

Impactful Listening in Coaching

(See also Conflict Management Coaching, The CINERGY® Model, Noble, 2012, 'Intentional Hearing' pp. 155-162)

Many people who take training in Conflict Coaching have a background in related professions such as mediation and will bring well-developed skills in listening effectively and actively. However, there are some differences in the application of listening skills in a coaching context and relationship compared to mediation. The aim of this paper is to share some theory around the purpose and practice of impactful listening in coaching. In particular, it aims to highlight the reduced emphasis in coaching on the need for, or value in, the coach paraphrasing back and reframing the content of their client's issues/situation. Unlike mediation, in coaching there is no 'other person' present where mutual hearing and listening needs to be facilitated.

While it is acknowledged that people experiencing conflict often have a critical need to feel their voice has been heard, this has to be balanced with other important purposes of coaching: namely to gain new insights and perspectives on their experience that will assist them to make the changes they are seeking. Trainee coaches are encouraged to develop their skills in listening beyond the content of their clients' conflict 'story' and the impact and power of silence as a fundamental coaching tool is underlined.



Purpose of Listening in Coaching:

Listening is a core coaching skill and has been described as the entry point for coaching – 'the gate through which all the coaching passes'. (Whitworth, et al., 1998, p. 39).

Pedrick (2021) cites two key purposes for listening in coaching: a) the client feels heard by someone else and b) the client listens to themselves so they acquire new insights and understanding about themselves and their own situation.

'The brain that contains the problem contains the solution' (Kline, 1999, p.39). Coaching is about eliciting client-generated rather than coach-led solutions. The coach's role is to create an environment

and atmosphere for their client to 'think better' i.e. reflect on challenges, obstacles and come up with their own fresh insights and ideas about how to move past the challenges. Coaches listen so the thinker (i.e. client) can explore their situation and achieve fresh thinking that assists them to overcome obstacles and move towards attaining their goals. Rather than listening so the coach understands, the coach works to create a listening environment that assists the client to deepen their own self-awareness and self-understanding.

Listening Skills in Coaching

Whitworth et al. (1998) identify two aspects to the skill of listening:

1. Attention or awareness: the receiving of information from the client. This encompasses not only the words – what the coach is hearing - the auditory sense but other senses e.g. visual – what the coach observes and intuits at a feeling/sensing level
2. Impact: what the coach does with what they have been listening to: how they act and respond when the client has spoken. This can range from saying nothing, simply leaving silence to more active skills such as reflecting, paraphrasing, clarifying, making observations, asking another question.

Attention, Awareness:

The literature on coaching defines 3 levels of listening:

Level 1: Internal or Content Listening

In Level 1 listening, the listener is focused on the content of what the speaker is saying, but their focus is on what that content means to/for themselves. The listener is focused on their own thoughts, opinions, judgments, feelings, needs, experience and how what the speaker is saying relates to that. In coaching, for example, the clients tend to listen at that level because that's a key task in coaching, to focus on one's own internal content. Similarly, in a coaching training programme, the participants might listen to the training content in this mode. This type of listening is common and appropriate in many of everyday interactions – from meetings at work, socialising, transacting business etc. Listening at this level often comes with judgements be they positive or negative – about the person being listened to. Level 1 listening tends to be through our own pre-formed views or assumptions rather than truly hearing the other person.

Level 2: Focused Listening

In Level 2 the listener's attention shifts to the speaker – they have the listener's undivided attention. The listener's focus is on hearing what is important to the other person, hearing not only the content but also the tone, facial expression, body language. They are listening from a place of empathy and warmth towards the speaker, rather than tuning into their own personal thinking and opinions about them or what they are saying.

This type of listening characterises much of the listening in coaching and similar professions. The listener might be paraphrasing and reflecting back at times. The listener aims to develop a sense of connection and rapport where the other person truly feels heard. They are tuning into the meaning of the listener's words and being deliberate in how they respond to them. Level 2 listening builds deep rapport and is integral to supporting a client in making change and transformation in their lives.

