



Power Listening

The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.” (Ralph Nichols)

Have you ever wondered why everybody says they are a good listener? Is it because we place little value on this skill or is it because people see it as such a natural part of being human? Yet how many people could you say are really good listeners? You may know one or two people but that is about all. However we all see this as a skill we need to have but how much time do we spend thinking about the depth of this skill?

A powerful listener is someone who is able to focus on what another person is saying without getting distracted. A powerful listener has intense focus. A powerful listener is present in the moment of the conversation. Perhaps our reason for overlooking this skill is that it sounds so easy to achieve but in practice it is very difficult. It requires putting our own needs aside to listen to another. To achieve this requires ensuring that you are feeling great about yourself and fully aware of your needs at that moment in time. It is far better to say that you are not able to listen to someone when you can't than to pretend to be listening. This type of deception is detected immediately and any attempt at creating a trusting relationship may fail.

A person speaking needs to feel heard and also understood. They need to have a response when one is asked for. As humans the very nature of being understood and heard is connected to our sense of self worth. When you are speaking, you have something of value to say and you want to say it to contribute and to be heard. If you are not listened to or even ignored, this hits at the heart of who you are and your self esteem. Imagine if you walked around all day and no one answered you when you spoke to them. Perhaps you would start to feel as though you were invisible. Having a voice helps us to identify with our family, friends and community. It helps us to understand ourselves. Some people use conversation to gain clarity on what they are thinking. They talk to people to work through thoughts and to refine them.

Why is it that we would never say we are a good talker, but we would say we are a good

listener? Is being a good listener connected with the belief that this makes you a better person? Being a good listener may be connected to the notion of generosity – giving time to someone. Is this what makes us a good person? So on one hand we see being a good listener as being connected to being a good person but on the other hand we may not spend a great deal of time perfecting this skill.

“A little recognized value of listening and inquiring relates to the realization that in human relationships, it is frequently not what the facts are, but what people think the facts are, which is truly important. There is benefit in learning what someone else’s concept of the reality of the situation is.” (Bryan Bell)

Self Application

Sit in a quiet space and in your head count to 50. The aim of this is to see if you can actually get to 50 without your thoughts drifting off. If you can count to 50 and be focused then you are able to be present for at least one minute. Now this may seem like an incredibly short amount of time but in a conversation this is quite a long period. You can practice this skill over time to see if you can increase the number of seconds you can stay focused for.

One of the important areas to consider about being a powerful listener is to determine if you value this skill or not. Really ask yourself if it is important enough to spend many hours learning how to be a powerful listener. Also ask yourself if you value what other people have to say – do you see that other people have something to offer to your life? Are you able to listen to someone if you cannot immediately see if what they are saying is of value to you?

If you truly value powerful listening then you will enter this skill into your conscious thought and you will start to become aware of how you listen to people throughout your day. You will start to observe yourself in conversations. Bringing this level of awareness about powerful listening into your day will be the first step to increasing your skills in this incredibly important area.

Reflection

1. How would you describe yourself as a listener?
2. Write down what you value about being a powerful listener.
3. Design a plan on how you can increase your skills in being a powerful listener.
4. How do you feel when you are listened to?

Coaching Application

Coaching is a different type of conversation than those we have on a day-to-day basis. When coaching, the coach is listening intently to what the client is saying and feeling. It is not a two-way conversation as such. Rather, the focus is on and all about the client. The coach should only share personal information and stories if they pertain to and can help the client. Ask before sharing a personal story. The equation for coaching is, the coach listens 80 percent of the time and speaks 20 percent of the time. If something different is happening, you are probably not really coaching at all.

How many of us feel like we are really listened to – that people really get what we are saying? Did you know we usually only recall 50 percent of what we have heard immediately after listening to someone talk? It is little wonder that most people do not feel like they are heard.

As coaches, listening is one of the most vital services we can provide. Part of what our clients are paying us for, is to simply listen to them. Just listen. That, in itself, is powerful. “The primary purpose of listening... is to truly understand the other person’s point of view, how they think and feel and how they ‘move through the world.’” (Zeus and Skiffington, 2000) A good coach is listening for what truly inspires a client, lightens them up, excites them, frees them, and keeps them from resignation. A coach then listens for what would fulfil that inspiration, and listens for what gets in the way. Above all, a coach listens to a client as a magnificent, extraordinary person; as their greater self, and relates to them that way.

