

1. INTRODUCTION: A ministry leader I greatly respect once told me not to focus on or count “decisions” but instead to focus on and count “conversations.” Conversations is how the seed of the Gospel is planted and watered. His idea was taking the pressure off closing the deal and instead deliberately working on the process. The power of effective conversations, what I call “Intentional Dialogues” is immense and underserved as ministry. Intentional conversations play directly into the different approaches of the “Shepherding Ministry” of pastoral care... which include counseling, mentoring, and coaching. There is necessary preparation for intentional dialogues in each of these shepherding ministries of pastoral care, but they require significantly different levels of skill and training. Counseling is the most intensive, and mentoring requires being involved in similar disciplines where you can speak into the life experiences of another. On the other hand, coaching requirements are far more modest. Almost anyone can employ coaching and almost everyone can benefit from being coached. Thus, coaching as a ministry is underutilized. This article is about employing “Coaching Techniques” in Lay-Shepherding through everyday conversations. Here are three direct links to the Authentic Discipleship website on articles about coaching techniques:

1. <http://www.authenticdiscipleship.org/pdfs/3-leadership-dev/LD%20-%204.1%20-%20Faith%20Coaching%20Fundamentals.pdf>
 2. <http://www.authenticdiscipleship.org/pdfs/3-leadership-dev/LD%20-%204.3%20-%20Coaching%20as%20Conversation.pdf>
 3. <http://www.authenticdiscipleship.org/pdfs/3-leadership-dev/LD%20-%206.7%20-%20Character%20and%20the%20Transformational%20Process.pdf>
- a. Coaching is a different approach to the shepherding relationship, and far more accessible than mentoring or counseling.
- i. Mentoring effectively says, “I know the way you should go because I’ve been there.” Mentoring teaches and advises through experience.
 - ii. Counseling takes a different approach which acknowledges either the woundedness or brokenness of the individual, and offers ways for them to regain personal strength and health. “Pastoral Care” is something most pastors are train for in their seminary preparation, however the disciplines of counselor, psychologist, and psychiatrist require years of education and training.
 - iii. Coaching is the third approach to helping relationships which recognizes that individuals are basically healthy but occasionally “get stuck,” and need some help in finding a way to move forward with confidence. Typically, a person who is stuck is emotionally, mentally, and spiritually healthy. A coach comes alongside the “person being coached” and helps this individual move forward with greater confidence through the use of open-ended leading questions. The person being coached doesn’t necessarily need therapy or mentoring guidance, instead they need a practiced coach to help them get unstuck and moving more confidently in a positive direction. Virtually any person will benefit from a

coaching conversation from time to time, and the beauty of the coaching discipline is that effective practitioners can employ it in “intentional dialogues” with everyday conversations.

Some additional thoughts about coaching:

- b. Every coach will have their own personal style of engagement that typically flows out of their own personality. The first step is for the coach to understand how to engage a person they are developing a relationship with. Coaching employs questions that probe the individual to generate a more thoughtful and insightful conversation. The intent is to keep moving the person toward personal observation and discovery with increasing focus and direction. Coaching is sort of like peeling an onion where as you move through the outer layers you move the person toward their center where the heart of the matter they seek may be found. As the coach asks these probing and open-ended questions, a practiced coach will know when they start hitting home and the person begins to gain insight into themselves. Thus, coaching is less about the coach’s discovery of the individual [although that often happens] and more about the person’s journey into self-discovery.
- c. I generally tend to take a more direct approach to individuals, especially those I know well and have an established relationship. However, coaching techniques may be employed on those you have a limited relationship with. I have found that opportunities for relational dialogue occur every day with people I know, and sometimes they don’t really know they are being coached. Too much of what transpires as “conversation” is more aptly characterized as either “trivial interaction” or “debate,” the really valuable conversations are characterized as “dialogue.”
 - i. Trivial is water-cooler low level interaction that generally reveals little but pithy one-liners in a five-minute visit.
 - ii. Debate is more about convincing the other that your understanding of something is superior to theirs; it’s more about trying to convince others of one or another perspective that we hold is the correct approach.
 - iii. “Dialogue” on the other hand, seeks to hear what another is thinking about. In dialogue there is no ostensible attempt to convince a person of one opinion or approach over another, rather it is respectfully engaging in what we think at the moment. Dialogue is affirming of one another because it respects the intelligence and integrity of the other, while debate usually tends to demean another by forcing my way of looking at things upon them. In my opinion, we need more dialogue in our life and a lot less debate. Listening and dialoguing work great together in a coaching approach to an intentional relationship.
- d. Most people I interact with outside of my faith community are usually reticent to actively engage in a faith dialogue about our individual spiritual journey. However, I have learned that by engaging even in casual conversations opportunities for relational development often result.