Level 3 listening: Global listening

Levels 1 and 2 listening are primarily for the client's words, content. In Level 3 listening the listener is tuning in beyond the words, 'at 360 degrees'. They are using all their senses and noticing the client's mood, pace, energy, the emotional 'field' behind the words. Whitworth et al. (1998) refer to this as 'environmental listening': the coach is noticing the client's energy level – is the client enthused or more flat-lined, is he/she relaxed or tense and controlled?

From this mode of listening, the listener also has greater access to their own intuition and might use that to inform how they respond to the client. To listen effectively at this level the listener needs to be 'softly focused, sensitive to tiny stimuli, ready to receive information from all the senses' (Whitworth et al. 1998, p.38).

Pedrick (2021) refers to a core aspect of listening which she calls 'noticing'. She suggests the coach's role is to assist the client to see the wood for the trees. Rather than focusing on the detail of the content, the coach can pay attention to:

- a) the 'Headlines' – the themes above the story. Whitworth et al. (1998) refer to the 'meta-view' – the bigger picture context for the client behind the content of their words
- b) the 'Underbelly' – the (unspoken) emotions and feelings which the client's tone, pace, volume might belie – and where they might be experiencing a level of vulnerability.

Similarly, David Rock (2006, p.40) suggests listening for:

- What's the person trying to say
- What are they not saying
- What's the emotional context inside what they are saying
- What's 'behind' their words
- What's the essence of what they are saying
- What are they saying that they can't hear for themselves

Impact:

Clearly, how the coach responds to their client will depend on, and be influenced by, how and to what they pay attention when the client is speaking or sharing. Secondly, it will depend on what the coach considers to be of value to their client. The coach's active listening can take many forms. This can range from saying nothing i.e. staying silent, asking a question to clarifying, paraphrasing or summarising what the client has said. The coach's listening response should serve one or both of the purposes mentioned above: ensuring the client feels heard and/or facilitating them to gain fresh insights and perspectives about themselves and their situation.

The WAIT (Why Am I Talking) acronym is a useful maxim for the coach so they respond in a conscious and intentional way to what a client has shared. For example, the skill of paraphrasing and summarising, which may be very beneficial in a 3-person context such as mediation to help one speaker hear what the other has said, can be less impactful in one-to-one coaching.

Rock (2006) differentiates between 'clarifying' and 'paraphrasing'. Paraphrasing is repeating back the content of what was said whereas clarifying is about capturing the essence of what someone is trying to say in a succinct way that adds something and takes the speaker's thinking to a higher level. Kline (1999)

warns that while a listener might be tempted to use paraphrasing as a way of demonstrating they have heard the speaker, it can weaken the impact of the coach's (powerful) questions. Paraphrasing usually means introducing some of the listener's own wording and will always be a second-best in terms of impact, to the speaker's own wording.

Building on the skill of noticing and level 3 listening, Pedrick (2021) suggests our response as a listener is most useful when it is short, without any unnecessary padding, asked with a question mark – tentative, exploratory – and based on data we have observed rather than our own interpreted meaning. It might be simply backtracking on two or three of the client's words where their energy seemed to shift or simply mirroring back what the coach observed in their body language or non-verbals. Even a simple comment with a question mark 'And...?' or 'So...?' can be much more effective in encouraging the speaker's thinking than an expansive and wordy interjection from the coach reflecting back what she/he has heard the client say.

One of the most powerful responding skills/interventions in coaching is staying silent – but present – to the client. Franklin (2019) points out that silence is essential not only after the coach asks the question but also after the client initially answers the question. Some people need time to process the question or think aloud and they may simply be pausing while they continue to process. If the coach jumps in with a reflection back or another question, they have disrupted the client's thinking. While silence might be uncomfortable for new coaches, it's a hallmark of effective and powerful coaching.

Susan Scott recommends 'Let the silence do the heavy lifting' (2002, p.218). She describes silence the 'space between thoughts' and a powerful way for insights and emotions to emerge. Neuroscientists have found that people are more likely to have insights when they are in a relaxed, unharried state of mind. Asking a few simple but powerful questions and creating a supportive listening space is one way of fostering this. When the client is silent, it doesn't mean they have stopped thinking; rather they are going on a 'solitary 'walk'' (Kline 1999, p.51) and what's essential at this point is to remain quiet but present. Quiet presence allows them to continue to do the thinking which allows new ideas, insights to develop.

