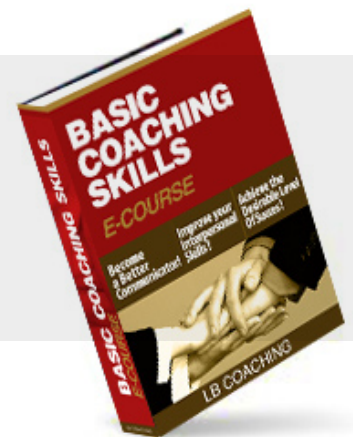




BASIC COACHING SKILLS

E-COURSE

Lesson 1 – Listening Skills



The objective of the lesson

To confidently develop and practice your listening skills as a basis for developing your coaching skills.

The areas covered in the lesson

- Understanding the importance of listening within the communication process
- Creating inner space and showing how clarity is developed by clearing inner space
- Levels of Listening
- Providing a basic framework within which to understand listening skills
- Explaining and encouraging the qualities of a good listener

Understanding the importance of listening within the communication process

Coaching is about raising awareness and allowing the client to realize for themselves what they need to do. Therefore in coaching, the purpose of listening is to fully understand. When client has to explain something to you to the maximum of your understanding, it forces them to re-visit the issue and understand it better for themselves. Better understanding helps them to see their situation more clearly, to become aware and ultimately to make better choices about how to move forward.

Listening is often taken for granted in that we assume if we start to speak, the person to whom we are trying to speak will listen. The level at which they are listening could range from “not at all” to being “fully engaged”. It is very frustrating if you feel that the person you are talking to is not really listening, or is not listening at all!

Develop good listening skills is a huge asset in everyday life and is essential to coaches.

Creating inner space

If you think of listening as the foundation of coaching, then creating inner space is creating the groundwork. There are two aspects of creating inner space, first within oneself and secondly within the speaker.

You only have to try and sit quietly for a minute to become aware of the huge number of thoughts that flash around in your mind. In fact, thinking speed is about 500 words per minute. Creating inner space in ourselves is about taking control of our own thoughts and clearing our own space in order to get ready to listen to the client. The phrase “has their mind on other things” is a common way of describing someone who is too “full” to listen.

It is impossible to be a good coach if we are full of our own thoughts and unable to create space in our own mind to really listen.

At the same time, the speaker, or, in our case the coachee has also lots of thoughts in their mind. As a result, it is simply not possible to think clearly and the new thoughts and ideas, which should be the product of a coaching session, are not likely to happen. By offering space, the listener gives the speaker the opportunity to “get it off his chest”.

It is very difficult for a coachee to move forward if they are swamped by thoughts and emotions which they need to unload to create the space for new thinking.

How to create the inner space?

Rule 1

As a coach it is of a paramount importance to eradicate your personal opinions, experience, mood and thoughts from the coaching process. Within the coaching context, a coach has to set aside his opinion and listen and understand from the view of their client. It is not always very easy, because as the client talks, we may recognize a situation and will automatically start to listen in terms of our own experience, while making the assumption that our client’s experience will follow the same pattern. However, their experience of a similar event may be entirely different and in understanding their experience there is no room for ours!

Rule 2

A state of mind or how we feel will convey our mood. It also effects how we listen, in that if we are feeling depressed, we tend to concentrate on the negative parts of the conversation, whereas, if we feel more optimistic, we tend to pick out the positives.

This works both ways and so if we determine our client's mood; it will help us to understand how they interpret what we say.

Unless we put our own mood on hold, it is impossible to clearly receive what our client is trying to convey.

Personal Exercise 1

Notice and record an instance when you were not listening, what distracted you and what you were thinking of.

Rule 3

Listening to ourselves is a good way to developing listening skills.

Every individual has their own conversations going on in their head and these are commonly referred to as "self-talk". Positive self-talk is when this verbal aspect to thinking tells us that we can do anything that we set our mind to. Negative self-talk is when we tell ourselves that we are destined to fail at whatever we try.

