



To bring our coaching skills services into your workplace, and for all your global change, coaching, mentoring, and leadership training requirements, visit us at [www.coachingcultureatwork.com](http://www.coachingcultureatwork.com)

---

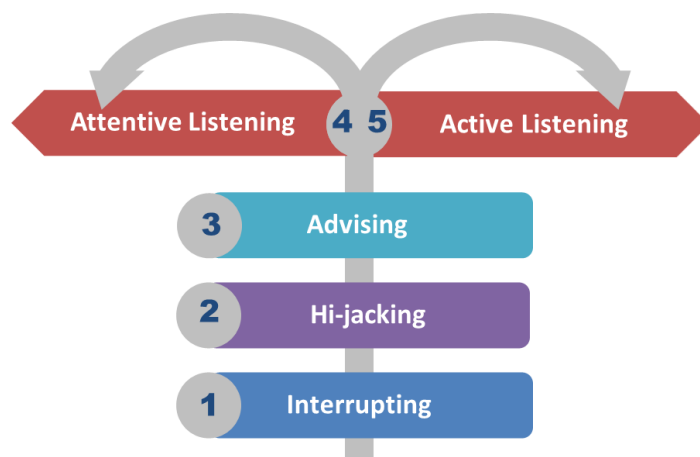
# COACHING CONCEPTS

After 20 years of training people to coach, I sometimes catch myself assuming that everyone knows the basics. Yet many leaders are still unfamiliar with these skills, and others have drifted away from them. This is the first of a series of articles intended as a refresher to all of those who have trained with us, and for anyone new to coaching.

Where shall we start? With Listening, of course, the cornerstone of coaching.

## The Five Levels of Listening

I like breaking things down into simple, jargon-free steps. One of my first discoveries in coaching was that most of us are not listening when we think we are. I defined it with this 5-step ladder:



---

## Level 1

- “I’d like to be promoted, but I’m struggling with...”
- *“You won’t believe who I just saw!”*

Have you ever been in a meeting when people talk over you? It could be with one person or 50. How did it feel? It’s more than just rude: most people develop their thoughts by speaking out loud, and the fear of interruption shuts that down. When people stop thinking, it’s a loss for them, their leader, and their organisation.

## Level 2

- “I’d like to be promoted, but I’m struggling with finding the time to study for the exams.”
- *“I have the same problem. I tried setting aside Friday mornings, but then urgent stuff kept coming in. So then I ...”*

We call this ‘hijacking the conversation’ (coined by James Wright). This must be the most common form of non-listening I hear. Hijackers think they’re empathising, but they’re not helping. (Guilty as charged myself sometimes!)

## Level 3

- “I’d like to be promoted, but I’m struggling with finding the time to study for the exams.”
- *“Try putting aside one day a week. Or just a half-day. Break it down into weekly chunks and you’ll get there.”*

Sound advice, isn’t it? But what if they juggle a full-time job and family? Advice isn’t a bad thing, but coaching is about asking questions that spark self-directed learning, not offering solutions.

## Level 4

- “I’d like to be promoted, but I’m struggling with finding the time to study for the exams.”
- *“Would you like to tell me more?”*

A nod, a pause, or echoing their words works too. Now we’re listening! Try this: pair up, let one person talk for 2 minutes while the other stays completely silent. It’s often a revelation for both sides.

## Level 5

- “I’d like to be promoted, but I’m struggling with finding the time to study for the exams.”
- “So you’re struggling to find time to study?”
- “Well, when I think about it, it’s not really the time. More the motivation that’s lacking”.

This is where the coaching gold can surface: an ‘aha’ moment where new insight emerges. It’s those unexpected breakthroughs that thrill and reward coaches and coachees alike.

So as a coach I learned to really listen. Author Nancy Kline raises listening to an art form:

*“Real help, professionally or personally, consists of listening to people, of paying respectful attention to people so that they can access their own ideas first.”*

— Nancy Kline, “Time to Think”

My next article will be about questions that unlock insights, and after that, the classic GROW framework co-created by my late and great colleague Sir John Whitmore. Go deeper with my book “[Performance Coaching](#)” or train with us individually or inhouse at [www.coachingcultureatwork.com](http://www.coachingcultureatwork.com).

## About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is also a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to facilitate change management and create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide. She has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of *'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training'*, now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, and *'The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge'*. She has contributed to six other books and published over 70 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.

---

*To bring our coaching skills services into your workplace, and for all your global coaching, mentoring, and leadership training requirements, visit us at*  
[www.coachingcultureatwork.com](http://www.coachingcultureatwork.com)