To quote Kline, 'the quality of your attention determines the quality of other people's thinking' (1999, p. 38). When we as coaches fill all the space with talking, then the possibilities for our client to hear their own innermost thoughts, intuitions and small voice of wisdom, diminish.

References:

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- Kline, Nancy, *Time to Think*, Ward Lock, 1999
- Whitworth L, Kimsey-Hourse, H., Sandahl, P., *Co-Active Coaching*, Davies Black Publishing, 1998
- Pedrick, Claire, *Simplifying Coaching How to Have More Transformational Conversations by Doing Less*, McGraw Hill, 2021
- Scott, Susan, *Fierce Conversations*, Berkley, 2002
- Rock, David, *Quiet Leadership*, Harper, 2006

Sample Exercises to Practice Listening Skills

1. Listening from different levels – Pair Work/Fishbowl:

Inviting trainees to listen at the different levels of listening outlined above can be done in a variety of ways e.g.

- Pair work in rounds:
 - i. first round 'Coach' listening from Level 1-2 more focus on content and Coach's curiosity, reflecting and paraphrasing back content;
 - ii. second round, 'coach' listening from Level 3 listening i.e. focusing less on content and more on client's energy level, pace, tone, emotional 'field', body language – any shifts in mood or tone, any dissonance in what they are saying and their energy, any metaphors, images they are sharing.
Coach taps into own intuition to respond – e.g. mirroring back one or two words, or an observation or a short question
- Fish-bowl where Trainer shares a 'challenge' or dilemma and groups of trainees listening at, and responding from, each of the 3 Levels.

2. In Coaching Triad practices, Observer applies Level 3 listening to the Client for the first 10-15 mins of the session and makes notes of what they are noticing about client's energy, mood, pace, tone, body language.

3. Exercise: Listening at Level 3 (Whitworth et al., p. 46): This could be set as a 'homework' for trainees.

Visit one or two venues where people might be gathered e.g. library, hotel lobby etc.. Pay attention to simply gathering Level 3 awareness of how people are feeling. Pay attention to the environment, the emotional field – what's the buzz/hum in the room. Notice where the energy is in the room and how it shifts as people arrive or depart. Try closing your eyes and see if you notice anything different.

This exercise could also be applied in other contexts e.g. work meetings, social interactions. Suggest that trainees make some notes on what they are noticing as they listen at Level 3 to their conversation/meeting partner(s) and notes on how they might share that in a clear, succinct, non-judgemental way, if they were a Coach in those interactions.

Appendix:

International Coaching Federation Coaching Competencies:

Three of these relate directly to the role and practice of listening in coaching:

4. Coaching Presence:

Ability to be fully conscious and create spontaneous relationship with the client, employing a style that is open, flexible and confident.

- *Being fully present and flexible with the client, “dancing in the moment.”*
- *Being curious, trusting your gut, experimenting, using humor.*

5. Active Listening

Ability to focus completely on what the client is saying and is not saying, to understand the meaning of what is said in the context of the client’s desires, and to support client self-expression.

- *Listening without an agenda, distinguish between the words, tone of voice and body language. Level 2 and Level 3 Listening.*
- *Understands the essence of the client’s communication. Helps the client gain clarity and perspective rather than engaged in the story.*

8. Creating Awareness

Ability to integrate and accurately evaluate multiple sources of information, and to make interpretations that help the client to gain awareness and thereby achieve agreed-upon results.

- *Going beyond the immediate goal. Engaging in exploration for discovery, perspective, learning and growth with the client.*
- *Identifying and acknowledging strengths. Noticing connections or threads between what is said and what is done*

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Mary is certified in CINERGY™ Conflict Management Coaching Model and is a member of the international team of Approved CINERGY™ trainers and has delivered the signature 4-day Conflict Management Coaching Programme both in Ireland and abroad.

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Mary is a former Director of the Mediators' Institute of Ireland and former Director of the MII Accreditation Policy Committee, of which she is still an active member.

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