One of the things I have learned in coaching conversations is to be aware of how God shows up, even in the most mundane situations. Because the Spirit that indwells me knows the person I'm interacting with intimately, He is already at work in the person I'm interacting with. By listening to the clues of the person I'm interacting with gives on what's going on in their mind and heart, I can help shed light on what God's already working on in them and encourage it. I have learned that coaching is an art that can help break through the mundane into the deeper areas of shared life experiences. In developing a coach approach to intentional faith conversations, it is helpful to be aware of some coaching basics:

- i. Listen well and pay deliberate attention to what people say. Being a good listener is allowing people with whom you are intentionally dialoguing the courtesy to present their thoughts, rather than looking for an opportunity to interject my own thoughts.
- ii. Be spiritually aware of what is going on below the obvious surface. Look for little clues that reveal something Important that you can probe.
- iii. Purposefully employ questions into the stream of dialogue both to promote and focus the conversation. It is more to encourage self-discovery by the individual, rather than my figuring out what's going on with them. When I see them as a puzzle to solve, I'm asking questions for me to gain understanding of them. When I'm coaching, I help them discover what is already going on in their life that they may have overlooked.
- iv. Coaching is less about understanding a person or solving their problem, and more about helping the person better understand what is going on in them and around them, and encouraging them in self-discovery.
- e. The following are examples of actual dialogues I have had with three friends and one complete stranger that may help illustrate how to identify opportunities where coaching can play a significant part in intentional dialogue engagement. These are people didn't really know they were being coached. The names below are fictitious to protect privacy, but the conversations are real.

2. **Diego Dialogue:** "Diego" and I are old friends and we enjoy spiritual intimacy on a regular basis, so he was a logical choice for my first faith dialogue interaction. Diego is a good friend, and he is a very knowledgeable and mature Christ-follower. He tends to think of himself as a self-sufficient Christian-intellectual, and doesn't like to think he needs another to mentor or coach him. Instead of a direct approach, I decided to take an indirect or tangential approach to dialogue. My intent was to look for an opportunity to coach him that was intentional but circumspect.

- a. Diego will tolerate any number of questions on almost any topic, but he truly loves dialogue on deep spiritual matters. The normal approach to coaching conversations I tend to take involves a few direct introductory questions to establish the parameters of our time together, and then employ subtle probing types of questions to see where we go and what responses develop.

Often, such questions surprise both the Person Being Coached (PBC) and me (coach). Diego is a thoughtful intellectual, but he also tends to be deliberately emotionally detached. He prefers the abstract side of things so much that he often loses touch with the more practical. The style I used with him comes from an understanding that he really needs me to keep his thinking focused on present practical application issues. Diego has been out of work for a long time and is in the process of putting his home on the market and likely moving out of the area. This has unfortunately undermined his confidence and self-esteem.

