
**FOSTERING CURIOSITY, ASKING POWERFUL QUESTIONS:
LESSONS OF A LEADERSHIP COACH**
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As a leadership coach (which often includes life coaching and performance coaching), I often am asked to help people move to the next level in their work or to help people discern next steps in their research, ministry, or life-pursuits. The series of questions I ask is determined by the topic a coachee brings to the table that day or over a period of time. The work is designated by our contract for coaching engagement. Sometimes lifelong themes emerge for conversation; at other times, an immediate dilemma needs to be managed or a problem needs to be resolved in a creative way. Currently, the main issue is survival in the midst of a global pandemic as well as development of new coping mechanisms.

Ultimately, my job is to ask powerful questions to foster curiosity not only in myself about the person with whom I am conversing, but also in the coachee about the topic he or she is exploring. The purpose of the coaching process is to guide the people across the table, on the phone, or through digital space to begin to ask themselves powerful questions. They enter a liminal space of curiosity and experiment as they ask themselves: What would happen if I tried...? How might I find a more meaningful way to...? These leaders are experiencing the cycle of their own development into deeper, more effective ways of relating to others and to their work. The leadership pattern of command-and-control no longer seems appropriate (except during an acute emergency) for their own health or the health of their organization. Rather, powerful questioning becomes a practical and ethical imperative

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for organizations that want to learn and innovate, whether it is religious or secular. By their very nature, learning organizations are agile, adaptable, and often cutting-edge imaginative—perhaps even fun. The same goes for leadership.

The Leadership Dilemma

Leaders in religious organizations often are given a checklist of change processes and told, “If you follow this model, you will turn this place around.” Consultants, books, online resources, and academic colleagues devise methods for change and are eager to make their approach generally available for everyone. I have seen dozens of Bible-driven or purpose-driven solutions, marketing schemes, discipleship-building plans with catchy phrases, blueprints for healthy congregations, and a general sense of formulaic responses to a poorly defined malaise in religious communities. Worse, questions driving these methods often point to what a congregation or nonprofit organization “wants” for itself and the world, rather than a transcendent sense of purpose that arises with powerful, open-ended questions, oriented to what religion can do and be to meet the world’s troubles and needs. Especially, now in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic as well as in its aftermath, this open approach is essential as we live through highly chaotic change that will leave us in spaces we have never seen before.

My training in the field of leadership coaching (Gestalt stance) addressed my uneasiness with what seems like a constant churning-out of programs by publishing houses and businesses with excellent marketing and generic promises for growth and well-being: “the encouragement industry.” I learned that by asking powerful questions in service of the coachee, whether an individual or a group, I partnered with them to move toward their own actions and plans for change. The premise here is that fostering curiosity and asking powerful questions evokes a new awareness in conversation, and in time, ultimately brings people to access positive change that inherently abides within them. Coaching creates the space to do this work, which is highly contextual and deeply personal for the

people in the coaching engagement. This approach creates a new way forward based on curiosity and experimentation.

Persons who derive their ethic of leadership from a core of curiosity and a life-approach of experimental adventure are the hope of the future for any organization. Curiosity removes the desire for predetermined outcomes, avoids leading questions, and leaves little room for anxiety, unlike prepackaged programs or expert consultants focused on fixing a situation or an organizational system. Leaders who embrace curiosity and a sense of adventure exhibit high levels of observation, commitment to reflection on the nature of progress, understanding of the levels of context, and appreciation for surprise based on a deep-seated learning posture, which they embody in daily interactions. For some, adventurous curiosity occurs naturally. For most, however, it is learned over time, usually acquired through reflection on mistakes or conflicts that have disrupted the typical checklists of good leadership characteristics that leaders often mistakenly substitute for the wisdom that flows from lived experience. For those who lead from a core of curiosity, these mistakes and conflicts have the potential to fuel a desire for retooling. The old ways no longer work when leading people to an emerging future, especially during disruptive times, such as during a pandemic or living through a natural disaster. No longer is high anxiety driving interactions among teammates who are wondering about each other rather than immersing in tasks for the sake of their stakeholders. Leadership in its maturing form manifests itself instead with curiosity as its basis for questions that target development of projects, programs, and paths forward that make a difference beyond the mere success of the organization.

