

Coaching: Tough Questions, Brave Answers

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Everyone has their own answers, if asked the right questions.

Explore how the simple questions in the headings can be used by everyone, inside and outside the criminal justice system, to change what we want. Brave answers to coaching's tough questions mean we can make the most of our potential and what life has given us, whatever our situation may be.

This chapter was commissioned to focus on our work with men and boys, in prison and out, for a book published in 2021: 'Humane Justice - What is the role of kindness, hope and compassion in the criminal justice system?'

Coaching Inside and Out helps people improve their own lives and the lives of others. CIAO's coaches offer kindness, have hope that everyone can change and act with (com)passion. It takes courage to answer coaching's hard questions, but there's laughter, as well as tears.

Everyone deserves to benefit from great coaching, regardless of their ability to pay or position in life. That's why we coach adults in prison and on probation in the community; as well as children who've been locked up or are on the edges of the criminal justice system. It's never too early and never too late. CIAO also coaches staff working with our clients. We started in 2010, when a Google search implied no organisations were coaching in prisons anywhere in the world. Now it's increasingly widespread.

Being asked to reflect on kindness, hope and compassion in our work with men and boys builds perfectly on the book about our beginnings in HMP Styal: *'Coaching Behind Bars: Facing Challenges and Creating Hope in a Women's Prison'*.

These attributes existing in criminal justice may surprise some, and possibly even more so with male clients. It's a tough world to share them in. People can be mocked and despised for it. It can be a challenging place for these qualities to be accepted too. Coaches have the luxury of being outside 'the system' and are very aware of the additional challenges faced by those in different roles; often in environments beset with drugs, fear and violence. However, you'll find examples here of kindness, hope and compassion by coaches towards our clients and, far more importantly, by our clients towards themselves and their peers, families, coaches and staff.

What's in your toolbox?

Mentors can advise and show how to fix things or even do a job for you, whereas coaches bring a toolbox full of transformational questions to help clients work things out for themselves.

We all need more tools, if, as Maslow said: *"It is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail."* Coaching helps you discover tools you've forgotten, tools you never knew you had or tools you aren't quite sure how to use yet.

How might we change the world if we believed everyone has their own answers, if asked the right questions? What if people could focus their energy by choosing what they want to change and what tools work best for them?

No tool required?

You can be human in a coaching session, not 'male'; no longer playing a role but being yourself, often for the first time. If you've spent a lifetime being told not to cry or show weakness, this belief is cemented. Sometimes you don't need to be asked a question. You just need space to work things out.

One man wept his way through half a box of tissues and said: *"Oh my god... I've filled the bin! You'll have to tell them you've been really busy and had ten clients today and they've all cried!"*

He'd paced back and forth with his head down. At times he lost his breath from crying so hard. It was a totally new experience. He'd never been seen crying and hadn't ever cried like this. Tears of shame, hurt, sadness, loss... He only managed to sit down for the last 10 minutes. A calmness came over him and he said: *"What's just happened to me?"* On leaving he immediately began to address his addiction.

Allowing so much time for silence may be surprising, not least when we limit our work to six hours with each client to concentrate thought and action, but that space can be as powerful as any question.

Suspicion of Kindness – Why are you doing this?

Great coaching means being open, genuine and straight-talking, as well as showing vulnerability. Being human and patient fosters trust and a safe environment for exploring thoughts, feelings and future actions. Knowing the immense part luck plays in our lives means we also work without judgement.

The power is with the client, which makes coaching a very different experience to most criminal justice interventions. Suspicion about kindness can lead clients to test us, whether by sharing their history or through current behaviour (anger, swearing, not turning up etc.). Instead of being pushed away we work through challenges and show up repeatedly regardless. Curiosity about issues like 'Anger Icebergs' means looking at what's below the surface, addressing the emotions that generate behaviour and reframing them.

This isn't soft or easy. CIAO coaches are tough but flexible and expect clients to work hard. We hold them accountable. If anyone plays games we'll work with that with curiosity: What's the game and is playing it really working for you?

We try to model bravery and don't avoid the powerful questions, but we don't encourage bravery above all else. We go deeper or just work at surface level, depending on where people are at that moment. While coaching can be challenging, uncomfortable, difficult and scary; you can go far further with someone alongside you being kind and encouraging you to be kind to yourself.

How's that working for you?

A young teenager was extremely kind to others and put all his energy into thinking and feeling about them but not about himself. *"I like to be kind to others; it hurts me when people aren't and I get into trouble as I do things to help them like starting a fight. I don't want people to feel sad when they're told bad things like: 'You're gay, black and stupid.'... Most people don't think I'm kind, they think I'm bad. What can I do about that?"*

Coach: *If being kind is your superpower how is fighting being kind?*

Client: *Oh!*

Client: *What else could I do?!*

Coach: *Let's work that out...*

He recognised he was feeling empathy and talked to his friends about how they actually felt and how his fighting then made them and him feel. His mum called the next day: *"I wanted to thank you as I had no idea that this was the motivation to fight – to be kind... I feel ashamed I didn't know this and that my son's also been bullied. I can offer him support from now on."*

In his last session he gave his coach a piece of paper: *"Please never forget to BE KIND I won't!"*

Beyond Hope - What would you make if you could make anything?

Some clients had hope taken away from them on imprisonment and many have never had a hope, which is part of why they're in 'the system'. Working with children can feel more hopeful as they're just starting their lives, but forgotten adults also need support. Hope means there's a future worth living for in places where many feel they're at a dead end and some take that literally by contemplating or attempting suicide. Hope brings light into this darkness and despair.

