

Systemic questions to guide learning processes of students

“If thou desirest a wise answer, thou must ask a reasonable question.”
Johann Wolfgang Goethe

Systemic questions help to instil a 'coaching / guide-on-the-side mindset' in teaching staff. They inspire reflection on processes and objectives, create a clearer picture of the status quo, and help to define the next steps in the learning and working process.

1. Questions about differences and exceptions

Pinpoint differences of perception, explanation and assessment of behaviour and persons. These questions address observable differences: Does everyone see the problem the same way? What kind of behaviour is apparent while the problem exists versus when it is solved? What appears, lessens, or doesn't appear when? When was the last time the situation was a bit better/worse/different?

2. Goal-oriented questions

Define and enable perception (also emotional perception) of objectives and their effects. How does the objective look, precisely? What would be, for you / for others, the first sign of progress towards it? What wider effects would achieving the goal have? How can the situation established by achieving the goal be maintained?

3. Hypothetical questions, “reframing” questions

Explore possibilities and alternatives and estimate the potential consequences of future behaviour. Let's say that you decide to do things differently next time. What effects would that have? What has to happen to get X to address the matter? Who would tend to see that first? What would they do/say/think? If you were Barack Obama, how would you open your speech?

4. Questions about approaches

Identify the strategies which have helped respondents to master similar challenges or which are helping them to address the current issue. “How did you study for that examination you passed?”

5. Consolidation questions

Invite respondents to think more deeply and identify new aspects. “You have named three points. What else do you notice?”

6. “Wunderfragen”

Pinpoint the prospective effects of achieving an objective. What if you still had one magical wish? If your objective were already achieved, how would your situation look then? How would it have changed? If you could do magic and solve your problem, what then? How would you behave?

7. Scalability questions

Assess change and divide it into smaller steps. On a scale from 1 to 10, let's say that 10 is “I will do everything I can to improve the situation” and 0 is “I very much hope that the situation improves but will not do anything about it”. Where are you today on this scale? Where are your intentions? Where do you want to go? What do you have to do to move up a point?

8. Differentiation questions

Help respondents view their position not in black and white but as more differentiated. “To what extent do you view your position as a risk, and to what extent do you see it as an opportunity? Give percentages.”

9. Circular questions

Help to work out what people in the respondent's environments think of the respondent or of certain relationships. How would your boss react if you changed your behaviour? What would your team say? Who would be the most surprised? What effect would it have on your team if you decided to treat them differently? Let's say that you decide to manage more cooperatively. How would your employees notice this?

10. Coping questions

Reveal the silver lining, i.e. the hidden benefits of the current situation. What has made the situation bearable up to now? What has helped, and what not? What have you done to prevent the problem being worse than it is? In what way is the problem potentially a good thing? What difference would it make if the problem no longer existed? If the problem were solved, what topics would rear their heads?

11. Resource questions

Render visible existing skills or contacts which aid solutions. What can you do well? What are your hobbies? How can you build on your strengths? What should stay as it is? What do you want to keep? Who is your most useful colleague at the moment?

12. Paradox questions

Paradox questions assume that the person who can make things worse also has the means to make things better. What would you have to do to make the situation worse? Let's say the situation remained as it is. How would things look in 5 years' time? After an improvement in the situation, what would you or X have to do to recreate the old situation?

13. Provocative questions

Loosen respondents' reserve and target their emotions by lightly provoking them. You say that the material doesn't motivate you. To what extent does that affect your learning?

14. Specifying question

Encourage respondents to make general statements more precise by using examples and facts. You say that you have studied a lot but still don't know the material. How did you prepare theme X for this lesson?

15. Intuitive questions

Help to discover respondents' inklings, their gut feelings. Ask respondents about their gut feelings. What answer would you choose, spontaneously? Do you have any idea why?

16. Questions about practical implementation

Help respondents to implement what they have learned from coaching in their everyday lives. What basic rules could you intentionally integrate into everyday life to ensure that you are always learning?

Source: Wehrle, M. (2012). *Die 500 besten Coaching-Fragen*. managerSeminare Verlags GmbH: Bonn.