Coaching questions for managers and mentors: 63 questions by purpose

Coaching questions help a manager or a colleague support someone to think through a work topic and choose their own next step. This deck has 63 original questions in nine groups, one for each moment of a coaching conversation and one for mentoring, with role boundaries, printable cards and a 45-minute practice.

45 minutes | 6–18 participants | Online and adaptable in person

Updated 2026-10-10

The outcome

By the end of 45 minutes each participant has coached one six-minute conversation on a colleague's own low-stakes work topic, has been coached once, has an observer's count of their open and closed questions, and has chosen two questions to use at work within two weeks.

Before the session

- For trainers, HR and learning teams who teach managers, team leads or peer coaches to ask better questions, with 6–18 adults in trios. It fits a new-manager programme or a peer-coaching scheme.
- Print card sheets 1–56 per trio, and an observer sheet and a note sheet per person.
- Read the boundaries table. Know which support your organisation offers, to name it if needed.
- Send the questions a day early in plain text for screen readers. Anyone may observe only, answer in writing or pass. Keep captions on and cameras optional. No movement or colour is needed.

Included in this kit

A facilitator run of show, participant worksheets with real tables, reference tables, debrief questions, adaptation notes and a follow-up plan. Use the editable Word copy to tailor examples and prompts before delivery.

Original material by Superglue. Timings are suggestions; adjust them to your participants. This resource has not been independently evaluated.

What is inside

- What workplace coaching is for, and what it is not
- Choose a group by the moment in the conversation
- Swap a leading or closed question for an open one
- Cards 1–14: topic and situation
- Cards 15–28: wants and options
- Cards 29–42: step and commitment
- Cards 43–56: review, and when stuck
- Cards 57–63: mentoring
- Conversation note sheet
- Observer sheet
- Filled example: a six-minute coaching conversation
- Filled example: observer sheet
- Facilitator section: run of show, reference tables, debrief and adaptations

What workplace coaching is for, and what it is not

Read this before you coach a colleague or a team member. The coachee chooses the topic and may pause or stop without giving a reason. This is a guide, not a policy: your organisation's rules come first.

Workplace coaching is for	It is not	If it comes up
A work topic that the person chooses: a task, a decision, a skill, a plan or a working relationship.	Therapy or counselling. It is not a talk about mental health, grief, trauma or a personal crisis.	Listen, thank the person and stop the coaching. Do not probe. Name the support your organisation offers, such as an employee assistance programme, HR or occupational health. If someone may be in immediate danger, contact the emergency services.
Helping the person think, decide and plan in their own words.	Performance management, an appraisal or a disciplinary talk.	Hold those in a separate meeting, with the purpose named in advance, under your organisation's own process. Say at the start which kind of conversation this one is.
Questions about the person's own work and role.	Advice on health, legal or money matters.	Do not guess and do not advise. Point to a qualified professional or to the internal team that handles it, such as HR, legal or payroll.
A conversation that the person can steer, pause or stop without giving a reason.	An interview, a test, or a way to lead the person to the answer you already have.	If you have an instruction or a decision, say it plainly as one. Do not dress it up as a question.
Notes that the coachee keeps and shares only if they choose.	A promise of secrecy. Some things, such as a safety risk, may have to be passed on.	Say the limits before you start. If such a matter comes up, stop, and say what you will do next and whom you will tell.
Practice between colleagues who are learning to ask better questions.	A coaching qualification, or a replacement for a trained coach.	For a long-running or complex matter, suggest a trained coach, a mentor or a conversation with the right manager.

Choose a group by the moment in the conversation

For a six-minute practice, lay out three to five cards from different groups. Use group 9 when you meet as a mentor.

Moment	Group	Cards	Closed checks
At the start	Agree the topic	1–7	7
The topic is named, the facts are not	Understand the situation	8–14	None
The facts are clear, the aim is not	Find what the person wants	15–21	None
The aim is clear	Look at options	22–28	None
There are options on the table	Choose a step	29–35	None
Before you close	Check commitment and support	36–42	40
At the next conversation	Review at the next conversation	43–49	None
Going in circles, or wanting to advise	When the conversation is stuck	50–56	54, 56
A mentor meets a mentee	Mentoring: career, learning and network	57–63	63

Swap a leading or closed question for an open one

Keep this next to you when you coach. The examples are written for this kit.