Personal Narrative for Change: Living in Liminal Space

After twenty years of teaching and administrative leadership in the academy, I decided to spend nine months training and becoming certified as a Gestalt Coach with emphasis on leadership. Further certification by the International Coaching Federation required a minimum of one hundred hours of coaching and a

final exam.¹ Why would I spend money I did not have to walk away from the setting that had provided more than one-third of my professional experience? Why would I become a student again, with faculty observing my work and the responsibility to study for exams? Such a path seemed too hard. Yet, a string of disruptions in the realm of academic community finally pushed me so hard that I knew it was time to seek a different path while still incorporating what I had learned over the years. My inner being knew that a change was coming, hence the retooling. At the same time, my mind clung to the status quo, namely for the love of teaching and the security of a regular paycheck. This polarity of interests—a desire for change and adventure opposing the desire to be safe and focus on the things I still could enjoy—held me captive for at least three years. Finally, within the learning process of Gestalt training, I felt enough impetus to “jump off the cliff” of security into the unknown, and I learned how to be a coach for others by being coached myself.

This new and unknown vocational space is liminal for me. In other words, it is a space and time between the past and an emerging future in which I am free to ask myself powerful questions, foster new ways of being a leader in the world, and navigate a way to make a living that relies on my perseverance and resilience. Entering this space is only possible for me with the support of trusted colleagues and friends. In this liminality, the role of powerful questions has provided direction along new and surprising paths.

To describe my journey is to offer one snapshot of a female leadership professor who is deepening the understanding of what leadership could be in terms of a kind of authority that counters the dominant version of leadership studies. To practice a gentle learning posture in a competitive society that rewards leaders who

¹ As I contemplated an approaching vocational change, I studied at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland in 2018–2019. Now I am certified as a Gestalt Coach (GPCC™), a Board Certified Coach from the Center for Credentialing and Education (BCC), and an Associate Certified Coach from the International Coaching Federation (ICF/ACC). In addition, I earned certificates from Cornell University in Executive Leadership, Change Leadership, and High-Performance Leadership in 2018.

are perceived as particularly clear about their authority, expertise, and strong use of power, even when the power must be agile, is almost revolutionary, albeit necessary to change the way we develop people and organizations. I have paid attention to long-term wise men and women who spend their time researching and developing the rise of learning organizations, founded on asking powerful questions.²

In a fast-paced, ever-changing world with crisis—currently in the form of pandemic, grief, illness, and trauma ruling our news and our contexts—there are few certainties. Resilience and experimentation are better suited to addressing the chaos we face more and more in a time of global health crisis, environmental crisis, and increasing economic disparity. The characteristics relegated to and admired in many leaders—*in extremis* called command-and-control, which at its worst develops a blame-and-shame ethic—might be useful in emergencies, but these characteristics are much less useful in the highly connected Internet world where rules and decrees are always challenged. Influence and persuasion are the leadership styles that make more impact when little privacy is given to decision-makers behind closed doors. Networks of learning organizations, living in resilient experimentation mode and connecting with each other, are more likely to make a lasting impact on important projects and tasks than people who follow a leader commanding the scene from one perspective with an ego that is motivated to win at all costs, including grave consequences for others.

Here is what I now know: many persons who tire of what society deems *good leadership* are gravitating toward team leadership, collective enterprises, and becoming coaches and mentors. I did so myself by enrolling in the Gestalt coaching program, which fostered in me the desire to live into a learning posture based in curiosity much more deeply than I ever have. A primary way for Gestaltists to live in this curiosity-oriented learning posture, which raises

² See thinkers and writers Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Betty Sue Flowers, Margaret Wheatley, and Joseph Jaworski as a few persons working to create and consult with learning organizations.

awareness and subsequently allows change to emerge organically, is to pay attention to a Cycle of Experience. This Cycle is a variation on a theme of cycles of change. However, I will use some aspects of the Cycle of Experience here to discuss how coaching and leadership speak with each other in an ongoing process that fosters powerful questions as a key component for leaders who live in curiosity.³

The Cycle of Experience: A Short Description

Cycles of change are not a new invention. They have been described in various iterations of change theory based on myriad contexts and times. However, the significance of change cycles for leaders, as learner-experimenters who live with an internal core of curiosity, is based on the understanding of liminal space necessary for moving forward with integrity and authenticity. Indeed, the cycle of change is not a closed circle. It is iterative along an arc of evolution, in our case, of leaders and organizations. Essential for moving through the cycle of experience along an arc of change are powerful questions. Such questions are the essence of fostering a grounded clarity in the midst of stakeholder and market uncertainties accompanying the fast-paced decision-making required of leaders and in organizations.

