

Ask One More Question: Episode 251

Elena: Hello, friends! Welcome to the Bright Morning Podcast. I'm your host Elena Aguilar, and in each podcast episode, you'll hear me demonstrate how you can lead conversations that build connection and spark change.

Have you noticed how we sometimes reserve our most unfiltered moments for those we love most? It's quite the paradox, isn't it? While there's something beautiful about having safe spaces where we can simply be, most of us also want to bring our best to these important relationships when we can. That's what this summer series is all about.

For the remainder of July, I'll be sharing powerful coaching techniques that can transform your everyday interactions. While I'll focus primarily on personal relationships—perfect timing as many of you navigate summer family dynamics—these strategies work brilliantly in any context. That's the beauty of these coaching moves—they enhance both your personal connections and professional interactions!

Each episode will introduce one specific technique, explore why it's so effective, and demonstrate exactly how to implement it in your life.

Before we jump in, I have one exciting announcement to make: this episode, and all of my episodes moving forward, are now also available as video Podcasts on YouTube! You can find a link to my channel and this episode in the show notes.

Okay, let's dive into today's powerful strategy.

Today's coaching move is one that can transform nearly every conversation you have: asking a clarifying question before answering. This simple yet profound practice involves pausing after someone asks you something or shares an issue, and then asking a question to ensure you truly understand before you respond.

Think about how many misunderstandings happen in our daily conversations. Your partner asks, "Do you want to go out tonight?" and you quickly say no, not realizing they had tickets to that show you've been wanting to see. Or your friend shares a struggle they're having at work, and you offer advice that completely misses the mark because you didn't fully grasp the situation.

We often respond based on assumptions, our own filters, or incomplete information. And once we've answered, it's hard to backtrack. That's where the power of clarifying questions comes in – they ensure that your response addresses what the other person is actually asking or needing, not what you think they're asking or needing.

So what exactly does this coaching move look like? It's about inserting a question between hearing someone and responding to them. Instead of immediately answering or offering your thoughts, you first ask something like: "Can you tell me more about that?" or "Can you say a

sentence or two more?" or "What specifically are you looking for here?" or even simply, "What do you mean by that?"

These questions aren't about delaying or avoiding a response. They're about making sure your response is actually relevant or helpful. They're about creating a foundation of mutual understanding before building on it with your own contribution.

This move is particularly powerful because it challenges our tendency to jump to conclusions, finish others' thoughts, or center our own experiences. It slows down the conversation just enough to ensure that we're truly connecting rather than simply taking turns speaking. Why does asking clarifying questions work so effectively? First, it prevents misunderstandings.

So many conflicts in relationships stem from people talking past each other because they're operating from different assumptions.

Second, it demonstrates respect. When you take the time to make sure you understand someone before responding, you send a powerful message: "Your thoughts matter to me. I want to understand you correctly."

Third, it creates space for deeper sharing. Often, a person's initial statement only scratches the surface of what they want to express. A thoughtful clarifying question invites them to go deeper. And finally, it helps you respond more effectively. Once you truly understand what someone is asking or sharing, you can offer a response that actually addresses their needs or concerns.

I discovered the transformative power of clarifying questions through a painful lesson. Years ago, a close friend came to me with concerns about her relationship. She started by saying, "I don't know if this relationship is right for me." I too had been thinking this relationship wasn't good for her and I immediately launched into all the reasons I thought her partner wasn't a good match, outlining the red flags I'd noticed.

The look on her face stopped me mid-sentence. "That's not what I was asking," she said quietly. "I was trying to talk through how to know when a relationship is right, not get a list of everything wrong with my partner."

That moment was eye-opening for me. I realized I had completely missed her actual question because I didn't take the time to clarify what she was really asking. I assumed I knew where the conversation was going and jumped ahead to answering what I thought she wanted to know. Not only did I miss an opportunity to have a meaningful discussion, but I also damaged our trust by speaking critically about her partner when that wasn't what she was seeking at all.

Since then, I've made it a practice to ask at least one clarifying question before offering a substantive response to any important question or topic. This practice has transformed my conversations, both professionally and personally.

Let me demonstrate how this might sound in everyday conversations. Imagine your partner asks, "Do you think we spend enough time together?"

Without a clarifying question, you might immediately answer based on your own perception: "Of course we do. We have dinner together almost every night and we watched a movie last weekend."

But with a clarifying question, the conversation might unfold quite differently:

[DEMO]

Partner: "Do you think we spend enough time together?"

You: "That's an interesting question. Can you share what prompted you to ask about this?"

Partner: "Well, I was talking with my sister yesterday about how she and her husband have a regular date night, and it made me realize we haven't done anything special, just the two of us, in about three months."

Now you have crucial context. This isn't simply about the quantity of time together; it's about quality time and special occasions. Your response can now address what's actually on your partner's mind, rather than defending the status quo or missing their underlying concern.

