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The Use of 'Silence' in Coaching

by **Andy Rankin**

Introduction

At the UK EMCC coaching conference in April 2007 Nancy Kline, author of "Time to Think", was the pre dinner speaker. In her short talk she challenged the attendees to put aside all the qualifications and "expertise" that we proudly hold as professional coaches and to spend more time providing our clients with a "profound listening attention" i.e. not intervening with our various coaching methodologies, models and questioning techniques. She gave some powerful case studies to illustrate the potential of her approach.

What was noticeable in conversations during dinner, subsequent coffee breaks and corridor chats was how many delegates spent time negating her premise in a "yes but" type of response. I don't know why I was surprised by these responses. I suspect it is because we dearly want (and need?) to hold onto our expertise as coaches and perhaps listening with silence is actually a rare commodity in the busy lives we lead.

This paper presents some reflective thoughts and a case for the considered use of silence during coaching practice. Rather than present a rigid approach (another model or methodology) questions around the topic are opened, benefits are explored and I offer some ideas for coaches to develop skill in this area.

Exploring the case for silence

My reflection from the sessions I attended at this and other conferences is that our training and practical experience as coaches can lead to a tendency to be rather "busy" in our attention when we are with a client. David Clutterbuck has identified that coaches need to be process aware of seven coaching conversations in order to master effective coaching practice. For example, we listen carefully and enter into a dialogue in order to clarify understanding, summarise, to challenge, to reframe and build rapport and empathy. We think about the next insightful question, of sharing our expertise, the goals that we will need to encourage the client to create. In short there is rather a lot going on.

What would the potential benefits be for a client of laying down our coaching tools for a while and practising holding more silence? This is not a state of doing nothing. It is what I might call the provision of a profound listening space or what Nancy Kline refers to as profound attention.

- A quiet time beyond the usual rush and urgency of life - provision of a sanctuary
- A unique shared partnership where one human being holds a space for another to explore an issue at hand in their own uninterrupted time
- Less invasion (by us) of the client's own thinking processes thus nurturing their unconscious thinking to come into play and to grow
- Enabling them to hear the whispering of their deepest aspirations
- A chance for the person to connect with their own "true self" - the still small voice of poetry and spiritual writing
- An experience of a deeper sense of community, identity, and solidarity
- This silent togetherness yielding a greater sensitivity to events, social relations and issues at hand
- Their own solutions to emerge
- Clarity on ways forward emerging naturally and effortlessly

Do such benefits have a place at all in the world of organisational coaching? The increasing demands in all spheres to provide a return on investment and other measurable outputs inevitably leads to a pressure to be focused on performance, the setting and achievement of goals and such like. However, there will be times when following a less focused approach and providing profound attention might be useful. For example:

- The exploration of transition issues in career and/or life
- A stepping back reflective phase / taking stock / thinking what next?

Exploring questions such as:

- What is really important to me?
- What are my deepest aspirations?
- What do I really want to do going forward?
- What are my deepest held values?
- What would I like to be remembered for?
- What is my vision?

These reflective scenarios may be the main reason for the coaching relationship. Alternatively they might be islands of reflection during a phase of performance coaching or a subset of activities related to leadership development or adapting to change in a restructuring or outplacement scenario.

A Comparison of Style

To clarify what I mean by providing a profound listening space for coaching clients (holding silence) I have summarised the main features and compared them against key features common in coaching approaches (see Table 1).

Table1: Comparing key features of profound listening with coaching Source: A Rankin, 2007

Coaching	Profound Listening
Coach (possible attitude of helper or expert) Client (being "coached")	Profound listener (fellow human being) Unique individual (Nancy Kline - Thinker & Thinking pa
Summarising Reflecting back Checking understanding Rapport / Empathy Commitment Goals	Profound attention Holding a "space" Not interrup
Tending toward outward focus	Settling to inner focus
Structured	Unstructured
Rational analysis Thought feelings Explored beliefs and drivers	Rumination Still quiet voice Felt feelings
Client as "object"	Whole person at this moment in time transition in future
Dialogue Expertise shared Steering towards goals	Listening Time to think, unfurl Self realisation
Timed	"Timeless"

