

# 1: Unified Theory of Coaching

## *Chapter Overview*

*Grounded in positive psychology, Coach Training EDU's approach to training is based in Hope Theory.*

*This section provides an overview of the theory, as well as two core skills a coach uses during a coaching session: powerful questions and direct communication.*

## *Essential Coach Qualities Covered*

*Professional. Empathetic. Curious. Courageous.*

## *Skill-Check Questions*

*What are the elements of Hope Theory and how do they play into a coaching session?*

*What are the elements of a powerful question?*

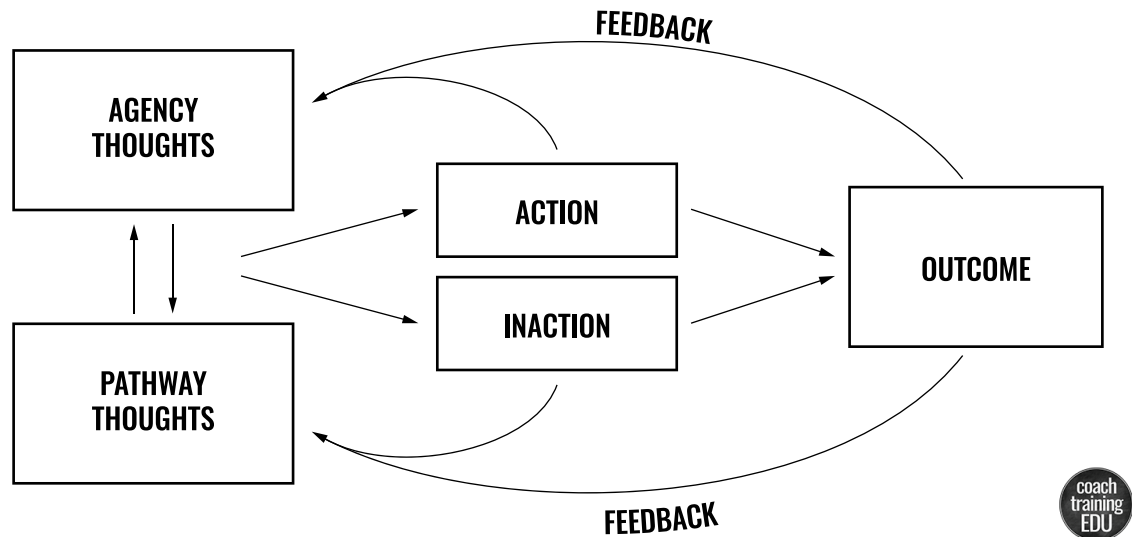
*How do I use direct communication in coaching?*

## *Etymology*

*Unified comes from two Latin words: uni-, meaning one, and -fied, which comes from the Latin verb facere meaning to do or to make. A unified theory relates individual elements to each other in a way that provides a deeper understanding of both the individual pieces and the synthesis of the whole.*

# Hope Theory & Learn-Be-Do

Several humanistic psychology theories have had a profound influence on the ideas that form the foundation of coaching. From theories like Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to Carol Dweck's Growth Mindset, the number of theories and conceptualizations of human decision-making and goal achievement are vast. These elements offer a strong foundation for the efficacy of coaching. Out of the plethora of theories, Hope Theory, as developed by C.R. Snyder, stands out. It excels in its ability to explain the efficacy of the coaching model from both the coach's and the client's points of view. The model also aligns neatly with the Learn-Be-Do categorization of questions.



C.R. Snyder offers the following definition of Hope Theory: “Hope is a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy), and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals).”<sup>32</sup> He split motivation into four different aspects: agency, pathways, goals, and obstacles.

The first aspect includes the assumptions you have about who you are and what you can learn. In terms of Hope Theory, this is called "agency". One of the characteristics that distinguish a seasoned coach from an inexperienced coach is the degree to which the coach uses challenges and setbacks as opportunities to explore what the client is learning about themselves, as well as what character traits the challenge is addressing. In other words, an experienced coach asks

<sup>32</sup> Snyder, C.R. 1995. Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Nurturing Hope. *Journal of Counseling and Development* 73(3): pp. 355 - 360.

about a client's agency. In Hope Theory, agency is defined as one's belief in their ability to learn the required knowledge and use or gain the required skills to achieve a goal. Many life coaching exercises, from the *Future Self* to the *Inner Critic*, apply tools to help clients take different approaches to develop a deeper sense of agency.