Here's another example with a colleague or friend who says, "I'm thinking about looking for a new job."

Without clarifying, you might jump to: "That's a great idea. I've heard the job market is really good right now," or conversely, "Really? I thought you loved your job!"

With a clarifying question, you might respond:

[DEMO]

Friend: "I'm thinking about looking for a new job."

You: "I'd love to hear more about what's leading you to consider that change."

Friend: "Well, I do enjoy a lot of aspects of my current role, but I've realized I'm not learning anything new anymore. I feel like I've plateaued, and I'm not sure there's room for growth where I am."

This additional information completely changes the conversation. Now you can engage with their actual concern – professional growth and development – rather than making assumptions about job satisfaction in general.

Let's look at a third example with a child or teenager who comes home and declares, "School is stupid!"

Without clarifying, you might launch into a lecture about the importance of education, or perhaps commiserate about how you also disliked school at their age.

Instead, with a clarifying question:

[DEMO]

Child: "School is stupid!"

You: "Something happened today that made school feel that way. What went on?"

Child: "We have to do this huge project, and the teacher assigned partners. I got paired with Jamie, who never does any work, which means I'll end up doing everything and we'll still probably get a bad grade."

Now you understand that the issue isn't school in general, but a specific concern about fairness and collaboration. Your response can address these actual concerns rather than missing the mark entirely.

The beauty of clarifying questions is that they work in virtually every relationship and context. Whether you're talking with your partner about household responsibilities, discussing career options with a friend, helping your child navigate social challenges, or supporting an aging parent through health decisions – taking time to clarify before responding deepens the conversation and strengthens the connection.

I've found this practice especially valuable in potentially contentious conversations or when someone asks a question that feels loaded to me. When someone says something that triggers a defensive reaction in me, asking a clarifying question gives me time to regulate my emotions while also ensuring I'm responding to what they actually meant, not what I initially heard through my own filters.

As you practice asking clarifying questions, here are some tips to keep in mind: First, keep it simple. Effective clarifying questions don't need to be complex. "Can you tell me more about that?" or "What do you mean when you say..." are straightforward but powerful. Second, use a genuinely curious tone. A clarifying question asked with defensiveness or skepticism won't invite deeper sharing. Your tone should convey sincere interest in understanding.

Third, listen to the answer! It sounds obvious, but make sure you're actually absorbing the clarification rather than just using the question as a perfunctory pause before saying what you already planned to say.

Fourth, be willing to ask follow-up clarifying questions if needed. Sometimes one round of clarification isn't enough, especially for complex or sensitive topics. Don't rush to respond until you're confident you understand.

You might face some challenges as you implement this coaching move. One common obstacle is impatience – both yours and others'. In our fast-paced world, taking time to clarify can feel

inefficient. Remember that the few seconds invested in clarification save much more time that would otherwise be wasted in misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Another challenge is that some people might interpret your clarifying questions as stalling or evading. You can address this by briefly explaining your intention: "I want to make sure I understand you correctly before I respond."

You might also find that clarifying questions occasionally reveal that there isn't actually a question or issue for you to address. Sometimes people are simply thinking out loud or processing verbally, and they don't necessarily need or want your input. This is valuable information that saves you from offering unwanted advice!

My challenge to you this week is to practice asking clarifying questions in at least seven different conversations – one each day. Pay attention to how this practice affects the quality of your interactions. Do you notice more meaningful exchanges? Fewer misunderstandings? A sense of deeper connection?

Also notice how it feels to pause before responding. Many of us experience a sense of urgency to reply quickly, as if taking time to ensure understanding is somehow impolite. As you practice this skill, that discomfort will likely diminish, replaced by an appreciation for the spaciousness and precision that clarifying questions create.

Remember, transformational coaching isn't about having all the answers – it's about creating the conditions for meaningful exchange and growth. Sometimes the most valuable contribution you can make to a conversation isn't your answer, but your question.

Alright, that's going to do it for today. If you want more of me telling you exactly what to do in common coaching and life scenarios, you are definitely going to want to check out the show notes to learn more about my Learning Library and Transformational Coaching PLC. It's your go-to resource for transforming ordinary conversations into transformative ones. If you want to bring some of the ease of summer into your work this fall, you're going to want to join me over there!

And if you love the show and want to watch me record every episode, you're in luck! The podcast is now on YouTube. Check out the show notes for a link to this episode in video form and subscribe to our channel!

And finally, if you appreciated today's episode please share it with someone you know would benefit from it, and/or hop over to Apple podcast and leave a 5 star rating and review to help others discover it. Thank you so much for helping our show reach new friends.

LesLee Bickford is the podcast producer, and Stacey Goodman does the sound engineering. Be well everyone!