- COACHING LISTENING RELATIONSHIP

Coaching Listening and the Art of Creating A Supportive Coaching Environment

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Para consultar este texto en español

COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN COACHING

Coaching is not a theoretical field, but a professional activity or profession. Consequently, practicing coaching does not call for knowledge in any specific domain, but definitely requires *skills*. Learning how to coach is therefore more about acquiring skills than about understanding issues or accumulating knowledge. The two dynamics are fundamentally different and sometimes quite contradictory. One may know, for example, how a car runs and may even be a great car designer, but may not have extraordinary driving skills at all. Many people may be excellent and very safe drivers, but may also have no knowledge whatsoever about what is under the hood of the machine that takes them to work every day.

It is also important to be aware that generally, conceptual knowledge is easily available in books and on internet, and that it can quickly be learned or memorized. On the other hand, learning *skills* requires practice in specific learning environments, such as with flight simulators, or in the field. Some skills may even take a very long time to acquire. That is what we generally call "experience". In short, skills are a form of *know-how* that need to be practiced, practiced and practiced again before they become second nature to the one that displays them.

We can give a simple coaching example of the difference between conceptual knowledge and practical skills. One may *know* that listening is a very important coaching tool, *and* have a very had time keeping quiet for even a very short span of time. *Understanding* that silence is important to listening is common knowledge. Naturally displaying silence and a capacity to really listen is often an acquired *skill*.

Before introducing and explaining the first set of coaching skills, it is important to clarify their purpose. This brings us to what is often perceived as a major paradox in the field of coaching: *coaches listen to clients, but never offer solutions*! Indeed, numerous people need some time and explanation to understand and accept that coaching skills or coaching *know how* is not focused on the coach solving client problems or providing avenues to achieve client ambitions. Fundamentally, the art of masterful coaching is the art of subtly *creating a learning space for the client* to solve his or her own problems, to develop his or her own ambitions and grow.

It may also be misleading to present an extensive set of skills or tools to serve this purpose in as much as the unknowing or beginning coach may want to extensively use these tools in order to manifest professional coaching presence and display competency. Real coaching, however is about creating a space for the client to grow *on his own terms and in her own way*, without being hindered by too "helpful" a coaching presence which may get in the way of original and totally personal client exploration and development.

Co-Creating the Relationship

The techniques listed and explained below are fundamental to the coach skill set. They figure among the most precious coaching tools. Unfortunately they are often underestimated, or just used to begin a coaching process, too soon brushed aside by the average coach who rapidly gets too involved and asks too many questions focused on client "content".

When viewed or used superficially, these techniques sometimes seem to be focused on getting clients to speak about their problems or ambitions. They would help the coach acquire all the useful information to understand a client's issues, much as a competent journalist would interview a person to elicit as much data as possible before writing a brilliant article.

Used more deeply, the skill set presented below can be central in establishing and developing the coaching relationship and are often totally sufficient to let the client progress forward to her desired outcome, or to his ambitious goals.

The subtle relational posture for a professional coach is that he or she is not necessarily focused on the *content* of a client's dialogue as much as on the client *as a person*, and on the unfolding of the client's frame of reference. This can include such items as the client belief system, client perceptions, client values, client basic assumptions, client frame of mind, client emotional structure, client limits and potentials, client thought patterns and client self-fulfilling prophecy, etc.

When using the skill set presented below, it is of utmost importance to understand that coaching is not so much focusing on a client's problem or ambition, but much more focusing on *who* the client is and on *how* the client is dealing with his problem or facing her ambition.

Used by a competent coach, these techniques, skills or tools ultimately serve to create the *matrix* or the *space* in which the client will expose, explore, develop, grow, create and mature his or her coaching concern, and more importantly, his or her relationship to *self*. In that sense, these skills and techniques serve the ultimate objective or purpose of a coach, which is to be totally present, *and* almost transparent to the client who is left to focus on his issue or on her quest, unhindered.

- **Silence**

On the coach's part, silence is basically knowing how to keep quiet, knowing how not to intervene in the client's "dialogue", or knowing how not to express feelings and reactions, nor ask questions. This technique or skill is often the most difficult for numerous beginning coaches to display. Budding coaches often need to "feel useful", to show their problem solving competency, or to display their creative intelligence, etc. They often display an uncontrollable desire to expose their points of view, an urge to share their thoughts or experiences, and an impatience to "drive" the client more efficiently towards results.

Silence can be considered the "foundational" technique or skill in coaching. Coaching silence creates a space in which the client can unfold his frame of reference and explore her personal territory. Much like a pump, silence creates a form of vacuum which will serve to "aspire" client expression, which will elicit client reflection and dialogue.

