Listening Skills Tune Up

Three Reasons Why Listening is a Cornerstone of Successful Coaching



While most training programs for coaches place a lot of emphasis on knowing how and when to ask the right probing questions, a solid set of listening skills is an equally important element of coaching. After all ***the most insightful and probing questions in the world won't do you much good if don't know how to hear the answers.*** Let's take a detailed look at how knowing how to listen will help you unravel a client's muddled thinking, inspire spontaneity and keep both you and your client engaged the coaching process.

- **Unravel Muddled Thinking** - One of the most important opportunities that coaching has to offer for clients is the opportunity for engaging with an objective professional who they can use as a sounding board for their personal challenges and aspirations. Experienced coaches know that most clients have a rather muddled view of their goals, obstacles and options. ***By knowing how to listen for signs of muddled thinking, you can identify opportunities to ask the right questions to help clients clear their perspective.***

- **Inspire Spontaneity** - While having the right probing questions in mind is an important part of preparing for a coaching session, ***having a good ear can help you coach on your feet by responding to what your client is saying.*** For example, you will find that clients sometimes make a casual reference to particular obstacles that they have been avoiding that you can help them confront overcome by responding with the right questions. Being prepared to listen for opportunities to improvise will lead to a much more dynamic and inspirational coaching session.

- **Staying Engaged** - In most cases, ***coaching is only effective when both the coach and the client are 100% engaged in the moment throughout the coaching session.*** Clients know when their coach is or isn't listening, and nothing is more of a turn off than coaches who are just waiting for their turn to speak.

Active Listening vs Passive Listening



The first step to becoming a great listener is recognizing the difference between active and passive listening. Passive listening is a virtually effortless activity in which the listener simply hears what a speaker is saying while paying a minimal amount of attention to the tone and content of the speech. ***Active listening requires a coach to invest himself entirely in the act of listening.***

The term active listening was coined by Tom Gordon in his 1977 book *Leader Effectiveness Training* and has since become an integral part of all professional coaching programs. At the heart of active listening is the concept that ***listening can and should be just as engaging and stimulating of an activity as speaking.***

Active listeners don't just listen with their ears, their entire minds are devoted to what a speaker is saying, including what he or she is communicating through tone, body language and phrasing. In order to understand what this process is all about, it is helpful to break things down to the three core levels of active listening: ***repeating, paraphrasing*** and ***reflecting***.

