

Are you really a good listener?



Chris Carling

Listening well is more than just hearing the words that are spoken.

Why the question: are you really a good listener?

Most of us overestimate our skills as a listener. Even as I write this, I can hear the siren voice whispering, ‘Yes, most of us, but not me. I really am a good listener’ – even though I know that listening well is an acquired skill, a craft, not something that comes naturally to any of us. We have all had to learn the specially honed listening skills we use as coaches. Once acquired, these skills need to be constantly reinforced.

Also, it’s easy to forget that our clients need to be good listeners if they are to make the most of the coaching relationship. As coaches we may need to coach our clients in listening – not just so they hear us more clearly, but, more importantly, to help them improve their relationships with others.

Assumptions coaches often make about listening

This module examines the kind of focused, attentive listening required in coaching, and what

can get in the way of our listening effectively. In so doing, it challenges some assumptions coaches commonly make about listening. Here are some instances:

- I’m a coach; therefore I must be a good listener.
- Listening allows me to understand for myself what the client is telling me so I can help them find a way forward.
- Being a good listener is a permanent state – a good listener always listens well.

- Words carry information. Listening allows me to pick up that information.

We need to question all these assumptions, but the first is the most important. The more strongly we believe we are, as a coach, almost by definition a good listener, the less open we are likely to be to questioning our listening skills. The best way for us to improve our ability to listen is to allow the possibility that we may have something to learn.

Key learning points

- ◆ Many coaches make false assumptions about listening and overestimate their skills.
- ◆ Only a small amount of the listening we do as coaches is about information gathering. Most of the time we are listening for clues to help the coachee assess what is most important for them to address.
- ◆ Listening as a coach requires awareness of all the different ways in which clients reveal themselves in the coaching conversation.
- ◆ There are many potential ‘enemies of listening’ for coaches of which we need to be aware.
- ◆ As well as listening well to our clients, we can also help them become better listeners.
- ◆ There is no such thing as perfect listening; the nature of communication is such that uncertainty is inherent in any exchange.

Listening as part of communication

The limitations of language

The reason listening is a skill acquired only with difficulty has to do with the nature of human communication. Many of us, without realising it, make the fourth assumption (‘Words carry information. Listening allows me to pick up that information.’). But, of course, words don’t mean, people do. Communication is an indirect, not a direct, process. When we listen, we have no choice but to interpret what we hear through the language area of our own brain, an area that will

Tips for better listening

- **Trust yourself:** move with the coachee into uncharted waters – get comfortable with not knowing.
- **Listen with your whole self:** take notice of your own reactions. For example, if you are rattled by something you hear, offer your reaction as part of the discovery process (‘This may or may not be useful here but when you said x, I had a strong feeling of ...’).
- **Limit:** watch the amount of questions you ask purely for your own information. Ask yourself, will asking this question help the coachee? Why do I need to know?
- **Feed back:** not just the story you’ve heard, but also moods and emotions. Check with the coachee that you have correctly sensed the emotional import of their remarks.
- **Take account:** of where the client is listening from (mood, emotion and so on). Try to put yourself in their place as a listener to get a better idea of how they are interpreting you.

reflect, in subtle ways, our own, individual structure and history.

It follows, therefore, that there cannot be any such thing as perfect understanding or, indeed, perfect listening. Because of our different brains, reflecting our different linguistic and life experiences, there will always be some difference, however slight, between what one person intends

by what they say and what another understands. A degree of uncertainty is integral to every act of communication, including coaching conversations. It’s a fact of life – but one that we need to keep in mind.

(I and my co-author Terence Moore develop these ideas further in our book *The Limitations of Language*²).