A large number of more active skills or techniques are useful to create and accompany the relationship. These are displayed to ensure that the coaching "space" or matrix created by silence is welcoming, positive and warm and give the client indications that the coach is actively accompanying the client's progress.

- **Listening**

Beyond just being silent, the second fundamental coaching skill is to *really* listen. Listening is an art that consists in actively and warmly receiving, understanding and accepting the client thoughts and thought patterns, emotions and reactions, affirmations and doubts, etc. as they are, for what they are. Listening is neither agreeing nor disagreeing. It is non-judgemental and non comparative. It is just simple "reception".

In active listening, the coach silently reaches out to grasp the mental, emotional, symbolic and sensory environment of the client's expression to fully grasp and unconditionally accept his or her total frame of reference, mind patterns, values system, etc. without intervening one way or the other.

A little more on the central role of silence in coaching...

To read an extensive article on attentive presence and listening in masterful coaching

- **Posture**

The general "correct" coaching postural stance for active listening is sitting (or standing) *straight.* This can be true both for face to face coaching as in phone coaching in as much as posture influences the quality of a coach's listening attitude. This being said, however, the body posture is often adapted to the client's position and/or movement in a form of "dance" as the coaching relationship unfolds during the course of a session.

Generally speaking, when the coach is leaning away or stepping back, the message that comes across to the client is one of distance, maybe lack of interest. Distance may also be very useful at times, to give the client more "breathing space", at other times to "mirror" or synchronize client behaviour. When the coach is leaning or stepping forward, the message that comes across to the client is one of "taking over" or of getting "taken" or involved with the content of the client dialogue. This coach position may also be useful at times, to give the client more warmth, support, or to display more coach focus or commitment.

Consequently, it is generally useful for a coach to be aware of his or her body posture, and to its "complementary" or "contradictory" nature compared to the client's posture. If a client is leaning forward (involved) and the coach is leaning back (detached), the difference will be felt by the client, and may be counterproductive in the unfolding of client dialogue. This is true of a number of other "complementary" and "contradictory" coach and client body postures.

- **Body Language**

Effortlessly, body language gives the client numerous physical or instinctive indications of an active and receptive coaching presence, or on the contrary, of coach disinterest. It is consequently useful to know that most clients will intuitively or naturally know when a coach is or is not fully listening, or when a coach is or is not fully present and engaged with the client's dialogue.

Indeed, whenever there is one short breach in coach attention, the client will immediately feel the "break" in the relationship, and loose focus on his or her personal dialogue. This instant awareness of the level of coach presence is felt by the client through a number of physical indicators that the

coach frequently and unconsciously emits while intensely listening.

The coach should therefore make an inventory of these physical indicators. The objective, of course, is not that the coach learns how to "control" them or learns how to "fake it". Any conscious effort to "display" any of these natural phenomena will often be perceived by the client as being superficial or non authentic. Consequently, the objective for the coach is to listen to the client, and to let these indicators of presence naturally and appropriately "flow out" without hindrance. That skill can be acquired with practice.

- **Eye Contact**

In a face to face relationship, the competent coach who is listening intently is continuously keeping strong eye-to-eye contact with the client. This skill displays focused interest in the client, and helps to develop the relationship. To the client, a break in eye contact is instantly noticed, and often signifies a break in interest.

Generally, two bodies reach a certain degree of synchronization through eye contact. It has been proved that two people actively engaged in conversation, martial arts, dance, etc. who have solid eye contact develop closer and closer cardiac rhythm, arterial pressure, breathing rhythm, sometimes synchronized electro-encephalograms. These measurable phenomena would almost indicate that through eye contact, two bodies in intense communication adapt each other's functions to the point of almost becoming one. (c.f. Desmond Morris)

These communication phenomena happen very naturally between two people by just being there to each other, with intense concentration through eye contact, and letting the body naturally do the rest. None of this can be done consciously. And whenever attention is broken by one or the other, both partners intuitively and instantly sense it.

- **Blinking**

When one person is intensely listening to another's conversation or dialogue and keeping continuous eye contact, he or she will often display a primary form of punctuation that may not be perceived by the environment. Observation often reveals that the listening partner in a conversation is blinking in rhythm to the conversing person, as if to silently say "yes", "yes", to the other's development, putting commas between the sentences and phrases of his or her dialogue.

This occurrence also commonly takes place when a coach is intensely listening to client dialogue. Intuitively catching on to the coach's blinking, the client senses that the coach is synchronized or in rhythm, following, participating through listening. This helps the client carry on with more and deeper sharing.

