

Listening



Listening is the core skill of coaching. The ability to listen well is what separates good coaches from poor coaches. On the face of it, listening is something we all do every day so should be easy. In fact, good listening requires well developed skills of relaxation, disciplined listening, empathy, good questioning, and feedback.

Relaxation

In a work setting, there are generally two kinds of communication. Those relating to task, and those relating to people. Task communications are frequent e.g. agreeing workloads, deadlines, or performance measures. Person communications are also frequent but have a different quality e.g. agreeing changes in work conditions, moves to a new team, or how to make personal improvements. Task communications are easier, and often briefer. People communications are often harder, take longer, and call for good listening skills in order to ensure that the real issue is explored, understood, and addressed. Coaching tends to focus on the person.

Tips for relaxing prior to *person communication*

- If you are busy but you sense that something is important, suggest a time when you are less busy. Then you can take time to collect your thoughts and focus your attention.
- Take a brief walk, or have a break prior to a coaching session so there is some distance between you and the tasks you have been doing.
- Carry out a quick tension check on yourself. Jaw muscles, eye muscles, 'frown' muscles and neck are favourite tension stores. Try and relax your face. How do you feel? If stressed, or apprehensive, or 'tight', these will show up in your coaching. Sometimes it helps to write down your feelings, park them and tell yourself you'll come back to them after your meeting. Is your mind full of tasks? Remind yourself that the coaching session may have long term consequences so this is your most important task.

Discipline

For many people, discipline has an unwelcome feel: a constraint, a 'must-do'. In fact, discipline is about deliberate repetition like an athlete's stretches before exercise or a computer programmer's step-by-step approach to correcting some code. For coaching, listening is a discipline. It calls for constant repetition of key steps. First, personal relaxation so that you give full attention to the other person. Then persistent 'listening' to three things:

- what the other person is saying
- what the coachee feels about what s/he is saying
- what her/his body is doing as they say it.

Tips for learning the discipline of listening

- Get into the habit of separating task from person communication. It is often necessary to pick up on the person behind the task as some people 'hide' an issue behind a task. For example if someone says: 'I've got to do this all over again because Marketing forgot to include a key component in the specification.' this could be a temporary annoyance or there could be an issue with Marketing.