The Tao of Lifestyle Growth: Part THree

By Amanda Baushke

Tao or Dao is a Chinese word signifying the way, path, route or road. Masterpiece will be oﬀering a four-part blog series on “The Tao of Lifestyle Growth,” discussing coaching and its role in senior living. The topics will include kaizen, artful listening, communication and engagement.

# Powerful Communication

Words matter. In his book, “How Full is Your Bucket”, author and researcher Tom Rath suggests that every interaction with another person either ﬁlls that person’s bucket with positivity or dips out of the bucket and spreads negativity.

In our work with older adults, we aim to empower them to embrace aging as a time of growth and to focus on purpose and meaningful relationships. We do this through lifestyle coaching, a process that teaches participants how to use communication to ﬁll buckets and stay mindful that words really do matter.

Communication is the foundation of coaching. In a formal coaching session, the coach starts by asking a powerful question to establish an agenda for the conversation. The agenda determines the purpose of the coaching conversation, identifies what the coachee wants to focus on and establishes how the coach and coachee will know when the goal has been accomplished.

The ﬁrst question can be as simple as, “What would you like to focus on today?” Through artful listening and mirroring, a clear topic will emerge for the session.

Powerful questions in a coaching session are magical. They help coachees discover next steps that work for them based on their available resources and readiness for change. My colleague, Danielle Palli, introduced powerful questions in part two of this series as an important ﬁrst step to artful listening. Let’s further deﬁne powerful questions.

# What are powerful questions?

1. **Powerful questions are open-ended.** They often start with who, what, where, when or how and cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. They create greater clarity and can open new possibilities for the coachee.
2. **Powerful questions reﬂect active listening.** By actively listening to what’s being shared, a coach can ask questions to support the coachee in self-discovery. Those questions will be directed toward what the coachee wants to accomplish according to the established agenda.
3. **Powerful questions are not judgmental.** The coach/coachee relationship is designed to be a comfortable space for self-discovery. That space will not feel as comfortable if the coachee feels judged—even if the judgment is positive. Coaches should not insert or reﬂect their own biases but should be what we call a “detached thinking partner.”
4. **Powerful questions are not leading.** Sometimes, when you’re not in the driver’s seat of self-discovery, the solution seems so obvious! However, self-discovery is an important part of coaching. Therefore, it’s important not to guide the coachee toward a specificresponse by asking leading questions.
5. **Powerful questions are not stacked.** This can be tough to do. Coaches who are actively listening and engaged in what the coachee is saying won’t be formulating the next question while the coachee is talking. This means that the question is created when there’s a pause in the conversation, and sometimes, coaches ask several questions instead of one. This is a mistake as it leaves the coachee wondering which question to answer.

# Nonverbal Communication

Another important element of communication involves nonverbal cues. Dr. Albert Mehrabian, professor emeritus of psychology at UCLA, pioneered an understanding of communication as it relates to body language.

He found that when people are in a face-to-face setting discussing their feelings and attitudes, 7% of their message comes from the words that are said, 38% comes from the way the words are said, and 55% comes from facial expressions and gestures. Is the coachee hunched over with legs crossed? This signiﬁes that something important took place in the conversation, which may be something to explore.

# Coaching vs. Conversation

What’s the difference between a coaching conversation and a friendly chat with an older adult? The main difference is in the self-discovery process. In today’s society, we are quick to solve one another’s problems. When you’re chatting with a resident who expresses a struggle, a whole list of solutions may come to your mind. In a formal coaching conversation, the coachee works to identify a solution through a guided self-discovery process led by the coach.

Consider trying this technique the next time a friend or relative shares a struggle: listen, ask questions and avoid giving advice. The conversation may surprise you.

In part four of this series, Masterpiece training and partnership specialist Kai Hillberry will discuss engagement as it relates to powerful communication, and the importance of “mattering.” Hillberry tells us, “Meaningful engagement isn’t just about showing up, it’s knowing that you matter, and you are valuable to the community.” (See accompanying video for more on Mattering: <https://vimeo.com/504400422>

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# Discussion Questions:

1. What is one positive way you can “fill a bucket” when you interact with a prospect, resident or team member?
2. What are the powerful questions you use in the sales process that have helped you better understand the individual?
3. What’s an example of non-verbal communication that you’ve seen when you were talking to a resident or prospect?
4. How do you address/respond to the non-verbal communication you observe?

# Sample questions for the sales team to use with prospects:

1. What is one thing that sparked your interest during the tour?
   1. Great, tell me more about what you just shared.
2. What would you like to continue doing or start doing when you move into the community?
3. What is it about moving to a community that’s important to you?
4. Tell me more about what brought you here today.

**Optional Exercise**: One of the most important parts of powerful questions is the powerful listening that comes before the question. Consider practicing conversation prompts followed by powerful questions that relate to what you learned from listening. (For practice purposes consider prompts such as, “Who has been a powerful mentor in your life?” or “What’s the most beautiful sight you’ve ever seen?”)