

The First Conversation

Building Clients Who Stay

**The conversation that determines
three months or three years**

A NOTE FROM PAUL

Before you run this session

I want to tell you how I found this.

2019. I'm doing a consultation with a 58-year-old woman called Linda. She hasn't trained in fifteen years. I'm going through my standard questions: goals, injuries, exercise history. She's giving me the answers she thinks I want to hear. Polite. Forgettable. Fine.

Then I asked a question that wasn't on my template. Just curiosity, really.

"What happens if nothing changes?"

Linda paused. Then her whole energy shifted.

"My daughter's getting married in eight months. I want to be able to dance at the reception without my back hurting. And honestly, I want to look good in the photos. I know that sounds vain, but I haven't felt confident in photos in years. I keep avoiding them. I don't want to avoid them at her wedding."

That was the real answer. Not "lose weight and get stronger." That was just what she thought I wanted to hear. The real answer was: I want to dance with my daughter without pain, and not hate how I look in the photographs.

Linda's still training with me. Three years later.

After that conversation I started asking every new client the same question, and tracking what happened. Eighteen months of data. What I found was that clients who gave surface answers, something like "I guess I'd keep feeling out of shape," stayed an average of 3.2 months. Clients who gave deeper answers, specific fears, things they could actually picture losing, stayed an average of 2.9 years.

One question. That kind of difference.

A quick word about this module before you run it. In most small gyms, it's the owner who handles new client consultations. That's probably you. You're the most trusted person in the building, you understand what you're offering, and new clients tend to open up faster with someone who feels like the person in charge. If that's your situation, this module is about doing something you already do, but doing it in a way that changes what happens next.

In some gyms, a senior coach covers this role. In a small number, there's a dedicated sales person who handles the first conversation before the client ever meets a coach. Whoever

runs that first conversation in your gym will benefit from this material. The questions work the same way regardless of who asks them.

But here's the thing worth saying before we get into the framework: what you're going to learn in this session isn't only useful in a new client consultation. The instinct underneath it, the decision to understand a person before trying to help them, applies every time any of your staff are in a meaningful conversation with a client. A check-in after a hard week. The moment someone says they're thinking about stopping. The quiet conversation before a session when something is clearly wrong. These questions work there too.

The framework is built around the new client consultation because that's where retention is won or lost first. But the coaching posture behind it is one your whole team can use, every day, with every client they train.

Clients over 50 have usually had a version of this story. They were capable once. Something got in the way. They're not sure if they can get it back. They're slightly embarrassed to even be trying. And they're almost certainly not going to tell the first person they meet what they actually want, unless that person asks the right questions and genuinely waits for the answer.

That's what this module is about. Not technique. Character. The kind of coach who earns the right to know what someone actually wants from their life, and treats that information like it matters.

"The first conversation determines three months or three years. Not because of what you say. Because of what you ask."

Run this session well, and your staff will leave with something most coaches never develop: the ability to make a new client feel more understood in thirty minutes than they have in years.

That's what builds the long-term relationships. That's what fills your gym with people who stay.

Paul Richards

The Ageless Playbook

FACILITATOR PREP

Before the session

Read this page the night before. The session runs better when you've sat with the material first rather than reading it cold on the day.

Who this session is for

In most small gyms, the owner is the person who runs new client consultations. If that's you, this module will make something you already do significantly more effective. In some gyms, a senior coach or a dedicated sales person handles this role instead. Whoever it is in your gym, this module applies to them.

But the scope of this material goes wider than the new client consultation. The instinct behind the Three Questions, listening for what a person actually needs rather than what they say they want, is useful in every meaningful conversation any of your staff has with a client. Encourage your whole team to think of these skills as part of how they coach, not just how they consult.

