

# **The First Conversation**

**Building Clients Who Stay**

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

## A NOTE FROM PAUL

### Before we start

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#### Who this is for

If you're a solo coach, this is your personal framework for the first conversation. Work through it as if you're both the facilitator and the staff member, because you are. If you lead a team, this is your staff training. Either way, the content is the same and so is the standard it's asking you to hold yourself to.

Let me tell you something that happened in 2019 that changed the way I work with every client.

I was doing a first consultation with a 58-year-old woman called Linda. Standard stuff. Goals, injuries, exercise history. She was giving me perfectly reasonable answers. Polite. A bit guarded. The kind of consultation that leads to a decent programme and a client who stays four or five months before quietly disappearing.

Then, almost by accident, I asked a question that wasn't on my template.

"What happens if nothing changes?"

She paused. Then she told me that her daughter was getting married in eight months. That she wanted to dance at the reception without her back hurting. That she'd been avoiding photographs for years and didn't want to avoid them at her own daughter's wedding.

That was the real answer. Not "lose weight and get stronger." That was just what she thought I wanted to hear.

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

After that consultation I started tracking what happened when I asked every new client the same question. Eighteen months of data. Clients who gave surface answers stayed an average of 3.2 months. Clients who gave me the real answer stayed an average of 2.9 years.

One question. That kind of difference.

What I want to share with you in this module isn't a sales technique or a clever manipulation. It's something much simpler: most coaches are so focused on being helpful that they never slow down long enough to understand what the person in front of them actually needs.

Clients over 50 have usually been carrying something for a long time. Some of them haven't felt physically capable in years. Some of them are quietly scared. Almost none of them are going to tell you what they actually want in the first five minutes, unless you create enough space for them to get there.

That's what this module is about. Not technique. The kind of coach you are when someone needs to feel understood before they can accept being helped.

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

One more thing before we get into the framework. What you're going to learn here isn't just useful in a first consultation. The instinct behind it applies every time you're in a meaningful conversation with a client. The check-in before a session. The moment someone says they're thinking about stopping. The quiet conversation when something is clearly wrong.

Get this right and you won't just improve how you handle new clients. You'll change the quality of every relationship you have on the gym floor.

**Paul Richards**

*The Ageless Playbook*

## CORE READING

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

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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 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"
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 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

Replace the standard consultation questions with these three:

#### Question 1

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

Gets their real life context. Not what they think a trainer wants to hear.

### Question 2

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

Gets their identity and self-perception. Do they remember feeling capable, or have they lost that entirely?

### Question 3

## "What happens if nothing changes?"

Gets their real fear. Their actual motivation. This is the question that predicts retention.

### The structure that follows

#### Part 1: The Three Questions (30 minutes)

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

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

#### Part 2: The Validation (5 minutes)

Address their biggest fear directly using what they told you.

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 their timeline, their fears, their identity.

Make it specific to them. No equipment, no movement screen, no sweat. Just understanding.

### Michael's story

Michael came in for a consultation. 63 years old. Former rugby player. Intimidating guy who looked like he didn't really want to be there.

I asked the three questions. When I got to Question 3, his voice cracked.

"I'll have to tell my grandson no. Again. Like I've been telling him no to everything physical for the last two years. I'm becoming the granddad who sits on the sideline. I don't want to be that guy."

That was the real motivation. Not "get fit for health." The sideline granddad he was becoming.

Michael has been training for fourteen months. He played touch rugby with his grandson three months ago. He sent me a video.

He's staying for years. Because I understood what he actually wanted.

*"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 REFLECTION

### Your answers

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Use this page during the session. There are no right answers. The most useful thing you can write here is what's actually true for you.

**Question 1: Think about a client who stayed longer than you expected. What do you think made the difference?**

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**Question 2: Write down the questions you currently ask in the first ten minutes with a new client.**

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**Question 3: A new client says they want to 'lose weight and get fitter.' What do you do next? What might that answer be covering up?**

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**Question 4: Why do you think 'What happens if nothing changes?' works when other questions don't?**

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**Question 5: Think about a long-term client. 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?**

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**Question 6: If every meaningful conversation with every client went this way, what would be different about your work in six months?**

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## YOUR SCRIPTS

### Three conversations worth learning

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These aren't lines to memorise. They're starting points. The goal is to make the language your own so you can use it without thinking about it. Keep this page.

#### Script 1

##### 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?"*

After you ask: count to seven. Silently. The real answer almost always comes inside that window if you give it space.

#### 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?"*

Use this once. If they give another surface answer, move on and come back to Question 3 later. You're not interrogating them. You're just not settling for the polite answer.

#### Script 3

##### The validation

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

Repeat their actual words, not a paraphrase. "You said you want to dance without your back hurting." This tells them you were listening, not just waiting to talk.

### The three mistakes to avoid

#### Moving to the plan before the validation

They say something real and vulnerable. You immediately say "great, so here's what we'll do." They walked in unsure. They leave slightly flattened. Reflect it back first. Then validate. Then plan.

#### Accepting the surface answer

They say "I just want to lose a bit of weight" and you write it down and move on. You never find out what they actually want. You build a programme for a surface goal. They leave when the surface goal feels out of reach.

### **Filling the silence**

You ask Question 3. After two seconds of silence you start suggesting answers. "Like, maybe you'd miss out on being active with your grandchildren?" They nod. You got a nodded answer, not a real one. A nodded answer predicts retention like a surface answer.

**YOUR TASK**

## What you're doing this week

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**The task**

**In your next meaningful conversation with a client, use all three questions.**

New client consultation or existing client check-in. Either works.

Don't try to do this perfectly. Just do it. The learning is in the doing, not in the reading.

The one rule: don't skip Question 3. The first two questions warm them up. The third is where the retention lives.

**Which client or conversation are you going to use this with?**

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**After you've done it, come back and write here:**

**What happened? Did they give you a surface answer or a real one?**

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**What was hard? Where did you rush, hesitate, or fill the silence?**

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**What would you do differently next time?**

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## YOUR COMMITMENT

### One thing

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At the end of every module, one question. No right answer. No performance required. Just honesty.

**Based on what you've read and discussed today, what is the one thing you are going to do differently in the next consultation?**

*Write one sentence. Be specific.*

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*Keep this workbook. The notes you made today will mean more in three months when you've used these questions fifty times and want to remember what you thought before you started.*

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**The Ageless Playbook Staff Training System: Module 2**

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