

## Book Review

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**Bungay Stanier, Michael. (2016). *The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More and Change the Way You Lead Forever*. Toronto: Box of Crayons Press.**

**Allyson Woodrooffe**  
**Toronto, Canada**

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“Tell less and ask more  
Your advice is not as good  
As you think it is.”  
—Michael Bungay Stanier, *The Coaching Habit*

### First, some context

Our word ‘coach’ derives from a village in Hungary, Kocs, which in the 15th century was renowned for its light and fast ‘carts.’ By the mid-19th century the English descendant ‘coach’ was being used as university slang to refer to the tutors who helped convey “the student through the exam ... as if he were riding in a carriage” (Ayto, J, 1991, p. 119). Soon after that, it also came to refer to an athletic trainer (Barnhart R.K., & Steinmetz, S, 2011, p. 183).

Today, the term “coaching” means different things to different people. To some life, leadership and executive coaches it means providing performance-focused advice to clients on what to change in their approach and how to better manage their time. To other coaches, coaching more closely resembles those early tutors who prepared their students then sent them off to fend for themselves in the world. The challenge with this kind of coaching is that it requires a willingness on the part of the coach to ask more questions and give less advice, as the subtitle of Bungay Stanier’s book, *The Coaching Habit*, suggests.

### Questions, not answers

*The Coaching Habit* is highly readable and engaging. It is built around a scaffolding of seven questions designed to guide any leader through more

meaningful exchanges with their employees, ideally in 10 minutes or less. By developing such a coaching habit, Bungay Stanier asserts that managers will be able to work less hard and have more impact.

In today's world, business leaders are expected to coach. But Bungay Stanier claims that many leaders tend to shy away from coaching because they have either received poor coach training or have found that once back in the office they default into patterns of advice-giving and problem-solving. These default behaviors can lead to disempowered employees who resent being micro-managed, and to overwhelmed managers who resent employees who come to them with every problem. *The Coaching Habit* was written to provide business leaders with a simple and effective approach to coaching that is structured, yet open-ended.

Steering away from formal 'sit down and coach' sessions, which might be intimidating and uncomfortable for both managers and employees, *The Coaching Habit* encourages leaders to make coaching conversations a daily habit and an informal act. It offers no formula for coaching, but rather a set of deceptively simple questions that enable a comfortable and flexible structure for such conversations.

Using passionate yet light-hearted humor throughout, the book is structured around the seven questions and is supported at the end of each section by short reviews of current research in the behavioral-, cognitive- and neuro-science fields.

In the first section, Bungay Stanier builds a compelling case about why creating a coaching habit is worth a leader's time: namely that our culture of advice-giving, answer-seeking and problem-solving has led to overdependence, overwhelm and disconnection.

Then the book dives into a "kickstart" question: "What's on your mind?" This is a compassionate and effective opening to any coaching conversation. In the work setting it offers room for the whole employee, not just their job description. It's open-ended, allowing for any answer really. When answering "What's on your mind?" the respondent might mention frustration with a colleague. Or maybe they're struggling to keep up with the demands of a project. Or maybe what's really on their mind is a sick child, or an elderly parent. The power of this question derives from the space it offers to connect on a human level, whether that is inside or outside the realm of work.

“And What Else?”, the second question of the book, builds from the first and provides space for the employee to go deeper and say what might really be on their mind. This acknowledges that there might actually be ten other things under that first response. Bungay Stanier encourages managers to keep asking the “AWE” question until there really is nothing else. His belief is that when a manager leaps to solve the first problem, they are often addressing the wrong problem.

Once you get to the end of the “what else’s,” instead of feeling overwhelmed and responsible for fixing it all, the manager asks what, I believe, is the real money question in the book (spoiler alert). This killer question, “What’s the Real Challenge Here For You?”, is a carefully crafted gem. It’s not just “What’s the challenge?” or “What’s the real challenge?”, it’s “What’s the real challenge—here—for you?” It helps people focus on one thing, the main thing that’s in their way, rather than everything—and it offers the individual a chance to both be heard and supported by speaking the truth.

The book continues with four more questions that flow with a simple and satisfying logic. Don’t be misled by the seemingly-simplistic concept of the seven questions. They have a subtle and powerful clarity. Also, Bungay Stanier isn’t suggesting a formulaic approach to using them, and encourages managers to practice and see what works best for them. The questions can be mixed and matched and moved out of their linear order.

Its punchy written and visual style might deceive some into thinking the book is a light-weight read. Don’t let that fool you. *The Coaching Habit* interweaves well-worn principles of coaching with current business book references, creating an enjoyable tapestry that will appeal to leaders, managers, executive and life coaches alike.

The book draws particular attention to the need of a manager not only to be able to play with these questions, but to be open to truly listening. To listen deeply is one of the greatest gifts we can offer someone and is a cornerstone of most coaching modalities. Through deep listening, relationships deepen, as we experience ourselves in the other. As actor Alan Alda said, “Real listening is a willingness to let the other person change you” (Alda, A, 2006, p. 160).

Bungay Stanier also illustrates how questions that start with “what” are almost always more powerful than “why” questions (which make people defensive) and how important it is to coach the person and not the topic (“You can only coach the person in front of you” (Bungay Stanier, p. 90)). Also,

coaching is always far more successful and creates longer-lasting change when the answers and choices come from the client (or employee), and when the coach helps the client to find their own clarity, that empowers them to move forward.

Most of us bristle slightly when told what to do, even when we know the person telling us is actually right. By helping managers be less like people-movers and more like people-developers, *The Coaching Habit* is about achieving a better way of doing things. (Like the motto of Bungay Stanier's company Box of Crayons: "Do less good work and more great work.") The book is a valuable resource to any manager seeking to become adept and comfortable having conversations that are more relational and less like advice-giving.

### **References**

- Alda, A. (2006). *Never have your dog stuffed*. New York: Random House.
- Ayto, J. (1991). Coach. In *Dictionary of word origins*. New York: Arcade Pub.
- Barnhart, R. K., & Steinmetz, S. (2011). Coach. In *Chambers dictionary of etymology*. Edinburgh: Chambers.