What this session covers

- Why the standard new client consultation loses 50+ clients before they've started
- The difference between surface goals and deep motivations, and why it predicts retention with 90% accuracy
- The Three Questions framework: the specific questions that unlock what a client actually wants
- How to structure the first conversation: three questions, validation, plan
- What a three-month client looks like in that first conversation versus a three-year client
- Practice: two role-play exercises using real scripts

What staff should be able to do by the end

- Run the three questions naturally in a new client consultation
- Recognise the difference between a surface answer and a real one, and dig deeper when they get the surface answer
- Validate a client's fear directly before offering a plan
- Resist the urge to move to fitness testing until trust is established
- Apply the same listening instinct in ongoing client conversations, not just first consultations

What you need to prepare

- Print one Staff Workbook per team member (available separately)
- Print the Script Cards, one set per staff member (available separately)

- Book a room with enough space for pairs to role-play without disturbing each other
- Allow 90 minutes. Don't try to compress it.

A note on resistance

Some staff will feel like they already do this. They probably do some of it. The distinction to hold is between asking questions and genuinely listening for the real answer underneath the polite answer. Most coaches hear the surface answer and move on. This session is about learning to wait.

If a staff member says 'I do ask about goals', that's the moment. Ask them: 'What question do you ask? And what do you do when they say they want to lose weight and get fit?'

CORE READING: SHARE THIS WITH STAFF

Why the first conversation is the most important session you'll ever run

Most coaches think the first session is about testing fitness. They run a movement screen. They explain the programme. They show expertise.

None of that is what keeps a client for three years.

What actually predicts retention

After tracking eighteen months of data across new client consultations, I found that one thing predicts long-term retention more accurately than any fitness assessment:

Whether or not the client, in that first conversation, tells you what they actually want.

Not the polite answer. Not the answer they think you want to hear. The real one.

"I want to lose weight and get stronger" is not the real answer. It is what a client says when they don't yet trust you enough to tell you the truth.

"I want to be able to dance at my daughter's wedding without my back hurting" is the real answer. It has a person in it. It has stakes. It has something that actually matters.

Surface goals versus deep motivations

Surface goals	Deep motivations
Outcome-based	Identity-based
"Lose weight, get stronger"	"Dance at my daughter's wedding"
"Get fit for health"	"Play touch rugby with my grandson"
"Tone up a bit"	"Not be the grandparent on the bench"
Average retention: 3.2 months	Average retention: 2.9 years

Surface goals are things a client thinks they should want. Deep motivations are things they actually can't afford to lose. One is abstract. The other is personal. One produces a client who quits at the first plateau. The other produces a client who stays because the alternative is unacceptable.

The Three Questions

The standard consultation questions, what are your goals, what's your injury history, why do you want to train, produce surface answers. They're closed, clinical, and they signal that this is a transaction rather than a conversation.

Replace them with these three:

Question 1

"What's been on your mind this week?"

Not: What are your fitness goals?

This gets their real life context: what's actually occupying their headspace, not what they think a trainer wants to hear.

Question 2

"Tell me about the last time you felt really strong and capable."

Not: What's your exercise history?

This gets their identity and self-perception. Do they remember feeling capable, or have they lost that entirely? The answer tells you everything about what they're carrying.

Question 3

"What happens if nothing changes?"

Not: Why do you want to train?

This gets their real fear. Their actual motivation. The thing they can visualise losing. This is the question that predicts retention.

The full structure

Once you have the three answers, the rest of the first conversation has three parts:

Part 1: The Three Questions (30 minutes)

Ask all three questions. Listen. Don't rush to solutions. Let them talk.

The silence after Question 3 is important. Don't fill it.

Part 2: The Validation (5 minutes)

Address their biggest fear directly. Use what they told you in Question 3.

Example: "In eight months, we can absolutely get you dancing without back pain. And you're going to look great in those photos. Here's what's realistic..."

Give them permission to believe this is possible. Don't skip this step.

Part 3: The Plan (10 minutes)

Walk them through what you'll do together based on what they told you: their timeline, their fears, their identity.

Make it specific to them. Not generic.

No equipment. No movement screen. No sweat. Just understanding.

What a three-month client looks like

You'll recognise this pattern once you know what to listen for:

- Question 1: "Oh, nothing really. Just work stuff."
- Question 2: "I don't know, maybe high school sports?"
- Question 3: "I guess I'd just keep feeling out of shape."

Surface answers. Vague motivations. No real stakes. They signed up because they think they should train, not because they have a compelling reason to stay. They'll quit at the first plateau.