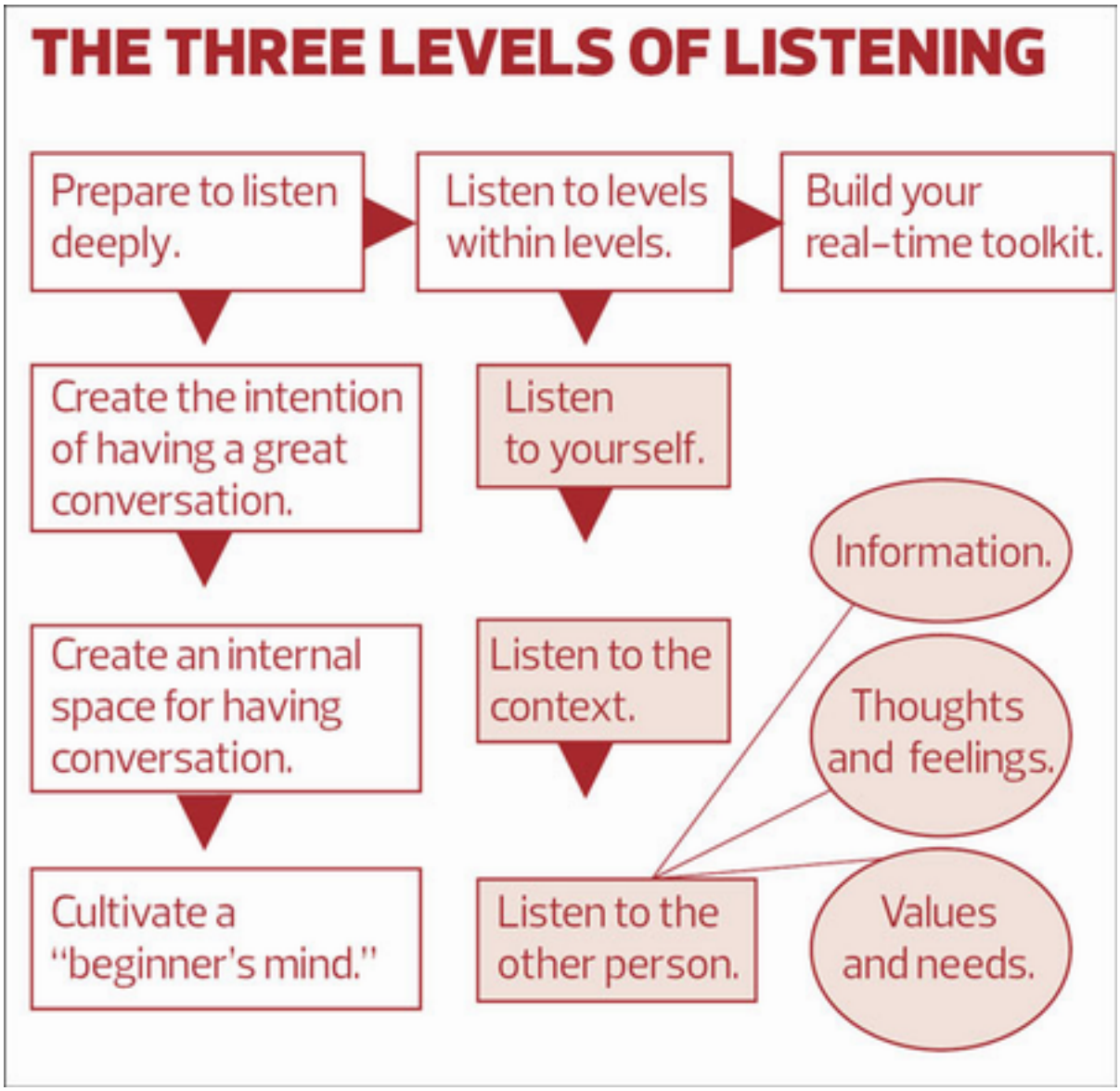


- **Repeating** - In the repeating levels of active listening, a listener is focused on doing three things to gather as much information from a listener as possible: perceiving what listener is saying, paying full attention to what is being said and remember what has been said. ***These listeners provide speakers with positive feedback by repeating the message in exactly the same words that they have used.***

- **Paraphrasing** - When an active listener is paraphrasing, he is focused on the same three principles as repeating while using his own thinking and reasoning skills to interpret what a speaker has said. ***These listeners will render the speaker's message using words and phrases that are very similar to what they have just heard.***

- **Reflecting** - Reflecting is most effective form of active listening. Instead of simply repeating or paraphrasing what a speaker has said, these listeners fully digest and synthesize a speaker's message. ***Reflective listeners will render the original message using their own words and sentence structure.***

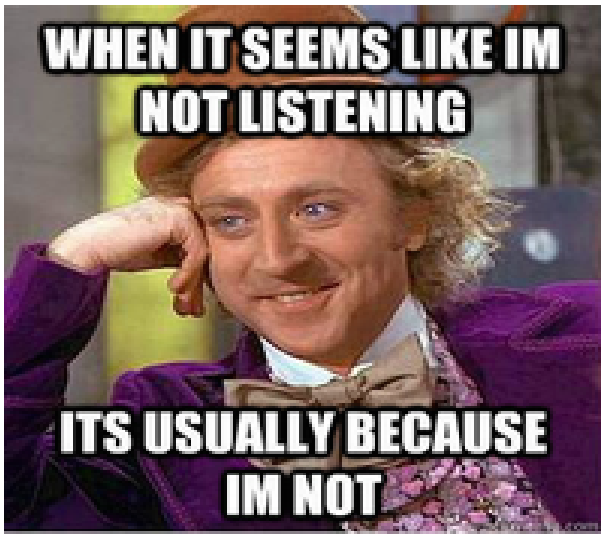
As a professional coach, it is your role to listen reflectively to everything that your clients are saying. ***By using alert body language, providing nonverbal feedback and rendering your clients message in your own words, you will encourage them to answer your questions as honestly and thoroughly as possible because they will know that they have your undivided attention.***



Four Common Barriers to Active Listening

No matter how much energy you dedicate to trying to be a good listener, the truth of the matter is that even the most effective coaches struggle to overcome common barriers to active listening. Let's take a look at how the most common barriers to listening can stand in the way of becoming an effective coach: identifying, placating, sparring and mind reading.