Self-talk affects our beliefs, hence the saying "whether you think you can, or whether you think you can't, you are right"!

Due to the fact that we are in control of our thoughts, we can learn to control our own self-talk, so that it becomes an asset. Control of self-talk means that we are selective in what we are feeding to our subconscious and in turn this will help us to bring about those things we desire. If we don't control our self-talk, it will control us.

A good listener uses his awareness of his own self-talk to create space by exercising control and organization of their own thoughts. Being aware of our own self-talk will help identify self-talk in clients. Recognizing negative self-talk in clients will enable us to help them change it from negative to positive.

Personal Exercise 2

Write a few sentences about the area of personal self-talk which you would like to control better.

Rule 4

Every individual's thought processes are affected by their surroundings. Outside influences such as friends, books, television, etc. all contribute to how we think about ourselves and to

our beliefs. Controlling what influences we allow into our life is important. Identifying and getting rid of the inputs that are not adding anything to our life will help us to create space. Having decided on the influences that we no longer need in our lives, we can positively resource our own inner space by actively selecting the input.

Rule 5

In coaching the aim is to be fully listening. This means not just appearing to be interested, but conveying that we are totally focused on the speaker to the extent when they feel that there is nothing more important to us than them at that moment in time. To be totally available we need to have cleared our inner space. We need to come to the conversation an empty vessel.

The mind has been described as the flame on a log – it loves being busy. By giving it a specific activity to do it stops jumping all over the place and begins to grow focused and quiet. Meditation, contemplation and prayer are ways of quietening the mind. Being able to access inner stillness helps develop clarity of thinking.

In terms of the method, the choice is yours; however, it is very important that you make it a habit to have a quiet time and clear your mind before each and every one coaching session. By doing so you will make your mind fully available to the client and his needs.

A simple 15 minutes meditation to try:

- *Find a comfortable place to sit.*
- *Take a deep breath and focus on your natural breathing.*
- *Silently repeat “in” and “out” with each in and out breath.*
- *Be aware of your body – observe without judgment.*
- *Allow thoughts to come and let them go.*

Another way to clear your own inner space is to keep a journal, where you can write your own visions, plans and ideas for the future. You record how you feel, your successes and disappointments. There are no rules as to what a journal should contain and you could include your values, your goals and the key people in your life. There are many benefits from keeping a journal, not least that it can provide a useful reference if you want to pick up on past ideas. However, in creating space, keeping a journal has its value in giving you the opportunity to unload your personal emotions. When you write something you would rather forget, you might find it useful to draw a line through it to denote it as a finished business.

Consider purchasing a journal, with a look and feel that appeals to you and start keeping one.

Rule 6

Having created space in ourselves, we are better placed to assist in creating it for a client. Allowing the client to unload their thoughts, feelings and emotions does it. Showing that we are listening, but not immediately responding enables this to happen. When the client stop speaking and we suspect they need to say more, we can gently prompt them by acknowledging and asking how they feel about the situation.

Knowing when and how to respond is a skill which is learned with practice. A good guide which can be used in any communication is “the three seconds rule”. Once the speaker has stopped, wait for three seconds before you reply, to see if they have really finished. Often a pause will encourage the speaker to continue, and in coaching the last few words might be the most illuminating.

Personal Exercise 3

Practice the three second rule.

Different types of listening

Some different ways that we may be listening are identified below:

Active listening:

An active listener is attentive and fully engaged, shows interest and keeps up with the conversation. They ask questions and clarify points which help them to understand.

Intolerant listening:

The intolerant listener doesn't give the speaker much time. They already think they know what is going to be said, or want to have their say, and consequently they jump to conclusions and keep interrupting.

Subconscious listening:

The subconscious listener is able to sense what is not being said and to get the "feel" of the conversation.

Non-listening:

A non-listener just hears the words which go over his head. This is summed up by the phrase "in one ear and out the other".

Emphatic listening:

An emphatic listener views understanding of the topic from the speaker's point of view. They use reflective statements like "you feel that..." to indicate that they are interpreting the deeper emotions behind the words.