The second aspect is what action plan(s) you think will help to achieve the goal. In Hope Theory, this is termed "pathways". Pathways are routes you map to reach your goals, and they go one step further than traditional action plans. With pathways, it's important to think about the effort you want to put into achieving the goal and develop pathways that are worth your time and energy. Time is the landscape on which you map your pathways. Snyder explains that time is a continuum of past, present, and future, and we tend to think about time as a line. To construct a pathway, someone links sequential actions from their present toward their cognitive construction of a future goal. Very hopeful people tend to be very confident in their pathways, and their pathways tend to be well-articulated. If one pathway doesn't work, hopeful people can construct another one to reach their goal. On the other hand, people with low hope levels struggle to identify clear pathways. When pathways aren't clear, it is hard to commit to them fully, and if they don't work, it's easy to throw in the towel.

The next element of Hope Theory is "goals". Hope Theory is largely based on the idea that people are naturally goal-oriented. This goal-oriented thinking includes three different stages:

**Stage 1.** Preliminary Decision-making Process. This stage includes decisions around goal choices and the value of possible outcomes. Learning, assumptions, and experiences of the past mixed with hopes, dreams, and fears of the future should be considered.

**Stage 2.** Action Step Analysis. This stage occurs as you are immersed in the process of working toward the goal. During this stage, we measure our actions by the degree to which they achieve our desired results. This leads us to stay engaged, increase our engagement, take a break, or disengage.

**Stage 3.** Reflection and Learning. This stage is marked by the absorption of experiences that happen when the results tumble in. This final stage feeds back into ideas and assumptions about agency and possible pathways, completing the cycle and starting it anew.

Goals can range from lofty (such as introducing and cultivating coaching concepts in the way we learn, work, and live) to simple (such as cleaning the office desktop). We can consider goals through agency, pathways, and the value of the outcomes which may appear immediately or reveal themselves over decades to come.

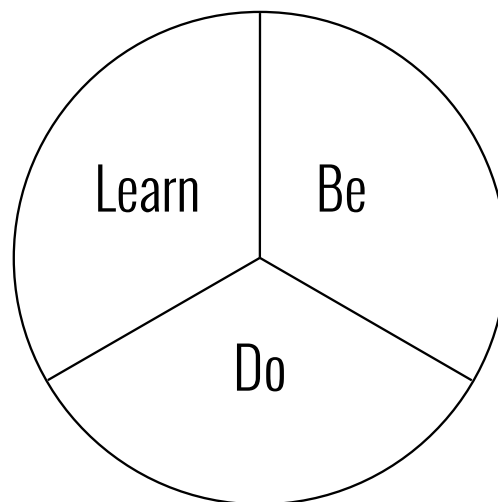
The final element of Hope Theory is the "obstacle." Borrowing from Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory, obstacles are necessary for the process of optimal experience. Without some kind of challenge, one can't slip into the optimal experience ("flow"), where one's skill set matches the challenge at hand, brings about awareness, and is intensely satisfying. When obstacles confront us, Hope Theory helps us look at how ideas and emotions about our agency and pathways interplay to either increase or decrease our engagement.

## Hope Theory as a Unified Theory of Coaching

The magic begins when you consider the dynamic between agency and pathways in all stages of motivation and the elements of coaching. Coaching excels at helping clients improve the quality of the decisions they consider. During coaching sessions, clients explore ideas and assumptions about their expectations, perspectives, skills, limiting beliefs, and mindsets. They mindfully craft action steps and accountability. When working with a skilled coach, a client learns to address their empowered assumptions about agency, and clarify options and insights about possible pathways to reach their goals.

Over the past decade, Coach Training EDU has adopted a Learn-Be-Do model of categorizing questions, giving coaches-in-training a framework for the kinds of questions that are useful while coaching. This framework aligns well with the aspects of Hope Theory. Indeed, each framework gains depth when combined with the others.

