AN INTRODUCTION TO COACHING SKILLS
A PRACTICAL GUIDE
SECOND EDITION
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SAGE
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In this chapter, we will consider the first of the coaching skills as we prepare to work through all three elements shown in Figure 3.1. This chapter is supported by video clips of these skills being demonstrated during live coaching sessions. Some of you may wish to read about the skill first, and then watch the videos. Others may find it useful to do this the other way round. Either will work!

**WHY LISTENING IS AN IMPORTANT SKILL**

Most of us use the skill of listening almost every day of our lives. What is different about listening for the purposes of coaching? Whereas we normally use our skills of conversational listening to understand what others are saying, in coaching it is important to listen in a way
that encourages the coachee to think more deeply and talk more openly. The ultimate aims of
this kind of effective listening are that people enjoy speaking to the coach; that coachees are
able to think better; and that coachees feel that they can be honest. Watch Video 3.2 which
shows how the coachee can realise something about themselves just by talking to someone
who is listening intently to them.

Find out more

This concept is best captured by Nancy Kline in *Time to Think* (1999). This book will provide
you with an in-depth appreciation of the power of listening in coaching conversations.

What about you?

Think back to a time when you were talking about something that was of genuine interest to
you but the person you were speaking to was obviously distracted or not listening. How did
that impact on what you were saying?

Often, poor quality listening can actually diminish the ability of the speaker to think clearly
and convey her message. If it seems to us that the person we are speaking to is uninterested,
we start to doubt the value of what we are saying. Fortunately, the opposite is also true. If
people listen to us genuinely and attentively, we feel more confident about our topic and are
able to think about and discuss it more fluently.

Story from practice

When I deliver training on coaching skills, I like to run a short activity on the power of active
listening. Participants are asked to work in pairs. One person in the pair is asked to think about
a hobby or topic of interest and the other person is given a ‘listening card’. The card instructs
the participant to listen in a certain way. There is a range of different cards: ‘active listening’,
‘attentive listening’, ‘less attentive listening’ and ‘not listening’. The ‘active listening’ card asks
the participant to use her best listening skills, using positive affirmations, nodding and appro-
priate body language. The ‘not listening’ card instructs the participant to doodle on a piece of
paper, interrupt the other person by asking seemingly irrelevant questions, jump in with her
own experiences (e.g. ‘that happened to me, too! In my case …’) and look out of the window
or otherwise seem distracted.
I am uncomfortable when I facilitate this activity because it can feel very disempowering and demotivating for the person who is partnered with someone with the ‘not listening’ card. The reason I continue to use this activity is because it can show so powerfully the difference between ‘active listening’ and ‘not listening’ for the person being listened to. Invariably, those who were listened to will feel positive and enthusiastic about their topic and will have enjoyed the chance to talk about it. On the other hand, those who experienced talking to someone with the ‘not listening’ card will have had a negative experience. Many participants report literally ‘losing their voice’ or feeling that their topic is ‘boring’ or ‘silly’. The difference between the experiences is extreme. Coaching is all about active listening which makes a coachee feel as if she has been heard, that she is intelligent and that her topic is interesting.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF OUR LISTENING?

There are three key ways in which a person can enhance her listening skills: by learning some techniques that will demonstrate active listening; by becoming familiar with the concept of ‘levels of listening’; and by embracing curiosity. In this chapter, we will consider the techniques and levels of listening. Curiosity will be discussed in Chapter 14 (‘Being human’).

TECHNIQUES

At a superficial level, coaches need to ensure that they look like they are listening to their clients. These techniques may already be familiar to you and they are useful in many aspects of our lives. This chapter will present a few ways to demonstrate that we are listening. If you do these already, that is great – please continue to do so. If not, think about the value of adopting such techniques. As with any new skills, it will be necessary to practise these techniques. To coach effectively, it is not sufficient to look as if you are listening. You must actually be interested in what the coachee is saying.

Stay quiet

The most important difference about listening for the purposes of coaching is that the coach should stay quiet. For a variety of reasons, our society affords us little opportunity to be genuinely listened to. Often, a conversation is more like a battle for ‘airtime’. It may be an exaggeration to say that we spend most of our time in conversations ‘waiting for our turn to
PART II – KEY SKILLS

speak, but it can sometimes feel that way. If we start to plan how to respond to what the speaker is saying while she is still talking, this means that we have diverted some of our attention away from listening.