Cycles of change and in particular, the Gestalt Cycle of Experience, begin with a state of equilibrium, followed by either a disruption or a raised awareness that the present state of being no longer fosters positive results. This disruption snaps one out of equilibrium into a liminal space. In liminal space, which has a temporal component to it (it begins and it ends), one does not dwell in the immediate past (equilibrium), but neither does one have a clear sense of what is forthcoming. One senses a need for change. A person in flux can choose to respond to this sensation of change in a variety of ways: retrench to attempt to recover past equilibrium, resist response that acknowledges the existence of any change in the

³ The Cycle of Experience can be found in the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland training manual, 2018, 75–76. Adapted by Juliann Spoth, Ph.D., coaching faculty for the Gestalt Institute. See also www.gestaltcleveland.org, and search for Cycle of Experience.

first place, or begin to foster curiosity by entertaining meaningful questions about this change and what might be evolving from it.

Should one choose to entertain deep questions about a disruption or shift from equilibrium, he or she enters the paradox of liminal freedom and uncertainty about what will arise from mind and body. Someone who contracts with a coach or turns to a colleague to engage these kinds of questions will find that the sensation of change moves to a growing awareness of what is important to examine, and what really matters in life and consequently in one's choices about leadership roles. The kinds of questions that might arise for a coach who is partnering with someone to do this work could sound like this:

What is happening to your body as you talk about this topic?

What meanings arise?

What does that option look like to you?

What happens when you experiment for yourself about that possibility?

What experiments might be worth trying in your workplace or at home?

What do you really want? What don't you want?

The coach invites the coachee to be aware of shifts in her or his body throughout the conversation, focusing on the messaging of the body through its own wisdom about the meaning and impact of new awareness, and ways of attending to it.

Choices occur along the Cycle of Experience. There is a flow to the Cycle, but people dwell in different aspects of it for different lengths of time, sometimes circling back to the previous state before moving on. For our purposes, I will describe a sequence, though it might not be linear for everyone.

One starts in equilibrium, the known way of being or acting. Yet, something is internally dissatisfying about this equilibrium, or a disruption occurs such that the steady state is no longer viable. For example, a conflict, a death, a market shift, a fire, or a change in leadership can lead to disruption, sometimes planned and sometimes surprising. One senses that change needs to happen.

Raising awareness about this sensation often fosters the idea that a shift or reconstruction could and would be positive, especially for persons who have felt stuck in their leadership roles or in their everyday lives. Here, the potential for change, sometimes through “aha” moments, enlivens the conversation. Exploring powerful questions and paying attention to phenomenological responses (responses in the body) leads to pinpointing internal energy about a particular subject or concern. As energy rises with awareness, a person might sense a parallel rising of motivation, mobilizing change. At this point, he or she can choose to sit with the internal energy or move toward formulating a plan for action. The plan might be readily available in one’s mind, or it might take time to formulate.

Next comes action. The act of change itself, whether behavioral or by making a decision, fosters a new way forward. This new way may be a small, immediate change such as a decision to eat more blueberries for health reasons, or a large, long-term change such as a decision to change careers or move to a different country. The leap is taken, and the change is implemented, either immediately or over time. Once the action is taken, assimilation, or getting used to the new way, also takes time for adapting life to the new path. Finally, when assimilation becomes the new norm, a sense of closure regarding the change sets in; one has arrived! New equilibrium occurs, and one moves out of the liminal and back into settled space.

People are different; they will spend different amounts of time and attention in different areas or stages of the Cycle. The variation of this Cycle is found in the amount of time each person stays in its different stages. For example, I might spend a great deal of time in “awareness-raising” to ponder every angle of every scenario possible before I mobilize energy and move quickly to planning and action. Others might not spend much time thinking through possibilities and move straight to action. Still others might want to stay in the sensation that their previous equilibrium no longer serves them, but they choose not to entertain questions that help them examine possible change closely.