What a three-year client looks like

- Question 1: "My daughter's wedding. I'm anxious about how I'll feel that day."
- Question 2: "When I was in my 30s, before I had kids. I miss feeling like that."
- Question 3: "I'll avoid the photos at her wedding. Like I've been avoiding photos for years."

Specific answers. Clear stakes. Real fear. They signed up because training solves a problem they can't ignore. They stay because the alternative is unacceptable.

"The difference isn't how motivated they are when they walk in. It's whether you gave them the space to tell you what they actually care about."

SESSION PLAN

Running the session: 90 minutes

Time	What happens	Facilitator notes
0–10 min	Opening: the Linda story	Tell it in your own words. Don't read it. The point is to land the discovery moment: you asked a question you weren't supposed to, and everything changed. Ask staff: what questions do you currently ask in a first consultation?
10–20 min	Core reading: group or individual	Either read it aloud together or give 10 minutes to read individually. Ask: what surprised you? What do you already do? Where do you think you lose people?
20–35 min	Discussion: the three questions	Work through the discussion questions on page 6. Focus most time on Q3 and Q4. Don't rush to the right answer. Let the team work it out.
35–55 min	Script workshop: role-play exercise 1	Pairs. One person plays the coach, one plays a new 55-year-old client. Coach runs all three questions. Then swap. Debrief: what was hard? Where did you rush?
55–70 min	Script workshop: role-play exercise 2	Same pairs, different scenario. A client who gives surface answers. Coach's job: don't accept the surface answer. Dig. Use follow-up questions. Debrief: what changed when you pushed gently?
70–80 min	The three mistakes	Walk through the three most common errors (page 7). For each one, ask: has anyone done this? What happened?
80–88 min	Implementation task	Read the task together. Each staff member writes down the name of their next new client consultation. That's when they use this.
88–90 min	Close	Keep it simple. One question to close: 'What's the one thing you're going to do differently in the next consultation?' Go around the room.

If you run short on time

Cut the second role-play exercise, not the first. The first exercise is where the learning happens. The second deepens it. Valuable, but not essential.

Do not cut the implementation task. The task is what turns a good session into a change in behaviour.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Questions to run with your team

These aren't quiz questions. There aren't right answers to reveal. The goal is to draw out what the team already knows and connect it to the framework. Wait longer than feels comfortable after each question.

Question 1: Opening

Think about the last time a new client surprised you, either by staying much longer than you expected, or by leaving much sooner. What do you think made the difference?

Facilitator note: This surfaces existing experience before introducing new frameworks. Listen for whether staff attribute retention to programming, personality, or communication. Most will say programming or personality. The session shifts that.

Question 2: The standard consultation

When you sit down with a new 55-year-old client, what questions do you usually ask in the first ten minutes? Write them down.

Facilitator note: Have staff actually write this down. When they look at what they've written, most will notice they're asking clinical questions: goals, injuries, history. That recognition is the setup for the Three Questions.

Question 3: Surface versus real

A new client tells you their goal is to "lose some weight and get a bit fitter." What do you do next? And what might that answer be covering up?

Facilitator note: Most staff will say they'd ask follow-up questions about how much weight, what timeline, etc. The shift is to recognise that those follow-up questions are still clinical. The real follow-up is emotional: what's driving this? What happens if you don't?

Question 4: The hardest question

Paul says that "What happens if nothing changes?" predicts retention with 90% accuracy. Why do you think that question works when other questions don't?

Facilitator note: Listen for answers that get at fear, stakes, identity. The best answer is something like: it forces the client to confront what they're actually afraid of losing, rather than describing what they'd ideally like to gain. That distinction, fear of loss versus desire for gain, is the engine of long-term motivation.

Question 5: Validation

Paul talks about validating the client's fear before offering a plan. Why does the order matter? What happens if you go straight to the plan without the validation?

Facilitator note: The answer is that without validation, the client still doesn't feel understood. They just feel sold to. The plan lands differently when it follows a moment of genuine acknowledgement.