- b. Diego has been working on keeping a positive attitude as while he really is convinced that God is in charge of his circumstances, I can tell he was feeling a little down and discouraged and I know from experience that he can tend to be insecure. So, I wanted to encourage him and asked some initial questions on what he felt God was doing in his life, how or if he observed God showing up. He responded positively, which I knew he would. As he talked... I usually just need to get him started and he can keep a monologue running an incredibly long time... I looked for strategic opportunities in the seams of the discussion to probe with further questions. He has been working on his house and he likes talking about that, but I sensed something was really bothering him, but he was keeping away from the subject.
- c. As I asked how his wife “Juanita” was dealing with all this, and I saw I had hit a soft spot. As I probed a little deeper, he admitted part of their problem was she was dead set on going to George Fox University, and Diego was thinking they would be going to Fuller Seminary. Turns out George Fox is incredibly expensive, and work in the area was scarce at the time. Being out of work with limited funds means they really had no way to make it work, and this was at the heart of the matter. Diego felt he was letting his wife down. When I asked, “I know what you want to do, but what *can* you realistically do?” I knew I had hit the right spot, and as he responded I realized also what I wanted to ask next, “What can you do to find middle ground with Juanita?” Bingo... that was the right question, and we explored some avenues where they both could get much of what they really wanted given their circumstances.
- d. Such intentional conversations are interesting because knowing both of them, I know they really want to do what’s right and follow God. But I also know they are stuck in a dead-end line of thought. Our conversation opened the door to alternatives where they could see things differently and to perhaps see what they felt God calling them to and they could reasonably support could still be accomplished. Compromise is very hard with both of them, they tend to have more of an “all or nothing” mindset, and they often butt heads because they see compromise as a weakness rather than strength. I am getting together with Diego this weekend, and will look forward to hearing what is happening next.

- 3. Papi Dialogue: “Papi” is a longtime pastor with great relational skills. He makes you feel comfortable as you dialogue, but he seems better at getting information out of you than in giving you insight into him...

and in his position, I can see the wisdom of that approach. Papi and I have known each other and worked together for some time, and are becoming comfortable with each other. I recently heard through his daughter that he not only likes me, but respects me and has a ministry opportunity in mind for me and is waiting for the right opportunity to broach the topic.

- a. Our typical interaction I would characterize as open but circumspect... we are not yet completely comfortable with a more direct approach, so a probing approach really works well as we find out more about each other and become more comfortable in sharing openly and honestly. I have found that when I deliberately open up with him, my being vulnerable allows Papi to engage with less pretense. These are our informal “rules of engagement.”
- b. When it comes to our faith walk, we both share a dependence upon the Spirit and an expectation for Him to show up in our life. Papi wanted to know how my seminary experience was progressing and if I had a sense of a calling to ministry. I explained that I had in the past few months come to understand that God was preparing me for a discipling and leadership development ministry. I noticed that I had clearly piqued his interest with this announcement, and we then engaged in a more serious dialogue about ministry.
- c. I was aware that I was keenly interested in Papi’s answers for obvious personal reasons, and had to deliberately put my interest aside to focus on him and where he was going in his thought process. I also knew that by allowing him to fully explore and express his thoughts that my long-term interest would be better served as well. Interestingly, God provided an extended time that we could engage in dialogue while running errands together in his car. I was able to ask a few specific questions about his ministry objectives, and how God was showing up and providing direction. It was apparent that he was just as interested in my thoughts, and so this exploratory session was helpful in thinking out loud.
- d. After our task at hand was complete we had a chance to talk more directly without interruption. I noticed that our interaction was more personal and open than previous dialogues. I decided to let God lead and not try to push the discussion in a particular direction. I asked Papi about his ministry approach to discipleship and he explained that was an area that God was suggesting he could do better in. His ministry typically has young people committed to a summer month term, but he longed for a longer term discipleship training approach year round.
- e. Intrigued, I asked how he saw this developing, and he expressed that he saw himself and me as “spiritual generals” with the opportunity to identify “lieutenants and foot soldiers” within the program for more specialized training and leadership development. I thought this an apt illustration for older more mature disciples desiring to develop younger disciples. A more focused discipleship ministry was something he had been praying about, and was something he realized had not really been part of his ministry focus. We were both encouraged as we observed that God had deliberately put us together at a time when ministry objectives would need pre-planning for the following year. We both sensed that God was “up to something” and

that we were being invited into it. Sometimes the most difficult thing about intentional dialogues is waiting on the Spirit to guide it. It is all too easy to attempt to push it in a direction of my choosing. It will be fun to see how it develops and what God has in store! I would love to work more closely with Papi.