- **Nodding**

Almost everyone is aware that naturally nodding one's head in rhythm to another's speech indicates presence and acceptance. The same synchronized nodding to accompany client dialogue is also a form of punctuation that is displayed by listening coaches. This physical movement signifies "I'm with you, carry on".

Beware, however. Excessive nodding may be perceived as a caricature of *the* "listening posture". When the movements are exaggerated or when they continue for a lapse of time after the client has stopped talking, the reaction by the client could become one of "enough". Nodding can often be associated with or accompanied by guttural sounds or more precise verbal "punctuating" interjections.

- **Verbal Punctuation**

Intense listening, eye blinking and nodding are often also accompanied by different forms of audible verbal punctuation such as hum-hum, yes, yes, wow! really ? and...? so…? etc. These are generally short, one-syllable words that could be translated as commas, question marks, exclamation points, suspension marks, and other forms of literary punctuation.

The intensely listening coach occasionally injects this punctuation into the client dialogue, to display accompanying presence. Be careful, however to appropriately adapt the dosage of this skill to different clients and situations. Excessive punctuation may cause the client to feel cornered or pressed, or make the client feel that he or she coes not have enough space for personal dialogue. Too little punctuation may cause some clients to feel a little abandoned.

Consequently, it is useful for a coach to know when a client needs more punctuation, and when it is better to inject less verbal acknowledgement of presence, so as to fit each specific client's needs. It can be probably be summarized that most extroverted clients need more continuous manifestations of coach presence and support, while introverts are usually quite comfortable with less punctuation which they could often perceive as excessively interruptive to their internal quest.

- **Last Word Repetition**

Other "light" or easy tools or skills can used to nudge the speaker along. One of the simplest techniques is to repeat the last word or group of words, adding to the repetition a questioning intonation, for example:

Client:_ " I am questioning my recent choices and looking for new options."
Coach:_ " New options?"

- **Key-Word Repetition**

Close to the previous technique or skill, repeating a key word that has occurred in the middle of the client dialogue with a questioning intonation will often send the client elaborating on that keyword, exploring his or her thoughts a little more deeply. For example, should a client say:

_"I have a lot of doubts about what course of action to choose."
The coach could just repeat a key word with a questioning intonation:
_"Doubts?"

The client will generally develop more around that word to explore his or her frame of reference more deeply. In that example, note that the coach could also choose to say :

_"Course of action?"

The client would then probably develop a whole set of different thoughts, focused on the future, searching for options and designing action plans.

This illustrates that the word a coach chooses to repeat will have an influence on the direction of a client's work. The subsequent client personal dialogue is directed by the coach's choice and therefore needs to be useful to the client, (not necessarily to the coach). Consequently the choice of which word to repeat could be either strategic or useless to a client, and merits a moment of thought on the coach's part.

- **Key-Word Questioning**

Another skill to get to the same result from the client is for the coach to ask the full question insinuated by the key-word "repetition" technique. In the above example, the coach could ask the client:

_"Can you say more about your "doubts?" or
_"Can you elaborate on what you mean by "course of action?", or again
_"Can you give an example of …?", etc.

- **Positive Reinforcement**

In a large number of cultures, worldwide, positive reinforcement is considered as ultimately supporting and motivating to promote healthy development and growth. Consequently, whenever possible (but without overdoing it), a coach can offer the client positive, supportive and validating comments.

_"Good work. You seem to have gotten to an important issue",
_"Congratulations on your work and results",
_"I admire your honesty with yourself",
_"You are really displaying a lot of courage here",
_"I love your insights!",
_"You are very creative with your search for solutions",
_"You are making really good progress here"
_"That sounds important to you!" are a few examples.

Needless to say, these "positive reinforcement" comments are all the more effective as a skill if they are not felt as judgmental, and if they are honestly and spontaneously offered by the coach, at the right time, for the right reasons. Beware that is some cultures, excessive positive reinforcement, or a very empathetic tone of voice while delivering them can be felt either as manipulation or a form of hypocrisy. Also, these comments obviously need to be truly authentic, and should never be of a parental nature.

- **Validation/Permission**

Visualize a client who would say:

_"I have difficulty trusting people in my work environment" with a dramatic face.

The coach could either respond with a non-committal "And…", or offer support with:

_"In some environments, that can be considered a healthy attitude, don't you think?"

This type of validating response serves to de-dramatize the issue and open the field for the client to explore the situation without feelings of guilt or fear of judgement.