Positive listening:

A positive listener responds by giving encouragement, using supportive statements, making encouraging noises like "ah" and using the appropriate body language. They acknowledge success and give praise, making the speaker feel motivated and inspired.

Different levels of listening

Listening is a skill which we all possess in some measure, but it is essential for a coach to develop this skill to the highest possible level. To gain a greater understanding and awareness it is useful to consider listening at different levels.

Level 1 – Internal listening

At level 1 the focus is on oneself. The conversation is listened to and interpreted in terms of what it means to you. Level 1 is commonly used in everyday life, to make arrangements, to gather information. While listening at this level, your self-talk is very active.

A coach would talk at this level with their client when dealing with the practicalities of the coaching session. For example, in booking the next session you might ask what time is convenient. The reply is for your information, your attention is on your diary and how the time suggested will be convenient to you. Your self-talk might be saying don't fit the session in if there is not really time between appointments.

The listening in a Level 1 conversation relates to oneself, rather than the speaker and clearly is not the level for a coaching session.

Level 2 – Focused listening

At level 2, the focus is on speaker. Occasionally, you will see people engrossed in a conversation, leaning forward, fully attentive. However, focused listening is not practiced very much in everyday life as it takes time and effort to listen in this way.

As a coach, this is the level at which you would generally listen in a coaching session, with all the focus on the client and your mind concentrated on their words, tone and body language (if coaching face-to-face). All the information being conveyed to you is being noticed – the expression, the emotion, the energy. In addition, you become aware of how the client responds to your input. Listening in this way enables the coach to get a real understanding of the client's perception, and the client to feel really understood.

The impact of level 2 listening in on speaker and this is the most frequently used level for a coaching session.

Level 3 – Global listening

At level 3 the focus is on the speaker as part of the wider environment. Global listening is a type of interaction not generally used, being recognized by relatively few. It requires "listening at 360 degrees" to everything available using intuition, outside stimuli, feeling emotion, and sensing signals. It is the kind of listening that a performer engages in when responding to the feel of an audience.

A coach would use level 3 listening to take in what cannot necessarily be seen, heard or verbalized but what can be received from the world around. The listener trusts their senses, "goes with the flow" and responds in the way that seems appropriate. In a coaching session you should be switching between Level 2 and Level 3 listening.

Developing qualities of a good listener

Everyone has listening skills – the difference is the level to which they are developed. Some people are more naturally gifted with listening skills; however, they can be learned by anyone.

The qualities of a good listener are as follows:

Respect

A coach listens with respect to what a client has to say. Even if slightly bored, or thinking that we have heard it all before or if they contradict what we know or believe to be true, we have to listen with respect, because whatever is being said at that moment might be important to the speaker.

Genuine interest

When we are listening to a client we take the “role” of a coach but coaching is not an acting part! A coach needs to demonstrate to their client that they are for real. A good listener shows that he is really interested; he really cares and is really committed to their client.

Empathy

Seeing the world through the speaker’s eyes, means to “feel with” the person, rather than “feel like” them. Coaching is about listening from the client’s perspective. When a client knows that the coach understands at this level, they are much more likely to continue and take the conversation to deeper levels.

Clarity

We may listen to our clients expressing all sorts of vague notions and ideas. They may come to us not knowing what they want; indeed the first thing that clients often need help with is formulating their goals. A good listener is able to clarify vague and muddled ideas and help the speaker to be more specific. A good coach shows clarity in his or her own thinking.

Articulation

A good listener will be able to reflect back the essence of the conversation, to succinctly describe the situation. In doing this, the coach is feeding back to the client what they have said. This alone often helps the client to see the situation differently. For example, it may enable a client to see an unwanted truth. Good articulation is a way of confirming that both coach and client understand each other.

Immediacy

Understanding of the dynamics of the conversation, knowing where you are at a particular point requires practice. It is how you know when to ask another question or leave it; how you sense that you are going round in circles. A coach has a sense of immediacy – a continuous awareness of what is happening in the conversation.