When a coach is working with a client, he or she is listening for not just what the client is saying but how they are saying it (e.g. what feelings and emotions are being expressed or withheld). Listen to the pitch, tone and rhythm of the client’s speech. A faster than usual pace and higher pitch may indicate excitement, a slow monotonous tone may indicate a lack of enthusiasm, a higher pitch and lack of ability to match breathing to speech may indicate anxiety.

The coach is also just as interested in what they are NOT saying as what they are. The client does not always tell you everything that is happening. Listen for subtle changes in voice, avoidance of questions or a change in subject. If a client starts to get aggravated or angry, you are most likely touching on something. Very gently, ask the client more questions. Let the client know what you are really hearing and ask if there is something more they want to say.

Active Listening

The practice of “active listening” has been used extensively in counselling and educational fields for over fifteen years now, although its exact origin is unknown. Even though many people believe that they understand and apply it in their life and work, to truly actively listen is harder than it at first appears. The best way to describe “active listening” is to describe what it is not. Active listening is not hearing until the other person has stopped talking so we can share our thoughts with them. Rather, active listening is truly attending to and “tuning in” to the person talking.

Most of us think we listen, yet we do not always “attend” to the person who is speaking to us. We are too busy doing other things, or thinking about things, while others are talking to us. Often times we are composing our reply in our head while the other person is talking. Our focus is on how we will reply to them, not to what they are actually saying. Other times we are entertaining judgements, opinions, or even beliefs about someone or something that is being said – while they are talking! Sometimes we forget to “live in the present moment.” Active listening is about being in the present to “tune in” every moment that is necessary.

To be an “active listener” you must develop the following skills:

Listen attentively: It is extremely difficult to receive information when your mouth is moving and making noise. Remain silent when someone speaks. This sounds simple but it is easy to say, harder to do. Even reassuring or consoling, while appropriate in non-coaching environments, can be counterproductive in a coaching relationship as this may prevent the client from telling their story. Give the speaker your complete attention. Avoid distracting behaviours, interruptions or visual stimulation. Coach from a clean desk. Keep anything distracting out of view to listen thoroughly. That space of listening honours the client genuinely.

Paraphrase: Verify what you are hearing by repeating it back in your own words. A specific example of this might be; “What I heard you say was...” When you can repeat back what the client has just said, then you let the client know you have truly heard them. The client will feel understood and welcomed by your listening. It is important, however, to only paraphrase whole concepts or major points in the conversation. If you paraphrase every small part of a conversation, it can unnecessarily slow the client down and become a tedious distraction.

The extent to which you paraphrase will also varies from client to client and from issue to issue. For example, if someone is telling you about something quite complex and hard to follow, you may want to paraphrase regularly. Also, if someone is feeling very emotional, they may need the extra support that comes from knowing that they have been really heard and understood, so they may need you to paraphrase more frequently. Knowing exactly how, when and how often to paraphrase in a conversation is a very powerful skill that can be developed through concentration and practice over time.

Check Perceptions: Checking perception is similar to paraphrasing with one important distinction. Perception checking is about feelings rather than concepts. The focus is on checking what you perceive to be the emotions that motivate the client's communication. The concern is not what the client communicated in words, as much as it is the emotion conveyed by their tone of voice.

Coaches can miss many of the emotional dimensions of a conversation if they are not listening for what is NOT being said. Consequently, they can miss what the client's personal reaction to the event is and how they really feel about it. If the feeling is missed, we lose the opportunity to sense the unique situation of the client. Feelings help us sort out data, organise it, and use it effectively as we shape and share relevant feedback. As a coach, you can reflect feelings back to the client. You may say things such as:

1. "It sounds as if you are feeling...."
2. "You seem really upset, excited, overwhelmed about...."
3. "I'm hearing a lot of emotion in your voice when you say X, can you tell me some more about that?"

Give the client the opportunity to confirm or disagree with your reflections of their feelings. This, too, will allow the client to feel truly heard.

Powerful Listening

Powerful listening builds on the principles of active listening with some additional strategies.

Waiting: Wait ten seconds before replying to what the client has just said. So often, we jump in and interrupt conversation before the person has finished speaking. Allow the client to have the space to finish their thoughts and feelings. There is an acronym that coaches sometimes use to remind themselves to wait. It is W.A.I.T. and stands for "Why Am I Talking?"

Sometimes, an extended silence will prompt the client to think more about the issue and add a detail or two. This may be important and even revealing to you as a coach, as well as to the client. Many of us, particularly those in western societies, are culturally programmed to think that silences between two people are negative. The term “awkward silence” is often used to describe periods of quiet in between conversational exchanges. There is no corresponding positive term in the English language to describe this phenomenon.