Instead of	Try	Why
“Have you tried asking them?”	“What have you tried so far?”	Advice in disguise
“Wouldn’t a checklist help?”	“What could help you remember?”	It leads to your answer
“Why did you do it that way?”	“What led you to that choice?”	“Why” can sound like blame
“Is the deadline the problem?”	“What makes this hard to finish?”	It is only your guess
“Can you do it by Friday?”	“By when can you do it?”	Yes is easy to say
“Are you OK with that?”	“What would you change in that plan?”	It invites a real answer

Cards 1–14: topic and situation

Cut between the rows to make the cards. Each group starts with a title card that says when to use it. Choose a card for its purpose, not by chance.

Card	Question
Group 1	AGREE THE TOPIC. Use these in the first minute. The coachee chooses the topic, and you check that they are willing to talk about it here.
1	What would you like to use this time for?
2	Of the things you could bring today, which one matters most this week?
3	What would make these minutes useful for you?
4	How will we know, at the end, that we talked about the right thing?
5	Which part of this topic do you want to start with?
6	What have you already thought through, so that we do not repeat it?
7	Is this a topic you are happy to talk about in this setting?
Group 2	UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION. Use these when you know the topic but not the facts. Ask about what happened before you ask about what it means.
8	What is happening now, in two or three sentences?
9	What have you tried so far, and what happened each time?
10	Who else is involved, and what does each of them need?
11	Which facts are you sure of, and which are guesses?
12	When does this go well, even a little?
13	What is within your control here, and what is not?
14	What would someone who watched this for a week say they saw?

Cards 15–28: wants and options

Cut between the rows to make the cards. Each group starts with a title card that says when to use it. Choose a card for its purpose, not by chance.

Card	Question
Group 3	FIND WHAT THE PERSON WANTS. Use these when the person describes a problem but has not said what they want in its place.
15	What do you want to be different a month from now?
16	If this went well, what would you see or hear that is not there today?
17	What makes this matter to you now?
18	What would be good enough, if the ideal is out of reach?
19	Which part of the result depends on you?
20	How could you measure progress in a way you can check yourself?
21	What do you want to keep as it is while other things change?
Group 4	LOOK AT OPTIONS. Use these once the aim is clear. Collect several options before anyone judges one. Hold back your own idea.
22	What could you do? Name three things before judging any of them.
23	What have you seen someone else do in a similar situation?
24	What would you try if you had one more hour a week for this?
25	Which option have you ruled out, and what would make it possible?
26	What is the smallest version of this that you could test?
27	What would you suggest to a colleague who had the same problem?
28	What is another option that we have not named yet?

Cards 29–42: step and commitment

Cut between the rows to make the cards. Each group starts with a title card that says when to use it. Choose a card for its purpose, not by chance.

Card	Question
Group 5	CHOOSE A STEP. Use these to move from options to one action with a day. The coachee makes the choice.
29	Which of these options do you want to take forward?
30	What makes that option the better choice for you?
31	What exactly will you do first, and on which day?
32	How long will the first step take, and where does it fit in your week?
33	What could get in the way, and what will you do if it does?
34	What will you stop or postpone to make room for this?
35	How will you know that the step is done?
Group 6	CHECK COMMITMENT AND SUPPORT. Use these in the last two minutes. Check that the step is wanted and realistic, and ask what help is needed.
36	How sure are you, from 1 to 10, that you will do this step? What would move that number up by one?
37	Whose help do you need, and what will you ask them for?
38	What do you need from me, if anything?
39	Who should know about this plan, and who will tell them?
40	Is this still the step you want to take, now that you have said it aloud?
41	When would you like to look at this again?
42	In one sentence, what have you decided to do?

Cards 43–56: review, and when stuck

Cut between the rows to make the cards. Each group starts with a title card that says when to use it. Choose a card for its purpose, not by chance.