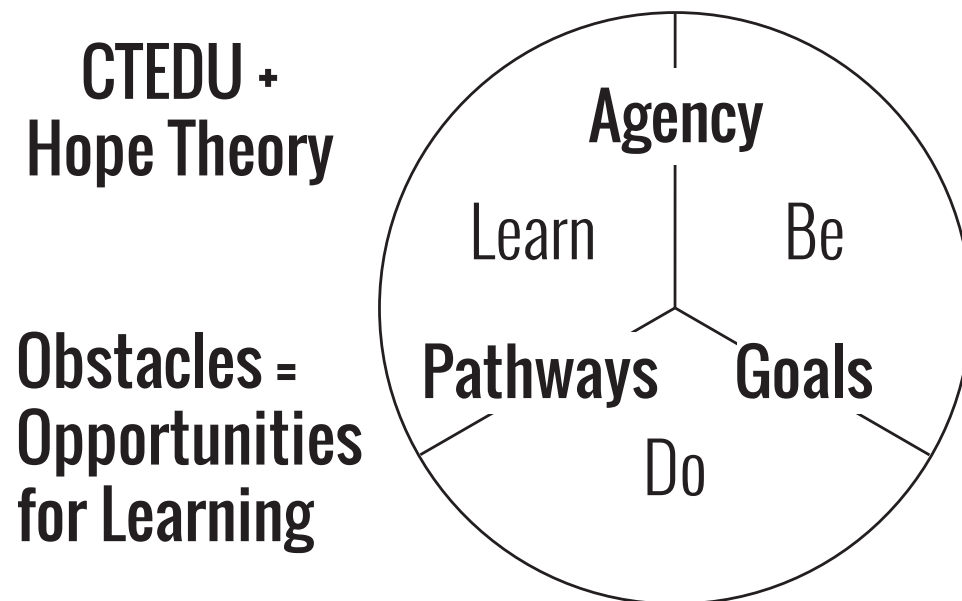
## Coach Training EDU's Model of Question Categories



"Learning" points primarily to the insights clients have about who they are and what they can achieve. From this perspective, a coach might ask a client, "What are you learning about yourself (in this moment, or in the current situation)?" Learning also involves the strategies and action steps required to achieve a goal. An example of a coaching question that includes learning would be: "What new skill is this challenge requiring you to develop?" When incorporated into Hope Theory, Learning most heavily lines up with agency and pathways.

"Being" questions refer to the characteristics your client already has or wants to develop. Being also includes the energy a client brings to a project, assumptions about their abilities, and assumptions about what new achievements mean to their identity. A coaching question might be: "What would this accomplishment mean to how you think of yourself and your character traits?" When meshed with Hope Theory, Being lines up with agency, goals, and obstacles.

"Doing" refers to the action steps and systems a client puts in place to achieve a goal. Usually, toward the end of a coaching session, a client will design an action step to implement before the next coaching session. The coach and the client then co-design how best to help the client stay accountable and incorporate the insights gained from the coaching session into their implementation of the action step(s). A typical question would be: "Based on everything we covered in our session, what are a few action steps that you want to take in the next two weeks?" When applied to Hope Theory, doing lines up with pathways, goals, and obstacles.



# Hope Theory & Learn-Be-Do in Action

Let's use the theoretical link between Hope Theory and Learn-Be-Do to see what this practically looks like during a coaching session. We'll quickly review the first six of the 7 Elements of a Coaching Session (the last element is to set the logistics for the next session), and we'll look at how Hope Theory and Learn-Be-Do play a role in each element.

## 1. Connection.

Connection is greeting your client in a way that resumes your rapport with them while establishing a safe space for your coaching session. This part leads either to checking in on past actions (Accountability) or to setting an agenda for your current coaching session (Set the Agenda).

## 2. Accountability.

Accountability looks at what your client has accomplished since the previous coaching session. It is the practice of reflecting on prior goals and pathways to create insights and learning that inform your client's sense of agency and ideas for new pathways.

## 3. Set the Agenda.

Agenda Setting is your client's chance to take control of the coaching session. On a deep level, it empowers a client to articulate an immediate, tangible goal. In the Hope Theory model, you ask your client to clarify a goal that impacts your client's agency.

## 4. Exploration.

Exploring Learning and Being using coaching tools is usually the majority of every coaching session. Your client has an opportunity to address ideas and emotions around agency. This often includes aspects of exercises such as *Empowered Perspectives*, *Busting Limiting Beliefs*, managing Inner Critics, or tapping into insights from the *Future Self* exercise. Learning and Being is woven into the tapestry of the interaction between thoughts and feelings about agency, goals, and possible pathways.

## 5. New Actions and Accountability.

Using the insights from the previous exploration, it's time to craft action steps. This element of a coaching session focuses on pathways and goals. Your client has the opportunity to craft action steps to complete between now and your next coaching session.