In coaching conversations, there are a number of things that we should stop doing.

a. Completing sentences

When coaching, it is better to allow the coachee time to complete her own sentences. If the coachee is starting to think differently or see things from another perspective, it is normal that she will pause as she is talking, even in the middle of sentences. As coaches, we must control our (usually well-intentioned) impulses to finish the sentences of our coachees. For example, a half-finished sentence such as ‘I don’t know … there are times that this work gets so difficult, and there’s just so little reward, I wonder whether to just …’ can be completed in so many different ways. But coaches should avoid the trap of attempting to demonstrate empathy by finishing such sentences for the coachee, e.g. ‘retire early?’ There are numerous reasons why this would be unhelpful. First, it is often important for the coachee to struggle with the sentences for herself. If the idea of early retirement has been problematic in the past, the coachee saying it herself is very important so that she can experience what it feels like to say it out loud. Second, you will have necessarily made an assumption about what the coachee was going to say. There are dual risks here. We can offend the coachee by making a derogatory assumption (as in the example noted here, especially if the coachee did not consider herself to be of retirement age). On the other hand, the coachee may not feel able to contradict the coach, and therefore an element of confusion is introduced. It can also be considered disrespectful to interrupt. Finally, we may be missing out on some insightful comments or realisations from the coachee.

b. Guessing at difficult words

Another temptation that may be perfectly acceptable in everyday conversation is providing suggestions for words that speakers seem to find difficult. This inclination is particularly unhelpful in coaching and should be avoided. To want to help a speaker to find exactly the right word is perfectly natural. But in coaching, the selection of words is critical. So we should encourage the coachee to come up with those words for herself. This applies even when the coachee asks ‘What’s the word?’ or you are speaking to someone for whom English is an additional language. The choice of word, especially when it requires some hard thinking, is particularly important. As a coach, it is desirable to wait until the word has been selected. Usually it is worth unpicking why that particular word was chosen, and this can often be quite interesting for the coachee. If the coach simply says, for example, ‘the word you’re looking for is “dichotomy”,’ many coaching opportunities are lost and the coachee may not feel fully listened to. Doing this also suggests
impatience, when the coach should be demonstrating respect. The coachee should feel that she
can have as much time as she wants to explore her topic. Videos 3.3 and 3.4 highlight the impor-
tance of meaningful words in coaching conversations.

c. Comparing ourselves

Again, this happens in normal conversations all the time. This is the ‘it happened to me’
scenario. In a two-way conversation, this can have a positive effect as it keeps the conversation
moving between both parties. In coaching, it is less welcome because it takes the focus of the
discussion off the coachee and onto the coach. The purpose of the coaching session is to give
the coachee thinking and speaking time. For example, if a coachee says ‘it was three weeks
before I met my line manager’, it might be very tempting for her coach to reply with ‘Yes, I
know how that works. It was the same for me. Mind you, I wasn’t too bothered …’, etc. This
may seem to be an effective way of demonstrating empathy, but what in fact happens is that
the conversation turns to focus on you, as a coach, instead of the coachee, where the focus
must remain at all times. When you are being coached, take advantage of this situation! When
you are the coach, note any thoughts like this but do not compare yourself. If it is necessary
or helpful to inform the coachee that you have been in a similar situation, keep it very brief.
Using the example above, ‘I had a similar experience. How did that make you feel?’ is suffi-
cient. In other words, share the fact that you have had a similar experience if you think that
this information will be helpful for the coachee, and then turn the focus back on the coachee's
experience of the situation.

d. Competing with the coachee

This is probably unhelpful in any conversation. This refers to comments that are intended to
show that you are better, or that you have had an even more amazing experience, than the
speaker. Referring back to the example above: ‘Three weeks? I don't think I met my manager
for well over a year!’ Such comments minimise the experience of the other person, and there-
fore have no place in a coaching conversation.

e. Doodling

While some people would argue that they are able to listen better when they doodle, it is not
conducive to good listening in coaching conversations. This allows us to consider a very
important point of principle when it comes to coaching. As important as listening attentively
to the coachee is the need to demonstrate that you are listening. Both must be happening.
So, even if a coach may feel that she *does* listen better when she doodles, the issue is that it may not be perceived that way by the coachee.

**Story from practice**

At one point in my professional life, I had a manager who used to ask me to talk to her while she was typing emails: ‘Talk to me. I can listen to you while I respond to this email.’ Even if she did have this amazing ability to type and listen at the same time, my perception was that she was not focusing on what I had to say. In turn, this meant that I was less able to express myself.