- **Identifying** - When you are coaching a client who is facing a challenge or has a personality that is similar to your own, it can be easy to fall into the habit of identifying with them to the point that you are only listening to part of their story. While there is nothing wrong with feeling a little empathy, ***the problem with identifying with your clients is that may start filtering out things they say that don't match your own story.*** By maintaining a professional distance from your clients, you will be able to listen to what they have to say far more effectively.



- **Placating** - As a professional coach, you will often need to discuss difficult or awkward subjects with your clients. In some cases, you may be tempted to placate a client in order to avoid conflict. Remember, clients don't seek out coaches to just be told what they want to hear. ***In order to help your clients identify and conquer their obstacles, you will need to be willing to rock the boat even when the seas start getting stormy.***

- **Sparring** - Due to the fact that coaching tends to attract driven individuals, some coaches can fall into the habit of verbally sparring with their clients, especially when they are first getting start. Although knowing how to challenge a client is a key element of professional coaching, ***the point of this process is not to prove that you are smarter or more experienced than your clients.*** If you catch yourself waiting for your client to stop talking so that you can deliver some kind of counter argument, it's time to take a step back and take an honest look at your motivations for your behavior.

- **Mind Reading** - One of the most common barriers to active listening is the tendency to try to guess what a person is thinking rather than hearing what they are actually saying. No matter how intelligent you may happ en to be, ***it's just not possible to know what people are thinking until you have considerable experience observing their speech and behavior.*** Since it is unlikely that you will have the opportunity to get to know most of your clients on such a deep level, you need to check your crystal ball at the door in order to be an active listener.



Coaching Analytical vs Bottom Line Clients

One of the most common mistakes that new coaches make when they begin working with *wildly differing personality types* is to assume that the basic coaching model is a one size fits all package. As any experienced business or life coach can easily tell you, this simply isn't the case. Instead, successful coaches use their solid understanding of the four major personality types in order to design the best coaching style and approach for each particular clients.

In order to keep things simple, let's use the examples of two very different types of clients: Client A and Client B.



- **Client A** is an very detail oriented and could be described by friends and colleagues as analytical with an emphasis on the first two syllables. Before he makes any major or minor decision in his personal and professional life, ***he gathers as much information as possible, weighs the facts and sometimes gets so weighed down in the details that ends up stuck in analysis paralysis***. Some of Client A's favorite magazines include Consumer Reports and Economist.



- **Client B**, on the other hand, is results driven power player who associates would describe as a leader who goes with her gut and just wants to be given the bottom line, damn it. ***She's willing to take calculated risks without a detailed analysis of every factor in a decision because somebody's got to be the one to call the shots***, and you've got to willing to play if you want to win. Client B has been subscribed to industry niche journals and magazines like Money, Newsweek and Architectural Digest for years, each of which she flips through and scans as time permits.

Now, just imagine a well-meaning business coach who's still wet behind the ears trying to coach clients like Client A and Client B for the first time. By the end of the first session, Client B would probably be running our hapless coach's show, while Client A would get so hung up on the minor details of his coach's probing question that the session would end with unmeasurable results.

Now let's take a look at how more experienced coaches use their understanding of personality types to tailor their coaching style for individuals who are as different as Client A and Client B.

- Broadly speaking, Client A can't see the forest for the trees and could use some coaching on how his larger aspirations and passions fits into the smaller picture of the day-to-day. ***Probing questions that broaden his tunnel vision and allow him to reach observations and conclusions on his ultimate destination could be tremendously helpful.***

- The chances are that Client B is going to enter her first session with a pretty good idea of what she wants out of the coaching experience in the long term. The task of the coach is start off with first things first and establish a concrete picture of both her major goals and present reality in terms that are as qualitative as possible. Next, the coach uses ***narrow probing questions so she can reflect on the major details of the present and future obstacles standing in her way, as well as the pros and cons of her most promising options moving forward.*** Finally, this type of session must end with a firm commitment from Client A on precisely what actionable tasks she plans on putting in place for short term solutions before her next coaching session.

