Listening

Conversation is a two way process and it is necessary for those involved to be competent listeners.

Listening is used in a wide variety of different situations and can serve specific purposes. It is useful to distinguish between these different types of listening so that we can be aware of the demands they make upon the listeners.

The Skill of Active Listening

Active listening is the ability to listen and internalise what is being said, essentially listening and understanding. You can use your whole self to convey the message of an active listener involved in the discussion, showing interest, gaining trust and respect. This can be achieved by using verbal and non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication has more impact than words alone, so facial expression, eye contact, non-verbal prompts (e.g. head nodding) and body posture (leaning slightly towards the mentee, showing interest) will contribute towards building upon the professional relationship and improving discussions.

Your surroundings can also be utilised to create a climate appropriate for discussion to occur. The aim is for a quiet, pleasant and relaxed environment with no physical barriers (e.g. a desk between coach and coachee).

Within active listening we can concentrate on two important aspects used within coaching these being:

*Being Focused*: *Keeping the coachee focused on a specific discussion topic: Keeping the conversation confined around one area*. This is difficult as coachees in the early stages of coaching tend to have many questions and move from one to the other without linking or having a structured approach.

***Using Verbal prompts*:**

Using sounds or key words to encourage the mentee to talk more, clarify a point or extend an idea e.g.

• The use of expressions like ‘I see’ and Go on…’ and by using sounds like ‘Uh-huh’ and ‘Ye-e-s’.

• Repetition of key words within a discussion e.g. If the coachee says ‘I am really concerned…’ repeating ‘concerned?’ may prompt the coachee to expand further and shows the coach is interested and concentrating on the coachee.

There are, of course, barriers to active listening which coaches need to be aware of. Awareness of these barriers will allow the coach to encourage, support, show interest and respect to the coachee.

Barriers to listening include:

***Tuning in and out*** – on average we think approximately four times faster than we speak, leading to listeners tuning out, using the space to address their own thoughts or concerns rather than staying tuned into the listener.

***The glazed look*** – there are times when an individual will concentrate on the speaker (coachee) rather than on what is being said for whatever reason, bringing on that glazed look on the face of those listening, a look we all recognise.

**Coachee-centred – issues** discussed are less important than the coachee, our discussions should always work around the development of the mentee and not the subject being discussed.

*Becoming heated* – certain phrases, words and views may cause coaches to feel as if they should dive in with their own opinions; resulting in the mentee becoming irritated,

***Upset and switching-off*** - It is OK to give your own view but remember the professional discussion is for the coachee and it is their ‘arena’ with the coach’s primary task being that of the facilitator/listener.

***Giving space*** – during discussions the mentee will have silences and spaces, which will vary in length. Try not to rush in and fill these, as we all have differing periods of reflection and thinking. It is important to allow the coachee time to internalise their thoughts.

Other kinds of listening

Interactive listening

Interactive listening takes place during a discussion where the role of the speaker and listener changes rapidly. In these circumstances participants exercise ‘bidding’ skills using body language, for example:

* raising a hand;
* sitting more upright and forwards; and
* starting to move their lips.

Some individuals will not have acquired these tacit skills and thus find it difficult to draw attention to the fact they want to join in. Others may find it hard to notice subtle moves by group members and therefore may not ‘let others in’. An effective way to develop these skills is through role-playing discussions, with exaggerated conversational ‘vices’.

Reactive listening

Reactive listening is where listeners follow a set format, for example:

* a set of instructions may be given which participants are then expected to act upon; or
* an extended input of information may be provided which the listeners are expected to take in and then respond to.

In interactive and reactive listening the emphasis is on following the meaning of the speaker. Differences are often in the degree of formality and the status of the speaker.

Discriminative listening

Discriminative listening is where listeners have to discriminate between and identify sounds rather than meaning, for example:

* phonic sounds for spelling or reading purposes; or
* environmental/musical sounds.

# Appreciative listening

Appreciative listening is where listeners listen for aesthetic pleasure, perhaps to musical or environmental sounds, for example:

* the rhythm or sounds of words in poems and stories; or
* other languages or accents.

**Exercise**

**Paired listening**

Participants get into pairs. One of them talks for two minutes about what they did the night before and their plans for the evening.

The other is instructed to either listen using the listening skills that can be outlined in a discussion prior to the exercise, or to act as if they are not listening, using body language that would suggest they are uninterested in the speaker.

The group then discuss the exercise.

Prompts are used such as:

‘How did you know you were/were not being listened to?’

‘How could you tell?’ ‘What skills did you use to show someone you were listening?’

‘How did it feel if you weren’t being listened to?’

This exercise gets participants thinking about what is important when listening and how to show someone you are listening to them.