**f. Looking at other things**

As we will discuss later, the use of eye contact is very important in coaching. Therefore, looking over the coachee's shoulder to see what is going on in the corridor, or noticing an unusual aircraft through the window, is unhelpful. However discreetly you do this, it is very likely that the coachee will notice. Avoid being distracted by other visual cues. Noticing something outside the window, inspecting your fingernails or looking with interest at a piece of furniture will get in the way of good listening.

**Story from practice**

As a coach, to minimise visual distractions I tend to sit in a way that means that I am facing the wall. Coachees are less easily distracted, especially as they are likely to be thinking and talking for most of the coaching session. If they are engaged and interested in what they are talking about, they will not notice people outside (even if the room has a glass wall).

In order to keep an eye on time, I place my watch between us somewhere very obvious, so that there is no need to glance in other directions. Another way of doing this is to look at the coachee's watch, although you will need to develop your ability to read the time upside down!

**g. Fidgeting**

Become aware of any unintentional fidgeting that you may do. The best way of discovering these is to film yourself coaching. Most people do not really know what it looks like when they are coaching. Minor behaviours, such as drumming fingers, clicking pens and twiddling thumbs, can be distracting, and may also suggest to the coachee that the coach is bored or impatient.
ACTIVITY

Try going to your local coffee shop on your own. While enjoying your drink, observe others. Who is actively listening? How can you tell? Can you notice mirroring of body language? In other words, are both people leaning towards each other? Is one person obviously listening to the other? What can you tell about the relationship just by noticing body language? Make notes in your learning journal.

So, for coaching, there should be a different dynamic from everyday conversations. It should not have a back-and-forth feel. Rather, it is more like one person talking and the other person listening. Coaches recommend a ratio of 20/80 or even 10/90 of the coach speaking. So it is natural for this to feel unfamiliar at first because social conversations tend to work best at 50/50 or 40/60. Take a few moments to watch Video 3.5 ‘Coach listening actively, coachee allowed to think’ and Video 3.6 ‘Coach demonstrates active listening’.

SNAPSHOT   Listening as a coach

Figure 3.2  Time spent talking in an effective coaching conversation

ACTIVITY   Twenty words

Practise limiting the amount of time you speak. Find a person who will appreciate being listened to. Start by telling them that you are curious about them or their experiences.

(Continued)
Challenge yourself by allocating yourself only 20 words in the conversational interaction. If you only allow yourself 20 words in a conversation, you'll have to be very careful about how you use them! See what impact this has on the person who is speaking. After completing this exercise, note your reflections in your learning journal.

**Purposeful listening**

When coaching, we listen with a different purpose. We want to allow the coachee an opportunity to speak, or to have a voice. Coaches must focus on listening *for meaning*. The purpose is to respectfully understand the situation or experience of the coachee. Being respectful entails being interested and open to a person's experiences. Especially important is the idea of not 'knowing' the other person's experiences or 'what it’s like'. Understanding the situation is not the coach’s primary purpose. As discussed above, the aim is to enhance the coachee’s ability to think well and deeply about the topic that she has brought to a coaching session.

**Maintaining eye contact**

It is important to show a keen interest in what the coachee is saying by maintaining appropriate eye contact. Once you start to intentionally manage your eye contact, you may find that this is more complex than you initially imagined. This is because different cultures and social classes have different expectations regarding eye contact. Coaches need to have an understanding of different cultural and social norms in order to ensure that they are providing sufficient eye contact to communicate respect and interest in what their coachees are saying.

**Keeping open body language**

Your body position can also transmit subtle messages about how open you are to what another person is saying to you. Coachees may start the early coaching sessions with closed body language, as they may be slightly defensive. Body language will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 10. For now, it is helpful to note that open body language invites the coachee to share more of what she is thinking.
What about you?

How do you sit when you are most comfortable? Even if you are comfortable in that position, how might others interpret it?

Matching and mismatching levels of energy

Coaches need to manage their levels of energy in relation to the coachee. For example, if a coachee is very excitable and drawn in many directions, it may be helpful for the coach to be less excited, perhaps showing more calmness. On the other hand, if the coachee is very sedate and quiet when trying to generate new ideas, it may be helpful for the coach to be a bit more energetic. Usually, in the first part of the coaching conversation, it is helpful to match the coachee's level of energy because it is a good way of building rapport. In the latter part of the coaching conversation, the coach may sometimes try to counterbalance the coachee's level of energy. How loudly a coachee speaks may give an indication of her levels of energy. This also applies to the coach. Watch Video 3.7 to see how a coach is able to match the energy and mood of the coachee.

What about you?

