

# Internal Skills of Active Listening

## The Power of Presence

### LISTENING

*"...All communication is filtered through our listening. It is shaped by our biases, experiences, intentions and interpretations." Gary Bloom (2005)*

Educational coaches understand that listening requires the internal skill to totally focus on the coachee and what is going on in the coachee's world. Listening deeply with acceptance and empathy allows the coach to truly understand the coachee and is also an initial step in building trust. The ability of the coach to listen with integrity for words and emotions leaves a space for the coachee to reveal concerns and shape goals during the coaching conversation. When a coach is fully present as both a listener and observer, a great deal can be learned about the coachee.

The coach must be mindful that coachees are very aware of the coach's listening and know when there is genuine interest in what is being told to them. This interest conveys respect for the contributions of the coachee and builds the coachee's confidence in the coach's integrity. Therefore, coaches must develop the internal skills necessary to have a keen awareness of their own thinking and listening. The internal skills components are recursive listening, bias in listening, listening set asides and presuming positive intent.

### RECURSIVE LISTENING

*"By persistently returning my focus away from myself, back to the client, to what she is saying, what she is experiencing, I can create a space for transformation."*

*The Art of Coaching*

Recursive listening is the act of listening to listening and is the precursor to all of the other internal skills. It is the internal skill of becoming aware of internal distracters that pose a barrier to committed listening. Recursive listening requires that the coach both listen to the speaker and be aware of their own inner thoughts or voice that takes the focus from the coachee. The inner thoughts may be preparing a question to ask instead of listening, thinking about the noise of a door that just closed or a grocery list. What is going on in the coach's mind determines what action they will take as the coach.

The ability to ignore or shut down the inner voice in order to attend to a speaker is a complex skill requiring practice. It is imperative for a coach to develop the skill of recursive listening so that barriers to fully understanding the coachee are eliminated.

### BIAS IN LISTENING

The internal skill of bias in listening is preferences or personal points of view the coach brings to the coaching situation about gender, culture, age, experience and capacity. Each coach brings a unique set of experiences, perceptions, observations and biases to the coaching experience. Biases are not necessarily negative, but may affect the ability of the coach to listen with non judgment and halt communication.

Coaches must be aware of their biases and that these biases have an impact on listening, questioning and how the coachee is perceived. A coach's awareness of the biases they carry will assist them in hearing and understanding another's point of view. If the coachee triggers a bias the coach must still listen with acceptance. Even though a coachee's value system and beliefs may be in direct opposition to their own, there can be a richness in the coaching relationship. Despite biases that may surface, the coach must listen to understand and mediate toward goals.

### LISTENING SET-ASIDES

Cognitive Coaching defines listening set asides as listening patterns that are considered unproductive and should be set aside to ensure focused listening. These unproductive patterns unintentionally decrease the likelihood that the coach will be a committed and focused listener. This internal skill requires conscious action, awareness and practical skill to set these patterns aside. Three are identified:

- **Autobiographical Listening** - occurs when the coach makes a connection to the coachee's story and begins to think of common experiences they have had with the coachee. When these connections surface in the coach's mind, the coach may have an urge to tell their own story. This is referred to as "me too" listening. Coaches must be aware of how much of their personal information is shared. A few comments may show empathy, however, continuous personal stories can result in the coach taking over the conversation. Not setting autobiographical listening aside can result in several things;

not fully hearing and understanding the coachee, judging and comparing the coachee's experience to your own, and mediation of the coachee's thinking does not occur.

- **Solution Listening** - Although while listening to a coachee, thinking of solutions is normal, it is not always productive. Being the problem solver interferes with the coaching conversation because both listening and thinking are diverted searching for a solution. The coach cannot deeply understand the communication of the coachee if they are internally thinking of a solution and how to provide it to the coachee. There are pitfalls in providing a solution to the coachee during the coaching conversation. The coach may only pay attention to the coachee's ideas that fit with their solution. The coach may hear only what supports the solution. Information the coachee is providing may be unheard because of the coach's need to be the solution provider. Providing a solution that does not work can result in a loss of credibility and trust for the coach. Effective coach's belief in the capacity of others to find solutions within themselves through mediation does not support solution listening.
- **Inquisitive Listening** - The coach's curiosity is the motivator for wanting to know details that are not relevant to the coachee's issue in a conversation. When the coach's thinking goes to needing small insignificant details, inquisitive listening is occurring. The coach prying for details that are unimportant may funnel down to gossip instead of a meaningful coaching conversation. Coaches should ask themselves "Is the question I am asking to satisfy my curiosity or does it mediate thinking?" If the information sought is only to satisfy the coach's curiosity, it should be set aside. Questions should be asked only for the sake of gaining clarity around the coachee's issue and to expand thinking. Coaching conversations are marred by inquisitive listening as the focus on unrelated details can result in losing sight of the issue at hand. Effective coaches monitor and adjust their own listening skills by focusing internally to avoid or set aside unproductive patterns of listening.

### POSITIVE INTENT

*“Therefore coaches take responsibility for believing in a person’s greater potential, even when that person does not see it, and even when reminding a person of his or her potential may seem directive.”*

*David Rock*

Positive intent is being mindful of the assumptions and beliefs that may be negative and hinder communication. In this internal skill, the coach assumes that the coachee’s intentions are positive because the coach thinks, wants and finds the best of others. Positive intent is to believe that others not only desire to do their best, but are capable of it. In other words, coaches trust that coachees have the best intentions. To presume positive intent leads to better interactions and openness of the coachee to engage in the conversation.

Coaches must align their language with the beliefs they have. Presuming positive intent means coaches choose words carefully that express that the coachee has already thought about, planned or done what is being asked. They also choose words that communicate acceptance and respect. The verbalization of this positive intention is expressed as a positive presupposition. The coach considers how to paraphrase or ask questions in a positive and useful way that will honor the coachee by demonstrating belief and trust. The use of positive presuppositions by the coach creates a safe and trusting relationship to support the coachee’s thinking and feelings.

### RESOURCES

*Cognitive Coaching. R. Garmston and A. Costa. Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc. 1994*

*Results Coaching. K. Lee, K. Anderson, V. Dearing. Corwin Press. 2010*

*Blended Coaching. G. Bloom, C. Castagna, E. Moir, B. Warren. Corwin Press. 2005*

*The Adaptive School, A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups. R. Garmston and B. Wellman. Christopher-Gordon Publishers. 1999*

*Coaching with the Brain in Mind. Foundations for Practice. D. Rock and L. Page. 2009*