Guy Claxton in his 1997 book Hare Brain Tortoise Mind uses an analogue in writing about how there are different types of thinking and intelligence. He explores the power of slow unconscious, contemplative thinking in contrast to more deliberate conscious thinking which society has tended to favour. He states that the leisurely, apparently aimless ways of knowing are as intelligent as other faster ones. He also suggests that more patient, less deliberate modes of the mind are particularly suited to situations that are intricate, shadowy or ill defined. This will certainly fit many organisational contexts! I propose that the holding of silence in coaching, allowing the rumination of the thinker in an un-pressured way, will allow the tortoise mind to function and to be brought into play.

Insights from other contexts

"In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light, and what is elusive and deceptive resolves itself into crystal clearness" Gandhi

I have found reading outside of leadership development or HR practice to be useful in exploring this topic. Religious writing is a natural resource to draw on. Quaker literature is rich in reflections on the power of silence in worship and everyday life. One of the first Quakers, wrote,

"True silence is the rest of the mind; and is to the spirit, what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment." William Penn

By holding a silent space at times with our clients we are perhaps allowing a process of nourishment as well as attending to issues at hand.

Abbott Christopher Jamison, whose Benedictine order featured in the BBC TV series *The Monastery*, shares his insights from working with the many people who have attended retreats at Worth Abbey. His 2006 book *Finding Sanctuary - Monastic Steps for Everyday Life*, has a whole section on silence as one aspect of Benedictine practice developed over centuries of practice. I suggest that the moments of silence that we can create through practising profound attention as coaches could be thought of as useful islands of sanctuary. Sanctuary away from the busy world we live in and that we and the client will return to once a coaching session is over. However, we return refreshed and perhaps wiser at some level.

How to improve our silence abilities

At the same EMCC conference I attended a session run by Megan Reitz from Ashridge on "Empathic Resonance". In pairs she guided us in two exercises. First for five minutes we just had to sit and pay full attention to our partner with no agenda other than to be with them. Second time round for another five minutes we were encouraged to have the notion of "helping" in our minds as we sat paying attention. Several people mentioned in the feedback there being a subtle shift and how attention was different in the two instances. Megan commented that some people find it useful to have a focus of helping in mind; it can in particular assist those who have a busy internal dialogue. For others, holding an intention can in itself distance them from being just truly present, in the moment, with the other person.

If there is a perceived lack of skills in being able to hold silence here are some ideas for nourishing the ability:

- With everyday conversations resist the urge to interrupt or tailgate (finishing a sentence for the other person) and allow it to pass - keep listening and notice what happens
- Forego the notion of being an expert, be a fellow human being holding a profound listening space
- Cultivate a philosophy of "being interested" rather than "being interesting"
- Study literature in this field
- Take times of personal reflective quiet time to discover your own centeredness

- Join a meditation class
- With a colleague practice just being in each other's silent company - paying full attention to the other person with no agenda other than just being together. Discuss the experience
- Review your progress in a journal
- Review with a colleague or supervisor

In my own practice as a coach I find it useful to settle into a quiet personal space or centeredness before a session commences. I have the intention of providing the profound space we have been exploring here. As we sit together I am aware of the presence of the other person, how we sit in the space together, the shape and sounds of the room, the sound of my own breath and heart beat. There isn't a need to be overt about this, to run through a relaxation sequence with them such as in a yoga or relaxation class. I practice being "present" for myself in the way I have described. I suspect 30 years practice of meditation helps me in this. However, I do not pretend to be enlightened or particularly wise. My mind is often far from quiet. It feels like there is an infinite amount to learn in this area and it is the place I seek to coach from. I have challenged myself to develop more mastery of this area in my own coaching practice and relationships with friends and family.

Conclusion

I have argued that the use of silence in coaching practice is under-utilised. The pressures of objectives and outputs in the organisational context, does not naturally encourage this kind of approach. Also there may be a general lack of experience of silence in the way we live in modern life and in how we relate to others. There is potentially a deep resource of silence to tap into to add value, not just to our professional work as coaches but also our capacity as fellow human beings in supporting each other through life.

About the author

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