## 6. Agenda Check-in.

Checking in on Session Agenda and Logistics for Next Session completes the 7 Elements of a Coaching Session. While checking in on logistics doesn't necessarily have a direct parallel to Hope Theory or Learn-Be-Do, checking in on the Session Agenda does. Checking in on the Session Agenda gives clients one final chance to reflect on the goals, pathways, and agency discussed during the session. Learning and Being questions can be important here, especially if the client is doing internal work over the course of the next week.

# Powerful Questions

Powerful questions form an essential part of the coaching skill set. This coaching skill relies on empathetic, active listening to craft meaningful, curious questions that provide tremendous value to the client. Powerful questions are effective because they invite a client to shift the way they perceive themselves in the context of a question or challenge. Such questions have the power to reveal possibilities that the client maybe never considered or perhaps assumed were unattainable. When employed with the rest of the coaching toolkit, powerful questions can trigger both self-reflection and motivation, which serve as the foundation for a client's agency to build pathways toward their goals.

## What

Powerful questions are short, direct, open-ended questions that are designed to elicit insight and learning. They help clients build motivation to help them follow through with action. Powerful questions have the following characteristics:

- **Open-ended, start with the words *What, Why, or How* (and sometimes *Who, Where, and What if*).**

Powerful questions are usually fewer than ten words. They are direct in that they cut to the heart of the matter. Powerful questions usually start with *What, How, When, Where, or What if*, leading to thought-provoking answers. This contrasts with closed-ended questions, which result in “yes” or “no” answers that provide only limited information and insight. Closed-ended questions typically start with the words *Is, Do, Does, Will, Are, or Have*.

- **Provocative and exciting to answer.**

Powerful questions also have a certain force about them that make clients want to answer. They are usually questions that may have been roaming around in a client’s mind but haven’t been fully addressed or asked directly. Neither the client nor the coach knows the answer to the question until it is asked, but it’s a great question for the client to consider.

- **More than facts.**

Powerful questions are not merely about factual knowledge or information. Instead, they address thoughts, habits, and emotions that may not have any known right or wrong answers. When a coach asks a powerful question, the client has an opportunity to deepen their learning and assess the things that are most important to them. It’s a chance to try out ideas and see which ones have the most energy. It is also a chance for the client to explore an emotion or use their imagination to conjure up how great it will actually feel to reach an accomplishment.

- **Based on curiosity.**

All powerful questions are based on empathetic curiosity. These are questions that invite the client to become more self-aware and confident about the action that they want to take.



# Why

## **A. Powerful questions give the client space to create a solution.**

The ideal solution for a problem comes from the client directly. Sure, general guidelines exist for what constitutes effective time management or the steps in building a successful business; however, the solutions to the deepest problems — and the ones most worth solving — come from within. The strength of a powerful question comes from the coach's invitation to the client to explore what is really going on from their point of view.

## **B. Powerful questions are short.**

Brevity is beautiful, and it focuses the client's mind on one topic without too much extra information in the way. Short, powerful questions also lends to creating space for the client to explore. Remember, you want the client to speak nearly 90% of the coaching session.

## **C. Powerful questions inspire creativity.**

Most powerful questions start with *What* or *How*. Being open-ended allows the client to be creative with the answer and gets the coach out of the client's way. The coach's job is to tap into a client's natural curiosity and point them in directions they haven't explored before. By asking an open-ended question, the coach stimulates the client's creativity and curiosity to explore and add value to the coaching relationship.

# How

Powerful questions require practice. It takes some time to get used to asking a question, then falling quiet to give space for your client to answer. Try to resist the urge to ask two questions at once, ask a long questions, or add a long explanation.

### **1. Tap into your natural curiosity while listening empathetically.**

When listening, imagine you *are* the other person. Get into your client's world. Then ask yourself what you would be most curious about if *you* were your client. You can trust your innate curiosity to guide you.

### **2. Start your question with *What, How, Why, Who, or What if*.**

“Why” questions can be great, but use them wisely since they could put your client on the defense. For example, it may be very insightful to ask, “Why is that important to you?” However, asking, “Why would you do that?” could cause the client to feel like they need to be defensive. Instead, try asking, “What reasons led you to do that?” The latter doesn't question the client's character but instead focuses on the circumstances of the situation. Coming from a place of curiosity and steering clear of judgment is key.

### **3. Keep your question simple and brief.**

When practicing powerful questions, challenge yourself to create questions that are ten words or less. Leave out any explanation of your question, and avoid restating the client's previous response.

### **4. Ask one question, then pause.**

Give your client time to think and be introspective. It may feel like an uncomfortably long time in silence, but that's okay. From a client's point of view, having that time to think and form thoughts is priceless. Keep in mind that it is likely that your client has never been asked questions like these before, so getting comfortable with silence is important.