Creating a space for the client to explore problems and solutions often means giving the client the permission to accept their own reality, intuitions,

feelings and perceptions. This validation or permission for the client to be who he or she is, may be through a short supportive and emphatic :

_“I know what you mean!” or
_“I’ve been there and reacted in exactly the same way!”.

Obviously, these supportive comments should not be followed by the coach sharing a detailed personal experience or start giving advice. Support may also take place through a more factual approach. In the above distrust situation, the coach can input:

_“So far, you are expressing your facts, but what do you want to do about it?”

This skill can help the client change focus and work towards future solutions. This illustrates that it is not necessarily a coach’s role to question or doubt a client’s perception. A coach’s function can often simply be to accept the client’s frame of reference and accompany the development of future solutions.

- **Humour**

Humour is a skill that should not be confused with sarcasm, irony, or making fun of someone. The right dosage of humour at the right time can help to give the client sudden healthy distance from the described concern:

Client : _ “I am sort of… I don’t know how to …I am...”
Coach: _ “At a loss of words, maybe?”

Most productive humour cannot be planned on the coach’s part. It just comes out, surprises everyone and lightens the atmosphere. Humour is a natural skill that suddenly creates a break in rhythm and that can give the client new perspective on the work process or content. Humour often supplies an immediate capacity to perceive differently.

- **Ask for permission**

Powerful coaching respects client space for personal dialogue. In much the same way as it is proper to knock on the door before entering someone’s private room, a coach can usefully ask for permission before entering the client’s unfolding frame of reference.

_“May I interrupt?”,
_“Can I ask you a question?”,
_“May I express a personal perception?”,
_“May I share my feeling?”,
_“I’d like to offer a thought, if I may?”.
_"May I offer a provocative question here?"

These displays of respect will often add to the client’s awareness that the space for reflection is his, or that the responsibility for progress is hers.

Asking for permission is a skill that also has a beneficial boomerang effect on the coach. Each time he or she seeks a client permission to “enter”, the invitation process will remind the coach that intervening in the client’s unfolding work should be rare, short, and strategic.

Furthermore, asking for permission to input often invites the client to give the coaching interruption all the attention it should deserve.

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- **Invitations**

Another respectful skill is the art of inviting the client to assume responsibility in the process of the work, often by using the form of a question that is eliciting a “yes” on the client part.

_“Are you ready to start this session?” can be a gentle way to begin a coaching process when the coach indeed feels that the client is ready.
_"Which way would you like to proceed?" is an open ended invitation for the client to move on.
_“Do you want to take a short break?”, can direct the client to acknowledge the need to take some perspective after intense work, and
_“Are you ready to work on an action plan?” can be a way to suggest that the client move on to a different focus and pace.
_”Should we start concluding on this?” is a gentle reminder that the coaching session or sequence is coming to an end, and that the client should focus on wrapping up..

Sometimes inviting or "directing" the client to go in a certain direction can have a paradoxical or contrary effect, such as when a client is hesitantly undergoing intensive and difficult work. If the coach invites the client to stop if necessary and take a breather, the common client reaction is to firmly decide to continue, with much stronger determination. This is where we observe, again, that when a client feels that the responsibility to progress is his or hers, the motivation and energy to move ahead can be much greater.

- **Expressing feelings**

This empathetic skill consists in the coach sharing a personal feeling with the client, for example:

_“I am deeply moved by what you just said”, or
_“I am in admiration of the meticulous way in which you design your action plans.”

This type of sharing illustrates how some authentic personal input on the coach’s part can help consolidate the relationship and give the client a supportive environment to continue on his or her quest.

Since coaches are human beings too, expressing a strong emotion or admitting to a stubborn feeling can also help manage the situation, on a more personal level. Verbalizing or expressing emotional involvement is a way of putting it at some distance, and can help the coach return to focusing on the client and the process at hand.

- **Expressing Perceptions**

A coach can also sometimes choose to express his or her perception of the client, so as to help the latter become conscious of something that may have escaped attention. Such an offer should generally be followed by a question aiming to get client reaction or to proceed to other work

_“It seems to me that so far, you are feeling quite satisfied with the progression of your career. Would you say that?”
_”I have the impression this last option you have presented is not really the most motivating for you. Is this correct?”
_”From the moment you have expressed changing employers, your face seemed to express more excitement. Does that correspond to your feelings?”

It is useful to express perceptions when the coach feels that observed client behavior may be revealing attitudes of which she is not aware or feelings that have escape his perception. This skill is useful when the coach has observed changes in client tone of voice, rhythm, posture, body movements, etc. that may be related to the content of the dialogue. At all times when volunteering these interpretations, the coach should clearly give clients the opportunity or permission to disagree or to modify the coach perception.