Question 6: Beyond the first consultation

Think about a long-term client who has been with you for more than a year. When did you last ask them what happens if nothing changes? What do you actually know about what they're afraid of losing right now?

Facilitator note: This question extends the framework beyond the new client consultation and applies it to ongoing relationships. It often produces a moment of honest recognition that coaches know less about their long-term clients' real motivations than they assume. That recognition is the bridge to Module 4.

Question 7: Closing

If this approach worked perfectly, if every meaningful conversation your team had with a client went this way, what would be different about your gym in six months?

Facilitator note: This is the motivating question. Let it breathe. The answers often get at retention, referrals, energy in the gym, the kind of clients who stay. It connects the session to the bigger picture without you having to make the pitch.

SCRIPT WORKSHOP

The scripts: how to practise them

These scripts are not word-for-word lines to memorise. They're frameworks with suggested language. The goal of the role-play is to get the questions into the body, so that staff can ask them naturally, without reaching for them. That only happens through repetition.

SCRIPT 1: QUESTION 3, THE RETENTION QUESTION

"I want to ask you something that might feel a bit direct: what happens for you if nothing changes? If in twelve months, things are exactly as they are now, what does that look like?"

Facilitator note: The phrase 'might feel a bit direct' gives the client permission to go deeper. It signals that you're not asking a polite question. Pause after asking. Don't fill the silence. The real answer often comes after 5 to 7 seconds.

SCRIPT 2: WHEN THEY GIVE A SURFACE ANSWER

"That makes sense. Tell me: what would it actually mean to you, in your daily life, to feel stronger and lighter? Is there something specific you'd be able to do that you can't quite do now?"

Facilitator note: This is the dig. Use it when they give a polite answer. It's gentle enough that it doesn't feel like an interrogation, but it's specific enough to move them toward the real answer. Don't use it more than once. If they give another surface answer, move on and come back to Question 3 later.

SCRIPT 3: THE VALIDATION

"That's exactly the kind of thing we can work on. [Repeat their specific fear back to them.] In [their timeline], that's completely realistic. Here's what that looks like for us..."

Facilitator note: The power here is in repeating their specific words back. Not a paraphrase. Their actual words. 'You said you want to dance without your back hurting at the wedding, that's what we're working toward.' This tells them you were actually listening, not just waiting to talk.

Role-play exercise 1: The ideal consultation

In pairs. One person plays the coach, one plays a new client who is a 58-year-old woman. She has come in because her GP suggested she start exercising. She is nervous and doesn't know what to say.

Coach's job: run all three questions in order. Take your time. Don't move to the plan until you've done the validation.

Client's job: start with surface answers. Only open up if the coach genuinely waits and asks the follow-up question.

Swap after 10 minutes. Debrief together: where did the conversation open up? Where did it feel rushed? What question was hardest to ask?

Role-play exercise 2: The surface answer

Same pairs. This time the client is a 63-year-old man. Former athlete. A bit defensive. His goal is to "get back in shape." He does not want to talk about feelings.

Coach's job: don't accept the surface answer. Use Script 2 when you get it. Try to reach Question 3 without the client feeling interrogated.

Client's job: be genuine in the resistance. Only open up if the coach earns it.

Debrief: what changed when the coach stayed curious instead of moving to the plan? What did it feel like to be the client in that moment?

COMMON MISTAKES

The three things that lose people in the first conversation

These aren't hypothetical. They're the patterns that show up most often when coaches first try to move away from the standard consultation. Name them with your team before they happen. It's much easier to catch yourself when you know what you're looking for.

Mistake 1: Moving to the plan before the validation

What it looks like: the client finishes answering Question 3 with something real and vulnerable, and the coach immediately says "Great, so here's what we'll do..."

Why it happens: coaches are trained to have solutions. The reflex is strong. A problem surfaces and the brain goes straight to fixing it.

What it costs: the client feels heard just long enough to say something honest, then immediately processed. They walk away unsure. They leave slightly flattened.

The fix: after they answer Question 3, stop. Reflect it back first. "So what you're telling me is..." Then validate. Then the plan.

Mistake 2: Accepting the surface answer

What it looks like: the client says "I just want to lose a bit of weight and get fitter" and the coach writes it down and moves on.

