?

Coach: Would you like to brainstorm some possibilities?

Client: Yea, OK. That sounds good. One thing that comes to mind is I could just take a few minutes before going into the office to get that feeling in my body. Maybe it's like my eating journal. You know, the awareness bit.

We went on to easily discover 3 possible strategies that the client wanted to experiment with to see what worked the best. Over the next several sessions, he was able to pretty much hold his Happy Duck Experience and, much to his amazement, his supervisor slowly became more calm and less demanding and critical. It was a huge learning for the client that he didn't always need to fix things externally. He applied it to his family life as well.



Example Dialogue 4

Coach: I read your session focus form. You seem to be doing well with your action steps. Congratulations!

Client: Thanks. I'm kind of proud of myself.

Coach: As you should be. Those intention exercises are really paying off. So what would you like to work on today?

Client: I want to lose a little weight.

Coach: OK, if you were to lose a little weight, what would that give you?

Client: Hmmmm, I'm not sure. 10 less pounds?

Coach: Are you game to explore what you want a bit more like we did before?

Client: OK. I'm not sure where you're going but I'm willing to play. Your wacky ideas seem to work well. <laughing>

Coach: <laughing> OK. Imagine you have lost 10 pounds, really feel it in your body, what would you experience?

Client: Oh, I get it. <pause> I really don't want to buy new clothes. If I lost some weight, my clothes wouldn't be so tight. They would fit me better.

Coach: Great. So is there anything else under that experience of looser fitting clothes?

Client: Hmmmm. <pause> I'd have freedom. I'd feel more free to move. <voice tone brighter, clearer>

Coach: OK, is there anything else?

Client: Nope. That's really it. I want more freedom to move. I never realized that that's what I want.

<Now we move into the second stage.>

Coach: Great. So knowing that you want more freedom to move and knowing yourself, what is your next best step?

Client: Well I thought of dieting and depriving myself and feeling miserable and I just didn't want to go there. It just made me feel tense. Now when I think about it as about moving, it's kind of different. <long pause> I just realized that I haven't been moving because I feel bound up. It's kind of a catch 22. I'm not moving and by not moving my clothes are getting tighter.

Coach: So your tight clothes are preventing you from moving. Let's look at your wheel. What other dimensions does this affect?

Client: <pause as she got out her scores and contemplated them> Wow! There are a lot. Let's do one of those spin things you do. That would be really interesting.

The session progressed easily into a productive spin on the wheel. The client went on to devise a program for herself of doing spins on the wheel every evening on her way home from work, then she would take a brisk walk and have a light dinner. She was able to lose 12 pounds fairly quickly using this method. She had more energy and loved her new freedom in her clothing. There were other benefits from doing the spins as well as she moved on to other dimensions to explore.

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