Card	Question
Group 7	REVIEW AT THE NEXT CONVERSATION. Use these to open the next conversation. Ask what happened before you ask what comes next, and do not blame.
43	What did you do since we last spoke?
44	What happened when you tried it?
45	What did you learn that you did not expect?
46	Which part was harder than planned, and what made it so?
47	What will you keep doing, and what will you change?
48	If the step did not happen, what got in the way?
49	What is the next step now, and when will you take it?
Group 8	WHEN THE CONVERSATION IS STUCK. Use these when the talk goes in circles, when you feel the pull to give advice, or when it is time to pause.
50	What is the hardest part of this for you?
51	What are we not talking about that might matter?
52	What have I misunderstood or missed so far?
53	Which question would help you most right now?
54	I have an idea. Would you like to hear it, or keep thinking first?
55	What would be a better use of the time we have left?
56	Shall we stop here, go on, or come back to this another day?

Cards 57–63: mentoring

Cut between the rows to make the cards. Each group starts with a title card that says when to use it. Choose a card for its purpose, not by chance.

Card	Question
Group 9	MENTORING: CAREER, LEARNING AND NETWORK. Use these when you meet as a mentor, not as a coach. The line between them: a coach helps the person find their own answer, while a mentor may also offer their own experience and contacts when the mentee asks. Keep to the mentee's work, learning and network.
57	Where would you like your work to be in two or three years?
58	Which skill would help most in the role you want next, and where could you practise it here?
59	What have you learned at work this quarter that no course would have taught you?
60	Who gives you honest feedback on your work now, and who else could?
61	Whose work would you like to understand better, and how could you meet them?
62	Which project or stretch task would you like to be considered for, and who decides?
63	Would it help to hear how I handled a similar step in my own career, or would you rather think first?

Conversation note sheet

One sheet per person. Choose a practice topic that is real, low stakes and about your own work. Keep this sheet. Share only what you choose.

Topics that work for practice	Leave these out
A task I keep postponing	A conflict with a named colleague
How to prepare for a meeting or a presentation next week	Health, family or money
A skill I want to practise this quarter	A complaint, a grievance or any formal process
How to organise a busy week	Anything about a person in this room
A choice between two ways of doing a piece of work	My performance rating or my pay
How to hand over or share a routine task	A topic I would not want repeated outside the trio

As coachee: my practice topic, the step I chose and the day

_____

_____

As coach: the cards I laid out, and the question that helped most

_____

_____

As coach: a moment when I gave advice or wanted to, and what I could ask instead

_____

_____

After the session: two card numbers I will use in a real conversation, and when

_____

_____

Observer sheet

One sheet per round. Make a tally mark for each question and each piece of advice, and write exact words where you can. The counts guide your notes. They are not a score of the person, and a closed question is the right tool for a check.

Coach: _____ Round: 1 / 2 / 3

What to record	What to listen for	Tally or notes
Open questions	Questions that begin with what, how, which, when or who. One tally mark for each.	
Closed questions	Questions that can be answered with yes or no, or that offer a choice. One tally mark for each.	
Advice or suggestions	Each time the coach says what the coachee should do. One tally mark for each.	
Share of open questions	After the round: open questions divided by open plus closed questions.	
One exact question	The question after which the coachee said something new. Write the words.	
The coachee's choice	How did the coach check that the topic and the step were the coachee's own?	
The step	The step the coachee chose, in the coachee's words, with the day.	
One thing to try	One change for the coach's next conversation. Describe an action, not a trait.	

Filled example: a six-minute coaching conversation

A fictional round. A team lead coaches a project coordinator on a topic the coordinator chose. The coach asked eight questions and gave one piece of advice. The advice did not help.