### **5. Listen empathetically to your client's answer.**

Repeat steps 1-4 by using some of your client's language to craft your next powerful question. Bring to mind coaching models such as Learn-Be-Do and Hope Theory, as well as the other elements in coaching exercises found in this book, to inform your next question.

# Examples of Powerful Questions

## **What Questions:**

- What do you want to work on today?
- What is most important to you?
- What is the biggest change you need to make in yourself?
- What is the benefit?
- What is the cost?
- After you accomplish this outcome, what is the next step?
- What stops you from getting what you want?
- What do you need more of to achieve your goals?
- What do you need less of?
- What causes you the most fear?
- What are you learning — or do you hope to learn — about yourself?
- What values are most important to you?
- What specifically about that value is exciting to you?
- What is your ideal solution?

## **How Questions:**

- How important is that to you?
- How do you know it will be successful?
- How does that solution feel?
- How do you know?
- How can you be sure?
- How can you develop [character trait] in yourself?
- How is your action aligning with your intention?

### **Why Questions:**

- Why or why not?
- Why do you want to move forward?
- Why is it holding you back?
- Why do you want to learn this about yourself?
- Why does this perspective come up at that moment?

### **Who Questions:**

- Who do you want to become?
- Who do you most admire?

### **What If Questions:**

- If you could change just one thing, what would it be?
- What happens if you fail?
- What if you knew you would not fail?
- What if you had all the resources you needed?

# Direct Communication

## What

Communication is about sharing ideas and information. Direct communication is the skill of being able to communicate and illustrate ideas clearly. Life coaches have the ability to provide value by using several tools to communicate directly with clients. Direct communication has several different components:

- **Information.**

This includes the original idea, emotion, thought, or other information (i.e., the message a life coach wants to communicate) the coach notices. Although it can be a risk, a coach can call out a client's behavior during a session. This can lead to further exploration and some great coaching. For example, if a client answers "I don't know" a lot or changes the subject when you try to dig deeper, bring up that observation without judgment. Utilize it as an opportunity to coach around that observation.

- **The sender's intention.**

When people are communicating information, the actual message and the intention, or how the sender wants the message to be understood, may differ.

- **The method.**

The sender has a variety of choices about the method they use to send a direct message. The next section outlines many of the methods a life coach can use to communicate directly with the client.

- **The recipient's understanding.**

The meaning of the message is some blend of the sender's original thought and what the recipient understands. Basing communication on the client's understanding is useful when thinking about developing the method and content of the message.

- **The relationship.**

There is always some relationship between the sender and the recipient. The designed relationship of coach and client allows for more direct communication.

## Why

### **A. Clarity cuts through confusion.**

Direct communication sends a clear message. This clarity aids a client in cutting through their excuses, limiting beliefs, and worn-out habits to focus on what is truly important.

### **B. Empathetic listening creates safety and the ability to fine-tune understanding.**

Direct communication is incredibly powerful because a coach in Level 2 listening is able to adjust communication for the client's understanding. The coach can ask the client powerful questions to ensure that the message has been understood in a way that aligns with the coach's intentions.

### **C. Taking a risk as a coach shows courage and builds the coach-client relationship.**

From a life coaching point of view, direct communication is not just communication for the sake of sharing ideas. It also acts as a method for the coach to strengthen the coaching relationship.

## How

### **1. Identify the message you want to share with your client.**

The first step in direct communication is being mindful of both the message you want to communicate and how you intend your client to understand the message.

**2. Make sure you are in Level 2 listening.**

Taking a moment to ensure you are listening in Level 2 listening — truly imagining you are the other person in the moment — helps you deliver the idea effectively and with compassion.

**3. State your idea as clearly and simply as you can. Then ask a short question.**

You want to avoid folding an idea into a question that acts as a suggestion. For example, it's not as effective to ask, "Do you think it'd be a good idea to plan out your week every Sunday night, or at least have a weekly planning time to go over your workload?" Instead, you could state, "I think you need to have a weekly time to plan." And follow with a question, "What do you think?"

**4. Closely watch the reaction of your client.**

A strong life coach maintains awareness of the client's experience. By continuing to listen empathetically, you can hold the space with curiosity. It takes courage to share, and hold the space for someone to process a challenging idea.

**5. Ask a follow-up question.**

It could be as simple as "What do you think?" Or "What was it like to hear that idea?"