You may find that it takes time and effort to train yourself into allowing your client a few extra moments to compose their thoughts. You may also find that your clients, due to their own cultural conditioning, interpret this silence as something negative, such as not listening or not understanding what they have said. If this is the case, you may need to explain the strategy to them. Alternatively, you could begin with a standard response time when speaking with them and then slowly increase the listening wait time, over the period that you work with them.

Getting the client to say more: The more the client says, the better you can listen together. The waiting strategy alone will increase the amount of information you receive from clients and will encourage them to dig deeper into what is really going on in their lives. Using phrases such as: “Can you elaborate?” or “Is there anything else you want to say about that?” will also often support clients to explore more.

Just as clients might be conditioned into thinking silences are negative, they may also be conditioned into thinking that talking at length about themselves is somehow selfish or inappropriate. It is important to disabuse them of this notion and to remind them that coaching is about them. People will often stop talking before they have fully explored a point because they are conscious of not dominating all of the conversation. It might take some encouragement from you to let them know that you will provide the space for them to say as much as they need to say.

Responding: Use techniques that allow the client to know that they are being heard. Paraphrasing is one of the ways that you can let a person know that they are being heard, however, as we learnt earlier, this strategy needs to be used judiciously. There are additional ways that we can let the client know that we are listening besides paraphrasing. In a face to face situation we have the benefits of body language including smiling, nodding our head and using facial expressions. However, if you are coaching over the telephone, the client cannot see you, so you must rely on verbal cues to let them know you are listening. You can

let the client know you are listening by saying such things as: “Yes, I hear you,” “Right” “Keep Talking” and “Hmmm.”

Once again, this concept may sound simple, but is easier said than done. Try watching a friend or colleague on the telephone. You may see them nodding their head, smiling, or opening their eyes in astonishment, completely oblivious to the fact that the person on the other end of the line is not picking up any of these cues! Try to stay focussed on the messages the client is receiving, rather than on the cues you are giving out as they are not necessarily the same. If you really analyse yourself, you may find that you need to respond more.

Being empathetic and non-judgmental: When you value the client and accept the client’s feelings you will be able to empathize more, and to offer them the gift of being heard. “The ground rule for you as a listener is this: It is not your job to point out to someone what you think he or she may be missing.” (Kegan and Lahey, 2001) Forgo judgements until after they have finished speaking. Our judgements can impair our listening.

Frequently we have preconceptions about what the person might say that shape the parts of the conversation that we pick up and the parts we don’t hear. We may “tune in” to the parts that are personally interesting and tune out of parts that we deem boring or repetitious, but which may be vitally important to the client. Ultimately our judgements and opinions are about ourselves, and our own life journey, not about the person being coached. Part of truly listening to a client is moving beyond our own ideas, values and life choices and focusing on those of the client. We are not really listening to them if we allow our own opinions and judgements to shape how much we hear them.

Moving to action: Analysis without action is not coaching, so while it is essential that you give the client time and space to really be heard, there are some conditions that you need to apply. If a client is rambling or venting about an issue, this is not constructive. Often when human beings are in ranting mode, they are not really wanting to be listened to. They are behaving like a mouse on a treadmill; falling into easy default behaviour rather than really communicating. If this occurs, you may need to move to the heart of the matter by saying something like:

- “How does that fit with what we were discussing?”
- “How does that apply?”
- “That is interesting, however let’s get back to what we were talking about.”

If a client is focusing for too long on a past issue, injury or disappointment, you may need to move them to a more future focus. Support the client in moving from worry, or anger, to a solution by saying something like:

- “Let’s link this to your current goals.”
- “So what do you think the next step is?”
- “How should we proceed?”
- “What will you do this week to get this resolved?”

Use your intuition: Listen from the heart and pick up on all communication. Share with the client things you are sensing and feeling. Intuition is a very powerful coaching tool. If the coach is sensing something the client is saying, it is best to share it with them.

Reflection

1. What are five things that a coach needs to listen for with a client?
2. Which of the listening strategies do you actively apply and which would you like more practice with?
3. How difficult is it to forgo judgements and opinions while listening to a client?
4. Why can consoling be a problem when listening to a client?
5. What is the difference between “rambling and venting” and genuinely unpacking an issue?
6. What do you think it means to “listen from the heart”?