How loudly do you speak in most situations? If you consistently speak loudly or very softly, be aware of the implications of this in a coaching session. A very softly-spoken coach will bring a sense of calmness and relaxation to a coaching session. A coach who is boisterous will bring excitement and energy. A good coach needs to be able to vary this based on the best interests of the coachee. It is a good idea to aim to end the coaching conversation on a positive, upbeat and high energy note.

Seating arrangement

This may seem like a detail but the arrangement and choice of seating can imply more than first meets the eye. How people sit during a coaching conversation can influence how the conversation progresses. Ideally, there should be no physical obstacles between coach and coachee. But it is also important to ensure that each person has enough ‘personal space’ for herself. As a matter of principle, coaches and coachees should consider themselves to be equal. For this reason, coach and coachee should be sitting on the same type of chair. When
one person sits on a grand leather office chair and the other person is sitting on a plastic stool, there can be no equality. If you would like to introduce any activities, it may be helpful to have a table nearby.

### Story from practice

When delivering a training session for coaches, two colleagues from a multinational communications organisation came to me to share a concern. We had been talking about the need to respect ‘personal space’. While both people worked for the same organisation, one was based in Northern Europe and the other in South East Asia. The question related to the ideal distance between coach and coachee. The two colleagues had very different views about the importance of ‘personal space’ and they were wondering how to manage this. This has left me curious, and I am wondering whether the very concept of ‘personal space’ is culturally specific. However, when in doubt, it is always best practice in coaching to align with the preference of the coachee.

### Encouraging nods and sounds

Encouraging noises and words like ‘uh-huh’, ‘go on’, ‘oh, I see’ show the coachee that you are listening and interested in what she has to say. When used in the natural gaps in a person’s speech, it can also reinforce the fact that you will not be interrupting – allowing the other person to take her time explaining something or exploring an idea. Watch Video 3.8 to see how you might listen to the coachee in an encouraging and non-judgemental way.

### How to manage silences

Silences are a key feature of good coaching conversations. Often, silences precede important realisations by the coachee (and the coach). This will be discussed later in Chapter 15 (‘Inspiring others’). However, this can be at odds with social norms. Social etiquette in many cultures suggests that it is polite to keep conversations going by filling silences. A gap in a conversation can seem awkward and uncomfortable, and even though we may not be aware of it, many of us have techniques and strategies for filling these silences.

In coaching, silences are desirable. First, they can create ‘thinking time’ for the coachee. Second, allowing a coachee time to reflect quietly without interruption can demonstrate respect. Finally, silences encourage a deeper and more meaningful conversation. So silences can build serenity into a conversation. They can also demonstrate your respect for the other person by showing that ‘silences are OK’. You are, in effect, saying that you will
view the coachee positively whether or not she has anything to say. Video 3.9 shows a good example of how silence can be used to encourage the coachee to take responsibility. In Video 3.10, the coach uses silence to give the coachee time to reflect.

First step: Notice when silences occur

Normally, our alarm system kicks in. In normal, day-to-day situations, silences are perceived as ‘awkward’ or ‘uncomfortable’. (The only exception seems to be when we are in elevators when such silences are expected!) Many of us are socially conditioned to be alert for potential silences in conversations. In the first instance, do your best to notice when these silences occur, accepting that they may be a normal part of a coaching conversation.

Second step: Do not implement the emergency procedure

Once a silence descends, it is tempting for a novice coach to blurt out a follow-up question to relieve the perceived tension. However, silence following a question may indicate that the coachee has been encouraged to think carefully. Remember, we are listening to encourage new thinking. So, in a sense, silence following a question is likely to be an indication that you have asked a very good, thought-provoking question. Stated differently, if the coachee is able to answer a question immediately, this may suggest that she did not need to think or contemplate anything new before answering.

We will discuss the skill of ‘asking powerful questions’ in the next chapter. Sometimes a coachee’s question can pose a dilemma for the coach. Coachees often ask ‘Do you know what I mean?’ or ‘Can you see where I’m coming from?’ When a coach is actively listening to a coachee, this question can be challenging to answer. On the one hand, we know that it is important to build rapport with the coachee. From that point of view, it would make sense to say ‘Yes, I know exactly what you mean.’ However, although most of us would feel encouraged by such a response, it also negates the need for the coachee to explain further. Our main intention is to get the coachee to speak as much as possible.

Story from practice

In my own experience, clients have often realised something significant only when they have spoken it out loud. For example, one client said ‘I didn’t realise why I was so annoyed about this relationship until just now.’ So, on the one hand it is important for us to maintain rapport, (Continued)
but also important not to assume that we ‘get’ what the client is saying before they have described the situation fully.

