



3. Further Reading, ‘What was most useful for you?’, ‘The Coaching Habit’ (extract) - Michael Bungay Smith (2016)

Six Reasons ‘What was most useful for you?’ is such a good question to end with:

1. It assumes the conversation was useful

Winston Churchill said that people “occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing ever happened.” That’s equally true about the conversations you’re having with those around you. There’s wisdom to be found, but only if you hang around for a moment to take a look. The Learning Question immediately frames what just happened as something that was useful and creates a moment in which to figure out what it was.

2. It asks people to identify the big thing that was most useful

Less, rather than more, is often better when you’re giving feedback. If you list twelve things that could be improved, everyone moves into overwhelm mode. More effective is finding the One Big Thing that’s worth remembering.

3. It makes it personal

Adding ‘for you’ to the question takes it from the abstract to the personal, from the objective to the subjective. Now you’re helping people create new neural pathways. And of course, people are telling themselves what was useful, rather than your telling them what you think should be most useful.

4. It gives you feedback

Listen to the answer you get, because it’s useful not just for the coachee but for you as well. It will give you guidance on what to do more of next time, and it will reassure you (if you need it) that you’re being useful even when you’re not giving advice but are asking questions instead.

5. It’s learning, not judgement

You’ll notice that you’re not asking, “Was this useful?” That question sets up a Yes / No answer, and it doesn’t actually prompt insight; it just elicits judgement. “What was most useful?” forces people to extract the value from the conversation.

6. It reminds people how useful you are to them

Come the annual performance appraisal, and an employee is staring at the questionnaire, with the cursor hovering over the upward-feedback part of it. “Is my manager useful?” the question asks. And thinking back over the last year, he’s struck by the fact that every single conversation with you has proven to be useful. Top marks.