

## Coaching yourself for precision

Self-management is an old idea made new again. As our world becomes more saturated with information and the pace of communication continues to quicken, managing ourselves matters. Time and attention become our most limited resources. Precision Questioning is a crucial self-management tool because it directs our attention to what is most important. Becoming more precise in our questions is a deeply personal form of learning that helps us cut to the quick of how we manage our most precious resources—ourselves.

### COACHING YOURSELF IN THE MOMENT

How people manage themselves is one of the oldest topics in psychology, referring to ways that people handle responsibilities, plan, and manage time and effort. These necessities have become all the more important as the world has grown in complexity and interconnectedness. How do we—in the midst of constant interruption—look forward, plan, manage our time and energy, and complete what we set out to accomplish?

Making deliberate use of time for planning is one answer. Time and emphasis on reflection is another answer. But what about in-the-moment solutions to the self-management dilemma? We rapidly get better at managing our time and effort when we insist on being more precise in the moment. Self-coaching can happen in the moment of your work, which makes it a powerful self-management learning tool.

Coaching—and especially self-coaching—is vital to self-management because it happens in the moment that work is transpiring. In this sense, self-coaching is different from reflective learning and from preparation. Reflective learning happens after the fact, when you are gathering lessons from an experience. Preparation happens as you are getting ready for an experience. The immediate form of self-coaching focuses on what happens in real-time.

### SELF-COACHING AND PRECISION QUESTIONING

Coaching yourself for precision in your questions depends on the capacity to feel your own thinking. We have limited vocabulary to talk about our cognitive states and we don't often discuss our

confusion with others. But if you cannot feel your own confusion, you will not be able to ask questions that move in the direction of clarity.

Coaching yourself for precision questions hinges on becoming more and more aware of your feelings of confusion, and then developing strategies to remedy that confusion. Follow these steps to build your capacity for precision in your questions:

1. *Monitor yourself for moments when you don't understand something*

What does it feel like to have a hazy understanding of an issue? How does that compare with the feeling of crystal clear understanding? Mild confusion feels different from complete lack of knowledge. How? Lack of contextual understanding is a different form of not understanding than lack of technical understanding. Develop your own vocabulary and typology for the different types of confusion you encounter in your work.

2. *Link types of confusion with types of questions*

The way in which you don't understand something shapes the kind of questions you will want to ask in order to understand it more fully. Hazy understanding usually requires questions of clarification to bring an issue into sharper relief. Lack of contextual knowledge, on the other hand, often requires Basic Critical Questions—i.e. How do you know this is true? Where did you hear it? Why do you believe it?—in order to bring the background into focus. A lack of technical knowledge may require questions about causes and effects in addition to clarification and assumptions. As you develop

more capacity for monitoring your own states of confusion, pay attention to patterns about the types of questions that help you remedy your confusion.

3. *Take time—and multiple iterations—to articulate what you don't understand*

Not every situation allows you to ask multiple iterations of a question, but many do. Powerful self-coaching involves recognizing that you haven't asked a question in exactly the way that

remedies your confusion, and then re-stating the question so that it is more precise. Use this preamble to gain permission: "I didn't quite articulate that correctly; let me try again. What I wanted to ask is:." Revise your questions in the moment you ask them, and keep revising them until they target exactly what you need to know. Nothing will help you gain in your articulation faster than coaching yourself in the moment in this way.

**This Month's Practice**

We have defined immediate self-coaching as an in-the-moment activity that involves monitoring yourself and correcting your behavior in real-time. This form of self-coaching requires conscious, small goals. This month's practice involves setting small goals for yourself and using in-the-moment self-coaching techniques to work toward those goals.

**PRACTICE: COACH YOURSELF TO ASK PRECISE QUESTIONS**

Set a goal for becoming more precise in one type of question - for example, questions about assumptions. Use every interaction this month as a kind of living laboratory to coach yourself for precision in this type of question. You can extend this exercise for several months by focusing on building precision across multiple categories of questions.

- Actively monitor your own mind for the feeling of confusion around the types of questions you have chosen as your focus. For example, what does it feel like when you spot an assumption? What does it

feel like when an assumption is challenged? What does it feel like when you can't quite see your assumptions? As an assumption becomes clear, what changes in your mind?

- Designate a file or a journal for your self-coaching observations. Use your journal to write about what it feels like to work with this kind of confusion. Make regular entries after periods of work or after important conversations. Build your capacity to articulate your own mental states. Keep the descriptions simple. For example, "when I don't understand an assumption, it feels like \_\_\_\_\_."
- In meetings and discussions where you are looking for assumptions, feel your

confusion and deliberately ask questions that help remedy it. When you are asking questions, insist on your own mental clarity by revising your questions in the moment. Use this phrase: "I didn't quite articulate that correctly; let me try again. What I wanted to ask is: \_\_\_\_\_."

We're here to help. If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at [QuestionMaster@vervago.com](mailto:QuestionMaster@vervago.com). You may also join our LinkedIn group for Precision Q+A alumni by visiting us here at [LinkedIn](#).