As mentioned above, it is tricky if the coachee asks ‘Do you know what I mean?’ or a similar question. Below are a few answers that I have given:

- ‘What you’ve said so far makes sense. Please carry on.’
- ‘I think I’m getting a picture of what it’s like. Tell me more.’
- ‘It’s becoming clearer …’ [followed by a brief summary of what the coachee has said so far].

Here is an example conversation:

Coachee: I don’t know if I’ve explained that very well …
Coach: Take your time.
Coachee: I’m not making any sense, am I?
Coach: I think it’s worth exploring.
Coachee: I can’t explain how I feel about this.
Coach: Could you try?
Coachee: It feels like a muddle. I’m in a maze. Do you know what I mean?
Coach: It’s becoming a bit clearer. So, it feels like a muddle to you?
Coachee: Yes, that’s the right word. It’s a bit of a muddle. On the one hand, I feel that I should be grateful for the opportunity. But on the other, I feel that this work should be recognised by the organisation. That’s probably the real issue.

In all cases, silences from the coach will show that it is OK for the coachee not to be able to articulate what she is thinking straight away. We are aiming for increased self-awareness and perhaps the ability of the coachee to see her situation from a different perspective.

LEVELS OF LISTENING

In an influential book about coaching and mentoring, Hawkins and Smith (2006) identify four levels of listening which are helpful to consider here.

1. ‘Attending’

At this level, the coach would give the coachee her ‘full and undivided’ attention (p. 213). This includes focusing on the coachee and giving the appropriate non-verbal signals that the coach is interested in what the coachee has to say.
2. ‘Accurate listening’

To listen accurately, the coach must not only be fully attentive but also be able to reflect back the content of what the coachee has said, either directly or by paraphrasing. Matching the language or sensory modes used (e.g. ‘I feel’ or ‘I see’) can demonstrate accurate listening to the coachee.

3. ‘Empathic listening’

This type of listening builds on the previous two levels. According to Hawkins and Smith, ‘this involves listening not only to the words being spoken, but also to the feelings being conveyed’ (p. 213). Listening in this way means that the coach is able to acknowledge the feelings of the coachee and reflect these back to her.

4. ‘Generative empathic listening’

This is the highest level of listening identified by Hawkins and Smith. At this level, the coach is ‘able to play back the thoughts and feelings that are on the periphery’ of the coachee’s awareness (p. 214). In some cases, the coach can pick up a sense, a feeling or thought that the coachee may not be fully aware of herself.

**What about you?**

Take a moment to reflect on how you are listened to on most days. What level of listening is most common in your everyday life? When are you listened to at level 3 or level 4? What does it feel like when you are listened to in that way?

When you are listening to others, what is the level of listening that you use most often?

Are there certain situations when level 1 listening is helpful? Write a few lines in your learning journal about how you currently listen to others.

To be an effective coach, it is necessary to be able to work at the first three levels identified by Hawkins and Smith (2006). Level 1 listening (being fully attentive) and level 2 listening (hearing what the coachee has said and being able to reflect this back accurately) are essential for every coaching session. At these levels, the coachee will feel that you have listened to her and that you have been able to understand what she has said. Often level 3 listening
(empathic listening) can be a powerful experience for the coachee. Not only has the coach been attentive, and heard what the coachee has said but she has also picked up the emotions and non-verbal communications of the coachee. As novice coaches, developing and practising level 3 listening is an important part of your development.

Level 4 listening is a more challenging concept. This requires much more intuition and can be risky. At level 4, the coach is able to sense feelings and thoughts that are just on the edge of a person's awareness. Coaches who are able to listen at this level report that they get a 'gut feeling' or a 'sense' that there is something that is not being said. For experienced coaches, it is sometimes worth the risk of sharing this feeling or sense with the coachee to see whether this resonates with her. However, this level of listening is not essential for effective coaching, and it is not recommended for novice coaches.

We have considered some techniques and different levels of listening. Hopefully, you now have an enhanced appreciation of the importance of listening to encourage thinking. One could argue that good listening is at the heart of effective coaching and that good listeners make excellent coaches. Practice is the best way of developing this skill. We will now proceed to a closely related skill: asking powerful questions.

**Website**

To access additional online resources please visit: [https://study.sagepub.com/coachingskills2e](https://study.sagepub.com/coachingskills2e).

Here you will find a summary of this chapter, relevant videos and activities.