Leading Through the Cycle of Experience with Powerful Questions

At some point, a leader might realize that her performance is not up to par at a certain stage in the organization's life. She does not know how to move forward, but she knows that something must change. By inviting a conversation about this dilemma with a companion or coach who can create a safe-enough space and who asks powerful questions, she finds that she has answers to her problem within her own body of knowledge and raised awareness. The coach helps her draw this awareness into conversation and then invites mobilization and action that the leader herself creates.

Or a leader realizes that he does not have the support of his team or committee. He creates stories in his mind about what is really going on, but he does not have data to verify his suspicions. Is the problem that people are burned out? Are they wary of his leadership style? Is it racism? Ageism? An intersection of both? Has the team become competitive with him and each other rather than collaborative with its eye on a mutual goal? Is one particular person stirring the pot? All these questions contribute to anxiety, but at the same time they are not powerful questions that get at the root of what the leader desires and how he might meet that mutual goal for the sake of the organization.

In each case, diagnosing problems is not the focus of curiosity. Rather, powerful questions stem from curiosity about the leader's sense of self in the present moment, followed by where the leader would like to be or who he or she would like to become. Powerful questions take the conversation to a deeper level. Eventually, through an action taken based on deep knowing fostered by living through the earlier stages of the Cycle of Experience, questions addressed by this leader are inherently manifested at a deeper level as meaningful, powerful change.

Fostering curiosity in the midst of chaotic times can be a difficult task when the propensity is to entrench and protect one's organization, or more personally, philosophy and style of leadership. As disruptions or needs for change occur, a leader

taking a breath to ask questions about the process of change and the capacity to live in liminal space for a time will find that she does not move into reactivity, but rather explores possibilities based on the questions that matter. Leaders cannot do this work alone effectively. Self-questioning has great value, but engaging persons who have the intuitive ability and the trained skill to ask powerful questions about what they are noticing or are curious about in the leader will result in deeper, more meaningful and significant insights and plans.

To create space for this work, the coach and the leader or group will need to attend to parameters and a relational field between or among them that fosters vulnerability and bravery. This space has potential for the leader to entertain deep, powerful questions for the sake of positive change; in such a container, powerful questions have room to do their work.

Powerful questions in the coaching world include attention to the *what* and the *how* foci. The *what* addresses issues of meaning and purpose: What is meaningful about this concern for the leader? What is important about the topic at hand right now? What is happening in the body during this conversation, which yields a clue to the topic's impact on the leader at a deep, perhaps primal level? The *how* questions move the leader to the Cycle: How will the leader move forward? How will the leader deal with resistance internally and/or from others? These questions lead to an exploration of possibilities and a check-in with the body's energy regarding responses to said possibilities.⁴ *When* and *where* hone in on specifics of what is happening or can happen. *Why* is a difficult question, whether used in an existential sense or to ascertain a person's motive. Often a *why* question, other than in analysis of experiment, can be received as a judgmental statement rather than a question: "Why did you do that?" sounds very different than "What was important about doing that?" to someone on the receiving end of the question.

⁴ My observations here are not a substitute for training in the area of coaching or powerful questioning. The questions are examples of establishing a pause that immerses deeply into the momentum of change, eliciting a more thoughtful and balanced way for moving forward.

These questions are not exclusive to coaches. To be sure, coaches are important for leaders and their teams who are sensing a need for change because they can provide a particular kind of space and confidential exploratory partnership to reveal a positive way forward. However, leaders can ask powerful questions of all who surround them. They also can receive powerful questions from other employees or volunteers. In either case, if leaders adopt a learning posture based in curiosity, are open to experimentation, and can tolerate failures, they will find a way forward that is more effective and powerful than they might have imagined. In fact, those who deliberately surround themselves with people who have learned how to ask powerful questions will meet the emerging future with greater agility and resilience than any other leader can. The culture of the organization will change from formal hierarchy with greater distance among employees to a “flattened” learning culture, where the leader models curiosity and experimentation in conversation with others. The culture itself becomes experimental and reflective, as well as less formally hierarchical, yielding more creativity that is relevant to their own purpose and work.