Purpose	What the coach said	Type	What the coachee said, in short
Agree the topic	“What would you like to use this time for?” (card 1)	Open	“The monthly handover note. I postpone it and send it late.”
Agree the topic	“Is this a topic you are happy to talk about in this setting?” (card 7)	Closed	“Yes. It is only about my own planning.”
Understand the situation	“What have you tried so far, and what happened each time?” (card 9)	Open	“I blocked Friday afternoon twice. Other work filled it.”
Understand the situation	“Which facts are you sure of, and which are guesses?” (card 11)	Open	“Sure: it takes me 90 minutes. A guess: people read all four pages.”
Find what the person wants	“What would be good enough, if the ideal is out of reach?” (card 18)	Open	“One page, sent by Friday 30 October.”
A slip: advice	“You should block Monday morning instead.”	Advice	“Mondays are full of meetings.” The coachee then went quiet.
Look at options	“What could you do? Name three things before judging any of them.” (card 22)	Open	“Write a little each Friday. Ask each project lead for three bullet points. Cut the note to one page.”
Choose a step	“What exactly will you do first, and on which day?” (card 31)	Open	“On Thursday 22 October I will ask the four project leads for three bullet points by Tuesday 27 October.”
Check commitment and support	“Is this still the step you want to take, now that you have said it aloud?” (card 40)	Closed	“Yes. I will tell my manager the note will be one page.”

Filled example: observer sheet

The observer’s notes for the fictional conversation above.

What to record	Notes
Open questions	6 tally marks.
Closed questions	2 tally marks. Both were checks that the coachee agreed.
Advice or suggestions	1 tally mark: “You should block Monday morning instead.”
Share of open questions	6 ÷ (6 + 2) = 6 ÷ 8 = 75%.
One exact question	“Which facts are you sure of, and which are guesses?” (card 11)
The coachee’s choice	Card 7 at the start. The coachee named the step and both dates.
The step	Ask the four project leads on Thursday 22 October for three bullet points by Tuesday 27 October.
One thing to try	Ask card 22 or card 54 before you offer an idea.

Facilitator run of show

1 Open: purpose, boundaries and topics | 5 minutes

Say: “For the next 45 minutes you practise asking, not advising. The person being coached owns the topic and the decision.” Two minutes: show the boundaries table and read three points aloud: the coachee chooses the topic, the coachee may pause or stop without giving a reason, and this is not therapy, counselling or performance management. One minute: explain the roles of coach, coachee and observer. Two minutes: each person writes one practice topic on the note sheet. It is real, low stakes and about their own work.

2 Demonstrate one short conversation | 5 minutes

Three minutes: coach a volunteer or a co-facilitator on a fictional topic, “I keep postponing a monthly handover note”. Use cards 1, 9 and 31 and give one piece of advice on purpose: “You should block Monday morning instead.” The group tallies questions and advice on the observer sheet. Two minutes: ask for the counts, then ask: “What did the coachee do after the advice, and after an open question?” Show how the share of open questions is worked out: open questions divided by all questions.

3 Round 1 | 10 minutes

Trios sit together or go to breakout rooms. One minute: the coachee says the topic in one line, and the coach lays out three to five cards from different groups. Six minutes: the conversation. The coach opens with a card from group 1 and closes with a card from group 5 or 6. The observer tallies and writes exact words. Three minutes of review, one minute each: the observer reads the counts and one exact question, the coachee says which question helped most, and the coach says what they would ask differently. Call each change of phase. A group of four has two observers in rounds 1 and 2 (A coaches B, then C coaches D) and splits into two pairs in round 3 (B coaches A, D coaches C).

4 Round 2 | 10 minutes

Trios rotate: the coachee becomes the coach, the observer becomes the coachee and the coach becomes the observer. Keep the same timing: one minute to set up, six to talk and three to review. The new coachee uses their own topic. Remind the coaches: “If you want to give advice, ask card 54 first, or ask one more question.” Visit the groups, but do not join a conversation.

5 Round 3 | 10 minutes

Trios rotate again, so that each person has had each role once. Keep the same timing. In the pairs from a group of four, each coach tallies their own questions after the conversation. If a coachee wants to stop early, the group uses the rest of the time to sort the cards they would choose for that topic.

6 Debrief and choose two questions | 5 minutes

Three minutes with the whole group. Ask: “Which exact question opened something up?” and “What did you do when you wanted to give advice?” Ask for questions and card numbers, not for the coachees’ topics. Two minutes: each person writes on the note sheet two card numbers to use in a real conversation within two weeks. Invite each person to say one card number aloud or in the chat, or to pass.