CIAO coaches often have no faith, in a religious sense, but bring love and an abundance of hope grounded in the hard reality of life that clients share. Many clients don't start with the determination and motivation to change things, whereas we know we all have the capacity to think differently. Coaches may come with greater hope, but it doesn't just transfer to clients, hope grows once they work out what's stopping them think and take control of their lives.

What materials have you got?

CIAO's first male community client said he only had five minutes but stayed for thirty. He'd never had any 'meaningful use of time' in all his 29 years and was first arrested aged 12: *"I had to look after myself all my life. I've never had a penny."* He'd no hope and couldn't see how he could change anything, so he went in at the deep end uncovering his strengths and values (that included kindness and hope). The raw

materials of energy and self-esteem were all he needed. *"People do things because of the hand they were dealt, who they're around, who they mix with and how they were brought up. Now I'm putting my cards back in the pack and giving them a good shuffle."*

Coaching had to stop after just two weeks because he got a job. As importantly, he was also now *"minding the kids a lot more and taking responsibility. I told my ex 'I can't have the kids with me' and that killed me. But I could. I just needed to sort me head out."*

What assumptions are stopping you start?

Another client shared that he'd lost his get up and go. *"I really want to make the changes but I just don't know where to start."* When asked what he was doing or thinking that was stopping him move forward, he covered a wall in sticky notes with negative assumptions of people's views of him, but he couldn't say why he believed that.

He recognised he held the power to make the changes he wanted to happen. *"How crazy is it that I was the one who was stopping myself from moving forward? I decided from session 3 that I was going to stop this. Once I'd worked that out I started immediately to change and move forward in my life. Things that I hadn't ever seen were all around me. It was as if I'd stepped into a new world. I learnt that I was supported, I had my place and people recognised that I was good at what I did. I have a new way of dealing with things now, which is brilliant for me."*

This officer's story shows how we're all human before we are anything else. It's common to read accounts and need to check if the client is a prisoner or a member of staff. Clients of all sorts share doubts and fears, as well as bravery.

No Forgiveness, No Compassion – What dead wood do you need to let go of?

"Scum", "worthless" and "FEAR".

Judgement and prejudice hold us all back. These words are what some men in prison wrote on a flip chart to describe themselves. Self-judgement is something coaches challenge to enable clients to move to a better state. We want people to demonstrate compassion towards themselves. Otherwise we shore up anger, pain and hurt inside us; with no solid foundation to build on. We want our clients to feel self-compassion, not self-hatred and shame.

Passion is more vital to what coaches do than compassion. Although coaches might feel sorrow or want to relieve suffering, it's essential that we don't coach in anger or pain, whether ours or transferred from clients. We need to be able step in and out of clients' emotions and we use clinical supervision and other help to support that. None of us is super-human. Treating ourselves, as well as others, with compassion is fundamental.

What are you assuming that's holding you back?

Coaches challenge invisible assumptions to break negative patterns of thinking or self-sabotaging. This positive questioning can be the first time many have done this form of reflection.

A client nearing release developed new strategies for old situations, which prompted this exchange:

- Client: *If people look at me funny in the street, when I'm out, then obviously I'll...*
Coach: *May I challenge you on the word obviously?*
Client: *Yes.*
Coach: *What's obvious about that? What if someone's just having a bad day?*
Client: *That never occurred to me! That's going to stay with me that is.*

We also explore 'Blind Spots' in perception and others' possible intentions: What don't you know about yourself that others do? How can you use this to change what you want?

An older boy really struggled with anger issues. He turned up angry once and when he realised the coach wasn't condemning or annoyed, but instead was going to be compassionate and work through his anger with him, something clicked. His coach modelled how things could be if he used his attractive personality for good. He realised he could forgive his family and treat himself with compassion too. He applied this and could see the change in his family's reactions. Once he'd cottoned on to this he took off and was elated. He had options, power and control. He opened up with his family, explained how he was feeling, and they supported him. The vicious cycle became a virtuous one.

CIAO coaches always write certificates and this client chose to adapt his in return. This is one of the points:

Coach:

You haven't been afraid to be challenged even when you were feeling down and irritable - that takes real guts.

Client:

You haven't been afraid to challenge me even when I was irritable, hilarious and the rest... that takes real guts!!

This response shows how kindness and compassion, and both giving and accepting challenge, leave us all with greater hope for the future.

Who can you share your tools with?

One man always talked of having three plans and whenever he mentioned Plan 3 he'd give a cheeky smile:

Plan 1 - Get a Job

Plan 2 - Go to College

Plan 3 - Go back to my old life but try not to get caught and locked up again.

In his last session he shared: *"Okay, I want to help other young lads like I was, to learn from my mistakes. I now know what it is that I need to do... I've made a mistake but that's not my life ended... I'm still only 24 years old... but I'm going to be kind to myself, not judge myself and hate myself. That way didn't work so good for me. There is no Plan 3: I'm never coming back!"*

Coaching is a two-way relationship and, whilst we clearly learn and benefit immensely from our clients, they often want to give something more back to their coaches and can struggle with being unable to. However, they can pay it forward in different ways instead, and they do, including recommending coaching to others. Showing greater care for staff is another kindness that results: one officer was shocked when asked: *"How are you?"* - *"That was a first!"*

What are you taking away from this?

Reflection makes us all better able to improve our lives and the lives of others. It takes years of experience to hone deep coaching skills, but everyone can benefit if we all ask more questions and listen more deeply. The questions in these headings can be used by everyone, inside and outside the criminal justice system, to change what we want.

Kindness, hope and compassion allow the belief that change might be conceivable and that an aspiration just might be achievable. Brave answers to coaching's tough questions can then provide all we need to make the most of our potential and what life has given us, whatever our situation may be. We cannot afford to waste resources, wherever they are. Thankfully though, some resources are renewable and the most powerful of these is hope.