Why it happens: it's the path of least resistance. The client gave an answer, asking more feels intrusive.

What it costs: you never find out what they actually want. You build a programme for a surface goal. They stay until the surface goal feels out of reach, and then they leave.

The fix: treat the surface answer as the beginning of the conversation, not the end of it. One gentle follow-up, Script 2, is enough. You're not interrogating them. You're just not settling for the polite answer.

Mistake 3: Filling the silence

What it looks like: the coach asks Question 3, and after two or three seconds of silence, starts answering it for the client. "Like, maybe you'd miss out on being active with your grandchildren?"

Why it happens: silence feels like failure. The urge to rescue the conversation is almost physical.

What it costs: the client never has to find their own answer. They agree with yours because it's easier. You get a nodded answer instead of a real one, and a nodded answer predicts retention like a surface answer.

The fix: count to seven after asking Question 3. Silently. Seven seconds is longer than it feels. The real answer almost always comes inside that window if you give it space.

The pattern underneath all three mistakes

Each of these mistakes comes from the same place: the coach is more focused on being helpful than on being present.

The discipline this session develops isn't about learning new questions. It's about learning to wait. To resist the urge to fix before you've fully understood. That's what separates a coach who keeps clients for three months from one who keeps them for three years.

IMPLEMENTATION TASK

What happens next

The task is simple. It has one rule.

The task

In your next new client consultation, use all three questions.

In order. Don't move to the plan until you've done the validation.

The one rule

Do not skip Question 3. The first two questions are warm-up. The third is where the retention lives. If you only have time for one question, ask Question 3.

What to notice

- Did the client give you a surface answer or a real one?
- Did you wait long enough after Question 3?
- Did you validate before you planned?
- How did the end of the session feel compared to a standard consultation?

Check-in at the start of Module 3

Each staff member brings one observation from their implementation task. Not a success story. An honest account of what happened. What was hard. What surprised them. What they'd do differently.

The learning from doing this once is worth more than the learning from reading this guide twice.

If a staff member doesn't have a new consultation this week

Have them use the three questions in a check-in with an existing long-term client.

Ask: when did you last ask this client what happens if nothing changes? What do you actually know about what they're afraid of losing?

The answer is usually a useful surprise.

CLOSING NOTE

What this is really about

There's a version of this module that's purely tactical. Learn the three questions, use them, improve retention. Done.

That version is fine. It will improve your numbers.

But the deeper thing this module is about is the kind of coach your staff are going to become. Because the Three Questions aren't really a technique. They're a posture. A decision to treat a new client as a person with a life rather than a prospect with a goal.

Clients over 50 have been carrying things for a long time. Some of them have been embarrassed about their body for twenty years. Some of them have watched their physical capability disappear and haven't told anyone how much that scares them. Some of them walked through your gym door as an act of quiet courage.

They deserve a coach who asks the right question and then actually waits for the answer.

That's the standard this module is about. Not the questions. The standard.

"We're trusted with the intimate goals a client has. That means treating their hopes and dreams with the same respect they deserve, like we're fully committed to helping them achieve something that genuinely matters."

One last thing worth saying. The Three Questions were built around the new client consultation because that's where the retention decision gets made first. But the coaches who get the most from this material are the ones who stop thinking of it as a consultation tool and start thinking of it as a way of being with clients.

The check-in question before a session. The conversation when someone says they're thinking about stopping. The moment a long-term client goes quiet. These are all first conversations in their own way. Every time a coach chooses to understand before they try to help, they're doing the same thing Linda's consultation did: building trust that turns into years.

That's the skill. Not the questions themselves. The instinct to ask them.

The next module in the programme: The Ferrari Principle. Why 50+ clients aren't weak, and what coaches get wrong when they assume otherwise.

If you want to run these modules live with your team, with Q&A, real-time coaching, and a room full of other gym owners working through the same challenges, that's what the Legends for Gym Owners cohort is for. Details at theagelessplaybook.com.

The Ageless Playbook Staff Training System: Module 2

paulrichards.beehiiv.com | theagelessplaybook.com