Reference tables

Filled example: observer tally for one trio

A fictional trio. Round 1 is the filled example conversation. The share is open questions divided by all questions. It describes one short practice round, not a person's skill.

Round	Coach	Open questions	Closed questions	Advice or suggestions	All questions	Share of open questions
1	Person A	6	2	1	8	75%
2	Person B	4	4	2	8	50%
3	Person C	6	3	0	9	67%
All rounds	Trio 1	16	9	3	25	64%

Debrief and next steps

Questions for reflection

- Which exact question opened something up, and what did the coachee say next?
- What did you do when you wanted to give advice, and what happened?
- As a coachee, what was it like to be asked and not told?
- Which two questions will you use in a real conversation in the next two weeks?

Adapt the session

- For 3 to 5 people, run one trio, one group of four, or a trio and a pair. In a pair the coach keeps the tally from memory after the conversation, and the two compare notes in writing.
- For a 30-minute version, skip the demonstration, open in 4 minutes, run three rounds of 7 minutes (one to set up, four to talk, two to review) and keep the 5-minute debrief: 4 + 21 + 5 = 30.
- Online, use breakout rooms of three and paste the round timing in the chat. The coach types each question if the coachee prefers to read it. Keep captions on and cameras optional.
- For quiet participants and people working in a second language, send the questions a day early and allow written answers. Anyone may observe in every round or pass on a question. Silence is thinking time, so the coach waits.
- For managers who will coach their own team members, keep a manager and their own team member in different trios, and add two minutes. Each manager writes the sentence they will say to make clear that the conversation is coaching, not an appraisal, and that the team member may choose the topic or decline.

After the session

Ask each participant to use their two chosen questions in a real conversation within two weeks, and to note afterwards which question they asked and what the other person said next. At the next session, spend five minutes on those notes, using the group "Review at the next conversation". Ask for questions and outcomes, not for names or personal details. The kit has not been field-tested, and a count of open questions in a practice round is not a measure of coaching skill.

Questions people ask

What are good coaching questions for a manager to ask?

Good coaching questions are short, open and about the other person's thinking, such as "What have you tried so far, and what happened each time?" Pick the question by what the conversation needs at that moment: to agree the topic, understand the situation, find what the person wants, look at options, choose a step, check commitment or review. A mentor meeting a mentee can use group 9, the mentoring questions.

What is the difference between open and closed coaching questions?

An open question begins with what, how, which, when or who and asks the person to think. A closed question can be answered with yes or no. Most of this deck is open: 58 of the 63 questions. The other 5 are closed or offer a choice on purpose, because they check consent, such as "Is this a topic you are happy to talk about in this setting?"

Is this deck based on the GROW model?

No. Many coaching courses use GROW (goal, reality, options, will), a model commonly credited to Sir John Whitmore and colleagues and described in Coaching for Performance (1992). This deck is organised by the purpose of each moment in the conversation, in nine groups written for this kit. You can use it next to any model that your organisation teaches.

What is workplace coaching by a manager not for?

It is not therapy or counselling, not performance management or a disciplinary talk, and not advice on health, legal or money matters. If a personal or serious matter comes up, stop the coaching, listen, and point the person to the support your organisation offers or to a qualified professional. The coachee chooses the topic and may stop at any time.

What is the difference between coaching and mentoring questions?

A coaching question helps the person find their own answer. A mentoring question also opens the door to the mentor's own experience and contacts, offered when the mentee asks. Group 9 holds 7 mentoring questions about the mentee's career, learning and network at work. The peer coaching circle is a timed group format for colleagues, and the active listening exercises train hearing, checking and summarising rather than asking.

What is included in the free and editable files?

The open PDF has the boundaries table, all 63 questions on five cut-apart card sheets, the conversation note sheet, the observer sheet, a filled example and the 45-minute facilitator plan. Subscribers also receive the editable Word file, an Excel workbook with the question bank, an observer tally and a trio planner, and a CSV of the 63 questions.

Use and sharing

Free to use and adapt in your own training sessions, including paid client work. Do not resell or redistribute the unmodified download as a standalone product. Share the resource page instead.