Tips for helping coachees listen well

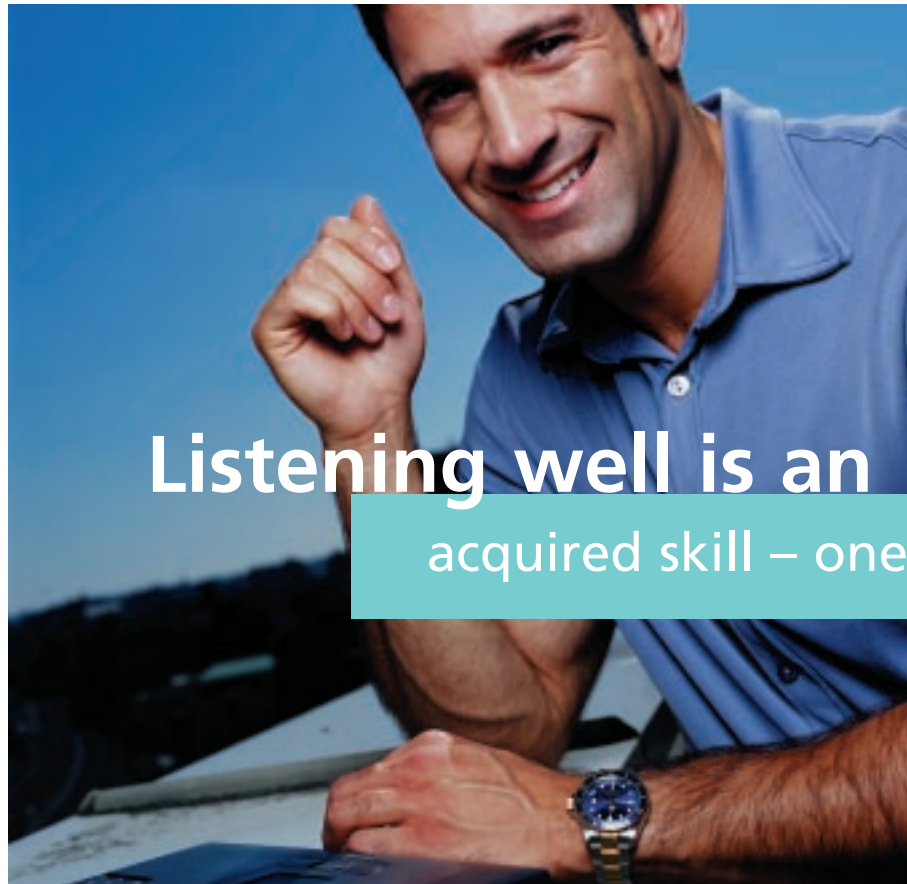
- **Make sure you and they are understanding each other:** ask them what they’ve understood – for instance, by what the two of you have agreed. Remember that uncertainty is inherent in any act of communication.
- **Talk about listening:** if the opportunity arises, talk with your coachees about listening (how it’s more difficult than people think, for example). Assess how far they engage in the conversation.
- **Ask them:** what feedback they get on their own listening – does anyone ever say to them, ‘You never listen’? How do they respond to this? Is the question of how well they listen new territory for them, or do they already have a good level of awareness?
- **Ask their permission:** to give them some feedback on their listening as experienced by you.
- **If they are open to it:** suggest some exercises to improve their listening – for example, practise listening to someone for, say, three minutes, without interrupting.

References

- 1 N Kline, *Time to Think*, Ward Lock, 1999.
- 2 T Moore and C Carling, *The Limitations of Language*, Macmillan, 1988.

Chris Carling runs Chris Carling Coaching, a consultancy providing personal development, communication and relationship coaching as well as business coaching for small businesses and professional partnerships. She is a professional certified coach (ICF accredited) and director of communication for the ICF in the UK. As a trained and experienced mediator, she also offers workplace mediation and facilitation. Chris is co-author of two books on language/communication.

- Telephone: +44 (0) 1223 367271
- E-mail: chriscarling@chriscoach.com
- Website: www.chriscoach.com



Listening well is an acquired skill – one which must be constantly reinforced

What makes focused, attentive listening such a key coaching skill?

We can start to answer this question by looking at what are we doing when we listen as a coach. What is listening for? (And also what is it not for?)

What listening is for

- **To give the coachee the floor:** so they can focus on themselves. For many coachees, this is what they value most, the space to go inward and rediscover what they really think and feel (this crucial aspect of listening is the theme of Nancy Kline's *Time to Think*).
- **To reflect the coachee back to themselves:** another vital function, given that, as coaches, a major part of our role is to help coachees become observers of themselves.
- **To pick up on clients' moods, emotions, concerns:** when coachees

talk about what's concerning them, they are often describing symptoms of a broader problem. Listening for moods and emotions can help identify the source.

- **To allow us to notice hesitations, uncertainty, inconsistencies:** we can choose to draw the coachee's attention to these and thereby help them gain greater clarity about their situation and what they really want to change.
- **To pick up what's missing:** a client of mine started coaching in order to make a particular change involving his business partner. I noticed that, though he talked a lot about the partnership, in coaching sessions he never actually referred to the change. On my drawing his attention to this, he recognised that the change felt so big as to be impossible to make, a huge barrier which emerged through noticing what was missing.