4. **Franc Dialogue:** “Franc” is my neighbor with whom I have an ongoing casual relationship for years. We are friendly and interested in each other, but between family and life experiences we have spent little focused time together. Franc is not a Christian and he and his wife are not open to faith at this time, although they know that I am a Christian. Recently Franc retired and has had some health issues related with kidney stones. I saw him walking slowly from the street to his home and felt the Spirit prompt me to go speak with him. When he turned around to face me I could see the pain in his eyes.
- a. I asked a very simple introductory question about how he was feeling, and his response of “OK” rang hollow. We chatted about family, retirement, and our short term plans. Franc’s son was graduating from our local middle school, and would be attending high school in the fall. I could sense that Franc needed encouragement, that his health issue had become the dominant thing in his life and was blinding him to the richness and beauty around him. So I decided to engage in an intentional dialogue and act on this hunch.
 - b. I told Franc how lucky he was being out of the work force as the corporate marketplace that I was still working in had become pretty brutal. I reminded him about how wonderful his family is – he has a great wife who is as sweet as she could possibly be; that his son has grown up into a fine young man, and that he should be very proud of him. As I spoke I could see that Franc was standing a little taller, and a little straighter. His focus had turned so inward on his pain and discomfort that he wasn’t seeing the obvious positive signs around him.
 - c. We chatted a little longer and as prepared to leave he reached out and embraced me. This is something he has never done in all the years we have been neighbors. We chatted a few more moments and I let him know that I was available if he needed anything, errands run, lunch, etc... whatever he needed while he’s recuperating from his kidney stones. He embraced me again as we walked away to our respective homes. His wife called later that evening and expressed Franc’s pleasure in our conversation, and a day or so later he reiterated his grateful appreciation of my “pep-talk” as he called it. I pondered as I digested this dialogue, how many opportunities had I failed to recognize that God had appointed, and I prayed that God will make me more aware of those who need encouragement.
5. **Jackson Dialogue:** “Jackson” I met while visiting families out of town. I shopped at his store and he was my checker. I had never met or seen Jackson before this encounter. As I placed my groceries on the belt, Jackson was distracted with his cell phone and looked a bit out of sorts. I smiled and asked, “how are you doing?” And he responded “not so well. I’ve been struggling with something lately and was

hoping things would work out, but so far it hasn't." I said, "Sorry to hear that, some days are just tougher than others." He spoke a little more and I had an intuitive thought that his problem might be financial. So, I told him a story about a good friend who is a musician and song-writer that I have played in bands with over the years who covered a song titled "Too much money at the end of the money" [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVtfbw5JjsQ>]. Jackson smiled and said, "Boy, ain't that the truth." I smiled back, glad the Spirit had given me the insight and a discreet way to broach the topic. We chatted amicably for a few minutes as he bagged my groceries. As he handed me my bag he said, "Well, I look forward to hearing that song cause I'm living it right now." I sympathized with him saying, "hey, we've all been there, and I encouraged him that things often work out in ways we don't expect." He seemed genuinely grateful, and I noticed his mood seemed a little more upbeat. As I walked back to my car I wondered about how many people I bump into each day, and that this wasn't some random thing but a divine appointment where I could speak a little grace into his life. How cool would it be if everyone was looking for an opportunity to speak a little grace, give a little encouragement to others when they were open to receive it. I'll bet that eternity will be filled with meeting many people we had such an encounter and forgot all about, and hear their complete story and maybe how this little moment with them had blessed them.

6. **Conclusion:** These four examples provide insight into how a subtle coach approach to intentional dialogue can be employed both to develop relationships, and to encourage people. We only need to watch for opportunities to deliberately engage and respectfully interact. The cool part is most people don't even know there are being deliberately coached. Encouragement is such a great vehicle to move people toward what God intended them to be. Our communities have become desperate for encouragement, and it is such an easy means for ministering to others. Most people are familiar with formal coaching sessions, but the same discipline can also be used in the most casual interactions. This intentional dialogue coaching process depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit at work both in me and in the person I'm coaching. Most people are either unaware or have lost track of what God is doing in their life. A coach can call attention to the work the Spirit is doing in them, and we can deliberately come alongside individuals to provide encouragement, insight, and support of what God is already doing. Christians should be naturally positive and encouraging since we know the Author of Life who we will spend eternity with. However, the world doesn't know God and also don't know they desperately need Jesus, and through intentional dialogue we can become a bridge to move them toward faith. With some rudimentary training, pretty much anyone can develop and employ most of the skills necessary to engage others with intentional dialogues.