

Co-Active Coaching Skills: Listening

It seems so obvious that listening would be one of the primary coaching contexts. In fact, we say that coaching happens in the context of a very particular kind of listening. In Co-Active® Coaching we talk about three levels of listening.

Level 1: Internal Listening

When a person listens at Level 1, they are actually listening to the sound of their own inner voice. That's where their attention is. They may hear the words of the other person, but they are primarily aware of their own opinions, stories, judgments — their own feelings, needs, and itches. They may be nodding, and going, “uh huh,” but inside they are saying things like:

>> *“I had an experience just like that.”*

>> *“This is starting to bore me.”*

>> *“I really need to get home to watch TV.”*

>> *“I’m hungry; when was the last time I ate?”*

>> *“I’m terrified I’ll say the wrong thing and look stupid.”*

There are plenty of times in our lives when it is perfectly normal — it's actually important for us to pay close attention to our own needs and opinions — essential that we listen at Level 1. For example, when the contractor is asking you how you want your kitchen remodeled; that's a situation that is 100% about what you want; your opinions, judgments, desires. And of course, it's essential that clients in the coaching relationship be at Level 1. The coaching attention is fully on them: their lives, what they want, where they are and where they're headed.

Level 2: Focused Listening

At Level 2 there is a hard focus, like a laser, from coach to client. All of the attention is directed in one way. Think of a mother with a sick baby; all of her attention is hard focused on the child. There might be great chaos all around her, but the mother stays focused on the child and the child's needs. Picture two young lovers sitting on a park bench; they're both at Level 2 with their attention completely focused on the other person; they can be oblivious to the world around them. They are two people completely at Level 2, listening intently to every word and “listening” for every nuance in the conversation. In order for coaching to be as effective as possible, coaches need to be able to coach at Level 2. And then they need to add the ability to listen at Level 3.

Level 3: Global Listening

This is the soft focus listening that takes in everything. At Level 3 you are aware of the energy between you and others. You are also aware of how that energy is changing; you detect sadness, lightness, shifts in attitude. You are aware of the environment and whatever is going on in the environment. There is a way you are conscious of underlying mood, or tone, or the impact of the conversation — where it is taking you and the person you are talking to. Stand up comedians have a highly developed sense of listening at Level 3. They know when their humor is landing and when it isn't. Performers in general have highly developed antennae tuned to the Level 3 in a room — a sense of how the performance is being received — how the energy is building or dissipating. This is also the level at which your intuition will be most available to you as well as metaphor and imagery. Coaches learn to listen with this soft focus, Level 3 in order to pick up as much information as possible about the underlying impact in the moment.

Coaching at Level 2 and Level 3

The most effective coaching takes place when the coach is at Level 2 and 3. There will be times when coaches will drop into their own Level 1 place. The coach will fall back into judgment and opinion about whatever is happening in the coaching, and in effect, disconnect from the client. The coach may be analyzing their own performance, as in, “that was a stupid question to ask,” or “I wish I was recording this session; the coaching is brilliant.” At Level 1, the coach may be pushing their own agenda — sometimes with the best intentions of “helping the client.” As a coach, the key is to notice when you are listening at Level 1 and find your way back “over there” with the client. Sometimes all it takes is asking a provocative, curious question.