Taking time to engage powerful questions—the *what* and the *how* primarily—invites deeper individual wisdom as well as collaborative wisdom from one or others who increase awareness and give particular time and attention to concerns at hand. Quaker Clearness Committees⁵ have a good sense of the effectiveness of this method; they exist as a communal way of discernment for an individual seeking a way forward. Clearness Committees do their work when called upon by an individual to sit with him or her, perhaps to make a decision to marry, or to change professions, or to solve a dilemma. The Committee sits and listens to the individual, maintaining long silences. When a Committee participant feels moved to ask a deep question for the purpose of discerning clarification, he or she directs the question to the individual. Over

⁵ See <https://www.fgcquaker.org/resources> for clearness committee descriptions and information. See also *Coming to the Light: Cultivating Spiritual Discernment Through the Quaker Clearness Committee* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet #446, 2017).

time, the individual begins to see a way forward, which has arisen internally from the powerful questions posed by those surrounding her or him. This space is a container for vulnerability and courage. Perhaps ideas will emerge as experiments to be entertained. Those asking questions do so out of curiosity, thereby initiating a culture of curiosity that incites the imagination about what is possible. Likewise, a companion, coach, or any discernment group must wait in silence after a powerful question is asked, or ask the question iteratively, until the one in discernment, including any leader, has sorted through emotions, phenomenological responses, and all the thoughts that well up in vulnerable space. Awareness rises, and new insights create a path forward.

A religious organization that engages in this work, for example, might be attempting to carve a way forward while living with significant debt. The process described above, with a skilled coach or facilitator, has the potential to yield underlying feelings and hidden thoughts about the situation, and generate a way forward that no one has yet entertained. Whatever the outcome, the inquiry-directed process lowers anxiety and builds consensus, yielding solidarity rather than polarization.

An inquiry-directed approach is especially crucial for churches at this moment and will continue to be essential in the aftermath of pandemic. Church members and constituents must decide in the next six to eighteen months what they will be or become: they can simply live through troubled times and return to the way they have always done things and thereby continue on the path to irrelevance. Or they can engage in a process of learning and discernment that co-creates the church for a new era that emphasizes *communitas*, an egalitarian community of clear purpose that serves constituents deeply and helpfully beyond its boundaries.

Response to Powerful Questions

Space and time relegated to immersing in powerful questioning and reflection are essential to develop a curiosity-based learning posture in a leader. The liminal space involved in this process then can lead to mobilization for change, resulting in designing a plan and leading to subsequent action. An essential aspect for moving from

plan into action, and eventually assimilation, is a structure of support, which includes accountability. A leader will need to identify persons or processes that hold her or him in supportive accountability for the work of change throughout the Cycle of Experience. This container or structure of support also applies to groups, teams, and organizations that participate in the coaching process. Whether working with an individual or a group, the coach bears the responsibility for checking in about the health of the container throughout the coaching engagement (time span for coaching).

Accountability sounds punitive to many of us—you are being watched and evaluated—but in fact, accountability is simply a structure, if used in a healthy way, to keep focus and momentum on track. This healthy accountability fosters responsibility for one's own work and ability to ask for help or accompaniment. Support is the primary focus of accountability. We are used to accountability that comes across as judgment. But encouraging support is a powerful way to companion a leader into the necessary change being called for. In team situations, this kind of accountability also lends itself to buy-in by the parties involved. The coaching questions can be: How will you garner support for your action? How will you hold yourself accountable for what you have named here?

Once change has been implemented, and the leader or organization has assimilated to the change, a new familiarity settles in. Next comes a rest period or a return to equilibrium. However, in our day and age, with the rapid speed of change and the emphasis on agility, rest periods might not last long. The Cycle will be called upon again, and powerful questions become part of an action-reflection-awareness raising cycle employed as part of the life of the leader and her or his organization. Celebration of the work that is being done softens the pace of organizational and leadership evolution, bringing energy and hope rather than anxiety, exhaustion, distraction, and burnout to the process of change.

Coaching Lessons for Leadership and Organizations

My hope is that the resilient person who derives her or his ethic of leadership from a core of curiosity and a life-approach of experimental adventure, even in crisis, will invite a following of

appreciative persons, committed to life-giving work in a world that seems intent on competition and destruction. Greater self-awareness, a rising energy to take action for change that hopes, heals, and is in service to the world, a plan that fits particular ministry contexts, and then living into a new reality all results in living into a new in a new way of engaging the world as religious peoples whose work is to bring love and hope where there is desperation and isolation. Leaders model this way. Groups and organizations learn it and live it. Health and wholeness spreads.

If enough leaders adopt this way of being, without myriad marketed checklists defining how to succeed, then the network of those practicing this hopeful, powerful approach will have potential to heal the world, one community at a time.

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