

What is Listening?

1 Doing three things at once

When we listen to a 'coachee', at least three processes are taking place. They can happen at the same time but it may be helpful to look at these processes separately:

Understanding what the coachee is saying

You can show that you have understood by summarising what the coachee has said or by simply saying, "Yes, I understand what you are saying." It is possible to understand something without really accepting it or valuing it so...

Accepting what the coachee is saying

Having understood what is being said, you can then decide to accept it and add this into your own way of understanding things. This means that you accept the coachee's information, views and opinions as being valid. Then you can add their ideas into your own view of the situation. Acceptance is usually indicated by such phrases as "Yes, I agree."

Valuing the importance of what the coachee is saying

Having accepted what someone else has said, you may give a high or low value to it. In other words, you may think that it is important or not very significant. The fact that you can understand what someone has said and accept it as being accurate does not mean that you always place a high value on it.

At times people may say disagree with something when really they may mean that they don't understand it or don't accept it or they don't regard it as important.

When listening to your coachee, you may find that you don't agree with their view of a situation. It is important to be clear about exactly where there is disagreement. For example, they may have said something that is factually wrong and you will need to correct them. It may be that your opinion is different from theirs, in which case you should say why. You might even agree with them but feel that they are getting their priorities mixed up, in which case you might say, "I understand and accept what you are saying but right now, I don't think I would give it as much importance as you do."

2 Active Listening

An active listener will:

- pay attention and encourage the coachee
- observe the coachee's 'non-verbal behaviour' such as facial expressions and body movements
- pick up the coachee's underlying feelings by listening to their tone of voice which may change over time ('listening to the music behind the words')

- sense what the coachee means behind the actual words they are using

They will also:

- show that they have understood and accepted what has been said
- summarise what the coachee has just said
- paraphrase the coachee's feelings on a particular issue

The essence of active listening is being able to mirror the person's feelings so that it helps them to communicate further their concerns and issues. The following is an example of a coach engaging in active listening but ignoring the important feelings that the client is communicating: -

Coachee: "My appraisal is coming up and it's really important that I get this qualification. I haven't been doing too well and my job might depend on it. I'm very concerned."

Coach: "Yes, I suppose your appraisal is due soon?"

Coachee: "Yes, it comes up at the end of this month."

In this case, the coach has ignored the *feelings* that the coachee has expressed and has only summarised the *content*. The coachee has added more information, but only about the appraisal date, not about how they feel about it.

In the next example the coachee's feelings are being reflected better:

Coachee: "My appraisal is coming up and it's really important that I get this qualification. I haven't been doing too well and my job might depend on it. I'm very concerned."

Coach: "It sounds like you are really anxious about whether the appraisal will go well for you?"

Coachee: "Yes. I'm not sleeping properly at the moment and I'm not eating well. I feel really tense and I wonder what I should do."

In this case, the coach has reflected the coachee's feelings and has helped them to provide more information on their situation and how their emotional state is influencing their actions.

The purpose of active listening is not to encourage coachees to wallow in self-pity. The idea is to get their feelings out into the open so that both coachee and coach can fully explore and understand the situation.

When it's done well, active listening can transform relationships from the superficial to a much deeper level. It can make a big contribution to increasing trust.

3 Using Open Questions

Open questions encourage the coachee to follow their own thoughts so you can develop an accurate picture of the situation without influencing their views. They are different from closed questions, which tend to promote a “Yes” or “No” reply.

Examples of some open questions might include: -

“Tell me more about that?”

“Tell me about what it is like working here?”

“What's it like being a managing director?”

“How do you feel about that?”

After open questions have been asked for a certain period, it can be helpful to summarise what has been said. You can then focus on specific topics from the summary that need more attention.

Good open questions are very effective in increasing trust and building your credibility.

4 Asking Interesting Questions

Interesting questions are open questions that are designed to help the coachee to think through an important issue rather than dwell on their pet theories or prejudices.

Two useful ‘interesting questions’ are:

“What is going well for you?”

“What do you see as the main issues facing you/the team at this time?”

These allow a coachee to first speak in positive tones about what is going on and then to organise their own thinking and priorities about what is concerning them.

Interesting questions can also give a client two or more possibilities to think about in order to engage their intelligence and encourage them to reach their own conclusions. For example, here is a situation where a client has a pre-formed view about a cause and effect and the consultant asks an interesting question in such a way that it enables the client to widen their thinking about possible causes: -

Client: "I think the main reason why we have such high absenteeism among supervisors is because they are all women, and women are always off sick!"

Consultant: "Do you think that the absenteeism is due to the fact that they are women or might it have to do with an epidemic of 'flu which has been evident in the community recently?"

Well-constructed interesting questions are very effective in increasing trust and building credibility.

5 Listening with Confidence

Your own level of self-confidence will be critical to the success of your coaching relationship.

When a coach has high self-esteem and a good sense of their own value, they do not feel that they have to prove anything to the coachee and they do not have the need to be dominant or feel superior.

In this case, the coach is more likely to focus squarely on the coachee rather than talk about their own feelings. They may also communicate directly or indirectly to the coachee what they appreciate and value most about them, what their strengths are or how valuable they are.

This is sometimes called 'profound listening'. This kind of listening has the following characteristics:

- it is relaxed rather than rigid or tight
- it is confident in reaching a deeper level of connection
- it is built on appreciating the coachee as a human being rather than making judgements about their competence
- the coach has the highest expectations of the coachee and their desire and ability to do well

Profound listeners usually get thanked warmly for how much they have contributed when, in effect, most of what they have done was pay close attention to the coachee, encouraging and enabling them to think things out for themselves.

(Source: Adapted from original material by Simmons Dickinson)



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