The importance of silence and interrupting

In ordinary conversation a period of silence is usually uncomfortable – there is a tendency to fill gaps. In a coaching conversation, however, silence is natural – there is no pressure, the coach is there to listen when the coach is ready.

Silence enables uninterrupted thinking time. It allows the client to make new connections in their mind and can lead to new thinking patterns. As a listener there are many ways to interpret silence. The client may have become distracted or bored or may be in a reflective mood, feel depressed or disinterested. Silence following a question may suggest thoughtfulness, lack of understanding, that the client is stuck for the answer, or even a choice not to respond.

In a different situation, some clients might talk continuously. They may have good reason in that they need to unload information and emotions, maybe the subject is long and complicated and they someone to tell. Equally, the client may be trying to avoid considering the issue, trying to impress you or they feel uneasy about silence, none of which is going to help them to move forward.

A coach needs to be careful before interrupting, because what sometime might seem as irrelevant can be a roundabout way of the client getting to what they need to say. A coach acts as a guide and decides whether they are listening to aimless rambling and repetition or whether there is any positive benefit likely to come from allowing the client to continue. If not, then we intervene. The easiest way to do this is to establish rules prior to commencing coaching which permit us to interrupt, to stop them, and then we can ask a new question.

Special attention

There are a few elements in coaching, indirectly connected to listening, which I have to mention here.

Recognizing emotions/feelings

Emotions and feelings are unique to the individual. It is easy to make ourselves understood when we talk about material objects and ideas because anyone can relate to them. However, words are inadequate to describe feelings, because we don't know if the listener understands the meaning in the same way that we do. Sometimes the right words may not exist to describe an emotion or a feeling that we have experienced. Not everyone is used to articulating their feelings and some clients will find this more difficult than the others. A good coach will engage in Level 2 or Level 3 listening so that they can hear what is not said.

Listening allows us to sense a whole array of emotions – fear, love, anger, gratitude, frustration, etc., without the client necessarily having to try to verbalize. It is not necessary for the client to say that they are frustrated about a particular issue, this can be conveyed in lots of ways – shouting, tears, resigned tone, etc.

Interpretation of what we hear is crucial, therefore always try and consciously become aware and observe the emotions/feelings in a conversation.

Recognizing underlying beliefs

Our underlying beliefs determine how we think and feel about ourselves and these will limit or encourage our subsequent behaviors. Listening to how a client presents a situation gives clues as to how they think and feel, and “where they are coming from”. Identifying an underlying belief such as “nothing goes right for me” or “I am no good” helps a coach to understand how the client perceives his world. This is explored in more detail later in the course.

Recognizing boundaries

As with all professions, coaching has its limitations. You may have used all your skills as a listener but still feel the client is making no progress. It may be that there is another approach, and you could seek assistance from a more senior coach.

If you are dealing with a client who is “stuck” in the past, they may be better consulting a therapist. A distraught client might indicate a need for counseling.

During a coaching session the coach or the client may realize that help is needed from another professional. It is our duty as coaches to recognize the boundaries of our own competencies.

In conclusion, we can see that listening is a key skill in successful coaching. When people are listened to, they feel they matter, that what they feel and think is important. This is a solid foundation on which to build a coaching relationship which aims to encourage and support clients to move forward in their lives.

Post Modular Assignments

1. Explain the significance of “inner space” to the coaching process and assess the effectiveness of 3 methods of creating your inner space. (around 300 words).
2. Explain the key characteristics of Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 listening and how they relate to effective coaching practice. Consider the different types of listening and evaluate three types that would represent each of the levels of listening. (around 1000 words).
3. Explain the key qualities involved in being a good listener and their contribution to effective communication. Identify and analyze three possible barriers to effective listening and how to overcome these. (around 850 words).
4. Analyze and evaluate three occasions:
 - a) when and how it may be appropriate to interrupt a client;
 - b) when the use of silence is appropriate(around 550 words)

Recommended reading

1. Long A., Listening
2. Mackay I., Listening Skills
3. Downey M., Effective Coaching