- **To allow us to notice our reactions:** our own reactions can provide valuable indicators. If we feel moved by a coachee, for instance, this is often a sign that something significant is opening up.
- **To give us clues as to whether the coachee is a good listener:** we get a sense of whether they are fully engaged in the coaching conversation, or being selective, listening only to what they want to hear.

change the way they are speaking – to slow down or speed up, for example, and see what effect this physical change has on the way they view the situation they describe.

- **Tone:** the energy level. Is the tone flat, all on one note? Or is it very lively, with high energy? Are the tone and the words in alignment, or is there a mismatch between what's said (for example, positive language)

What listening is not for

- **To gather information:** remember the second assumption (above). Some coaches listen so they can get all the facts with a view to finding a solution; the focus is on them and what they understand rather than on the coachee.
- **To be able to produce a solution:** problem solving is more fruitful once the coachee feels truly heard. Attentive listening helps create a climate for action which the coachee truly owns.

and the way it's said (in a flat tone, with lots of sighs)? Can you tell anything from the pitch? (People's voices sometimes rise when they are nervous, for instance.)

- **Mood reflected:** how do they feel? What mood is reflected in what you're hearing? How will this mood affect their desire or ability to take action?
- **Consistency:** between what you hear and what you see (if you're face to face). Is a lively manner coupled with reluctance to make eye contact? Where is the coachee comfortable, and how does discomfort show up for them?

Elements of listening

One reason why listening as a coach is so focused is that we have a lot to pay attention to. We need to listen to all of these:

- **The words:** what's said and, in particular, any words or phrases that stand out because they express strong feeling, for instance; or a striking image that may shed light on the coachee's issues.
- **Speed of delivery/rhythm:** the way it's said. Is the speed slow or fast? Is the rhythm smooth or staccato? By noting the way the words are delivered, we open up the possibility of asking the coachee to

Enemies of listening for coaches

Recall the third of the assumptions we need to question: 'Being a good listener is a permanent state – a good listener always listens well.' What is becoming clear is that listening well is not a skill we acquire once and for all. We have to re-become a good listener with every coaching session. And with so much to pay attention to, this is not always easy. These are just some of the enemies of listening that can get in the way:

- **Making judgements:** listening non-judgementally is the greatest gift we can give a coachee. But it's easy to slip into making judgements, often in the guise of being realistic.
- **Moving too quickly into problem-solving mode:** a well-known coach admitted that in his early days he used to listen till he heard a problem that could be solved, and then moved to problem-solving mode. This approach can lead to putting lots of energy into solving the wrong, or a very peripheral, problem.
- **Following own agenda:** the coach's agenda is often 'This

session must produce a result that I, the coach, am satisfied with.' This can result in disregarding anything the coachee says that doesn't further the coach's agenda.

- **'I already know that':** this one's an easy trap to fall into – hearing what sounds like a familiar line and switching off because we believe we know what's coming.
- **Distraction in own head:** we all suffer from this one, on occasion. Sometimes our own ego intervenes and sometimes a pressing personal issue causes our mind to wander.

Overcoming enemies of listening	
Do you ever?	Suggestions
Listen harder at the start of session than later	This listening pattern often reflects the coach's desire to find a problem to solve. We walk with the client in identifying a problem, then go off on our own track in finding a solution. Try listening just as hard as the client works towards their own solution. Notice how you can pick up on clues as to what's right for the coachee (even if it hadn't seemed the best solution to you).
Push for a result at the expense of listening	This pattern can reflect a coach anxious to show their own skill (or perhaps to give good value to the coachee). Remember, your full attention is, in itself, a gift to the coachee. Again, walk with them rather than running too far ahead.
Listen till you recognise a type or category of issue you are confident you know how to resolve	To counter this pattern, you need to become more comfortable with not knowing. Some coaches need to feel they have some understanding of the problem and some ideas for a solution to feel confident. You need to practise 'seat of the pants' coaching, in which you feel free to walk with the coachee where no one has necessarily walked before.
Listen for what you want to hear, seeing what you think the problem is and encouraging the coachee to agree	In reflecting back, coaches sometimes put words into the client's mouth in their enthusiasm to have a clear problem to work on. When reflecting back, listen hard to the coachee's response: are they really agreeing or just trying to please you?