- **Reformulating**

Reformulation is re-expressing in one’s own words a complex or lengthy client development, and then asking for acknowledgement on the exactitude of the feed-back loop. Beware, this skill needs both precision and a capacity to use synonymous words or expressions so as not to merely parrot the same sentences back to the client.

As with other skills mentioned above, a reformulation sequence should be preceded by a permission to do so, and followed by a question asking the client if the coach feedback loop is reasonably correct. Should the client diagree with, or add to the coach’s reformulation, always remember that the client is right and has the final word on the content of his or her dialogue.

This technique or skill is most useful, and sometimes powerful when both the content and the tone reflect a deep understanding of the client’s frame of reference. It is like putting a slightly personalized mirror in front of clients to allow them for a look at their reflection. The coach should always remember, however, that if the reflection is incomplete or incorrect, if it is repetitiously and ritually imposed, or it is offered at inappropriate times, the client may lose patience.

- **Offering Metaphors**

Similar to reformulation, offering a metaphor is interrupting client dialogue with a very short (ideally one or two words) metaphor, image, analogy or popular saying that clearly fits in the client frame of reference. By its short nature, this skill is almost a form of punctuation. It also gives the client the satisfaction of feeling that the coach has grasped the essence of his or her concerns.

Beware, however. Should the coach take more time to express a longer metaphorical story or illustration, the client may feel interrupted in a personal chain of thoughts, and the coaching process could be disturbed. The coach should not give in to the urge to share personal associations that may interrupt the client’s work tempo and put him or her in a passive/receptive mode.

- **Humility**

When using some of the above skills such as reformulating client dialogue, expressing personal feelings or offering perceptions, a coach should remember that he or she is venturing on client personal territory. Those intrusions require a respectful if not an outright humble approach:

_“I may be wrong but…”,
_“I am not sure about an impression but…”,
_“I don’t know if I understood correctly but…”,
_“I’m not sure I follow you, but…”,
_“This may be a personal projection, but …”, etc. are some ways to introduce a point of view, a reformulation or a perception, while giving the client the option of brushing it away.

Remember, that the coach’s point of view, perceptions, interpretations are not so important, unless they serve client progression in their own frame of reference, on their own terms and at their own pace. Should a coach ever volunteer a personal perception, he or she *could* use introductory “oratory precautions” such as the ones illustrated above, and *should* be immediately ready to openly back away, accepting and admitting that the input or sharing was not useful for the client’s work.

- **Commenting on the coaching relationship**

Much like with any other relationship, it is sometimes useful to meta-communicate, or to communicate on the coach-client communication and relationship. This skill can be followed by a question to elicit the client's point of view, or to focus on the next steps in the coaching process:

_"I feel that **we** are understanding each other better and our work is becoming more efficient. What do you think?"
_"I feel that there is more trust between **us**, and that helps your work. Would you agree with this?"
_"I feel that **we** are getting stuck; what do you suggest we do?

In all the above examples, notice that the **us** and **we** offer the coach and the client share responsibility while still allowing the client to decide on the next step.

Although it is far from complete, the list of coaching skills presented above is sufficiently extensive to start practicing growth relationships. These tools and a host of other techniques serve two main purposes: to create the relationship and simultaneously offer the client more than enough personal room to grow.

Notice that all these skills can apply to any coaching situation no matter the nature of the client's content, whether it may concern problems, solutions, ambitions or aspirations. Whatever the field covered by a client's dialogue, the same simple coaching skills can be at the service of rapid progression in relative client autonomy.

Notice also that the list of skills has been presented in a general order of increasing complexity. This is not to infer that these skills should be used in any specific order in a coaching sequence.

Likewise, the list does not intend to infer that *all* the skills should be used in a coaching sequence. Indeed, like most tools in a complex and well furnished toolbox, most sessions require at most just a few techniques, used sparingly at the right time to obtain the best results.

This is to impress the fact that masterful coaching is not an extensive demonstration of coaching skills. Powerful coaching takes place when excellent progress is made by an empowered client within a highly supportive and delegated environment.

To practice the skill set presented above, note also that all the tools can be used in all relationships, as a husband or as a wife, as a manager or as a co-worker, as a salesperson or as a buyer, and as a human being concerned with understanding whomever we are facing in every day life. In fact, most coaching techniques or tools are no more than a set of "everyday" communication skills.

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I am deeply indepted to Margaret Kriegbaum for her extensive corrections and suggestions to improve the original version of the above article. Thank you Margaret, for your precious time and input.

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