



THE FIVE LEVELS OF LISTENING



Listening is probably the first coaching skill that any prospective coach or manager learns, and yet it is often the one that is least used, even by competent coaches, as it becomes buried under an avalanche of more sophisticated tools and techniques. The reason for this is perhaps that most of us like to do rather than observe; from the time we are small children playing party games, we want it to be 'our turn'. Using the coaching techniques of asking questions, repeating words back or even suggesting our own solutions, is sometimes easier than concentrating hard on what another person has to say, without any interruption.

The power of giving someone 'a good listening to' cannot be underestimated. In fact, many people will coach themselves more effectively when allowed to talk unhindered. The value then of having a coach is that the coach's attention focuses the coachee's mind. Trying to think through important issues on our own is quite difficult, as we tend to find that we have somehow started thinking about our shopping list, or a family discussion, or some other issue. Then, just as we are gaining some depth into that issue, something else takes over. Our minds seem reluctant to explore and will seize on any distraction to avoid it; whereas having an intent listener hanging on to our every word makes it seem almost rude to veer towards another subject after we have declared it our intention to focus on one particular topic.

During several years of doing oral assessments, I have noticed subtle habits that tend to get in the way of good listening, like nodding too frequently, or saying the same word after every

phrase of the coachee's. The commonest of these is 'OK'. In coaching this is not a great response as it implies finality – 'OK, we've dealt with that, let's move on'.

Another is 'excellent'. Once in a while this works well for motivating the coachee, providing some welcome positive feedback. However, it is all too often used when there is nothing particularly excellent at all about what has been said, and in these cases the speaker tends not to even be aware that he or she is using the word. For the coachee, the authenticity of the whole session is reduced.

Variations on this are frequent interjections like 'uh huh', 'right' and 'mm hmm', particularly distracting when they interrupt a sentence.

Occasional use of all these responses is fine, and can demonstrate that the coach is listening; it is mindless repetition which we must avoid. Strangely, the coach is not usually aware of the habit at all, so it is always worth asking coachees for feedback from time to time.

In all the above cases, what would be more appropriate when a response is needed is either to mirror back or paraphrase what the person has said, or - and quite often this is the best option - just be quiet, keep one's eyes on the coachee, and wait for the coachee to finish the particular train of thought.

I have identified five levels of listening. You can see that in the diagram above, levels four and five are on a par. Level five without level four is not really listening at all:

Level One: Interrupting

Not only not listening, but not even allowing the person to finish:

'I think we should arrange a staff meeting about that and ...'

'Yes, but did you know there's going to be a rail strike tomorrow?'

Have you ever felt that someone was simply waiting for your lips to stop moving, so that they can say their piece? This is a variation on Level One Listening.

Level Two: Hijacking

Stealing the agenda by telling the speaker what happened when you had a similar experience:

'I am having some difficulty being heard in meetings'

'I find that too. Last month I...'

At least here the speaker has heard what the listener said. But just like level 1, the speaker has taken the ball and run with it, stealing the agenda. Do you know anyone who does this? Do you ever do it yourself?

Level Three: Advising

Giving advice can be valuable, but not until you have explored the issue and encouraged people to come up with their own solutions.

'I want to win a new account'

'What you should do is ...'

One of the reasons why it is not a good idea to give advice too early on is because you may not understand the full background to the statement. There may be all sorts of reasons why the speaker cannot win the new account and the solution you offer may be irrelevant.

Another reason is that on the whole people do not like following advice, and one of the causes of this is that a perfectly reasonable solution for you may not suit someone else's values, or learning or performance style.

Level Four: Attentive Listening

Listening to what the speaker is saying and inviting more. Allow the speaker time to think, and show you are listening by looking at the speaker.

'I'm not sure how to restructure my department.'

'Would you like to tell me more about that?'

What a luxury it is when someone simply asks to hear more, and how rarely does it happen, both at home and at work?

Level Five: Active Listening

Listening behind the words and between the words; listening to the silences; using your intuition; prompting the coachee to explore; facilitating the coachee's self learning and awareness; making suggestions – this is coaching:

'I really must get my report written but there's never any time. I'm rushing around like a mad hatter and at the end of the day I don't seem to have achieved anything.'

The proficient coach uses a variety of skills in response to such a statement, primarily listening, plus reflecting words back, summarising and asking coaching questions.

Levels 2 and 3 above have their time and their place in good management, particularly in mentoring, but they cannot be termed 'listening'. These two levels may also be appropriate in normal conversation, which is often a process of trading information and ideas. It is useful to be aware of where we are in the five levels during any exchange, so we can consciously decide which to use. In a coaching session, we should almost always be in Levels 4 and 5; however, in a social situation Level 2 may be more comfortable for all parties, and Level 3 is sometimes useful, particularly when someone has come to us specifically for advice.

Most coaches are happy to give advice in a coaching session where it seems useful. However, it is usually couched as a suggestion, for which permission is first requested, and not until the coachee has run dry of his or her own ideas.

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