



The Coaching Manager - 6

LISTENING

This is probably the most underused skill that managers possess! There is so much going on in a manager's mind – performance issues, discipline issues, budgets, appointments, customers, you name it – that sometimes putting all these to the background can be really difficult.

Whoever Zeno of Citium is, I would like to quote them:

“The reason we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may listen the more and talk the less”

A similar quote is “You have two ears and one mouth, use them in that proportion!”

So, exactly what is listening and why is it so important in coaching? Listening is a process of absorbing words and selecting meanings. It is a skill and can therefore be developed and improved upon. Self-awareness and discipline are needed in order to be a good listener and to convince the speaker that you are listening and hence attempting to really understand what they are saying. This is why it is so vital in coaching – you need to listen in order to really understand what is going on with the coachee. If a coachee sees and feels that they are being listened to intently then trust and openness begins to build and true coaching can then take place. Do you remember the last time you were telling somebody something and you got that feeling that you weren't being listened to? Were you interrupted? Did you have to repeat what you had said? Did you see their eyes wander as some beautiful person came into the room? What did this feel like?

There are certain cues that you can give to speakers to let them know you are listening and paying attention. Nod, ask the odd question to get real clarification of what they had said, repeat back to them what they had said to confirm that you had heard correctly. In terms of asking questions for clarification, be careful, in that you do not want to ask the question as if you needed to hear what they had said for the purposes of the fact that you had wandered off!

Most people listen at about 50% efficiency during the first part of a conversation and this can quickly deteriorate to 25% overall. But, you are a manager who wants to coach effectively, so how do you boost that to 100%, all of the time?

Firstly before any conversation or coaching session starts you need to check some things:

- You have time and are not in a hurry. If you have been hurried, calm down and compose yourself. Manage your time with the coachee.
- Empty your mind as best you can – you are there for your coachee in mind and body.

- Don't be distracted by what is going on around you.
- Don't be bored! If you are to coach then you must treat everyone with respect. Remember the issue on beliefs and values?
- Try not to think about what you are going to say next.
- Do not let models like GROW dictate how you proceed. Use them accordingly.
- Don't guess what the coachee is going to say next.
- Don't go in with hidden agendas – don't manipulate.
- If you are tired then consider rescheduling.
- Focus in on enjoying the coaching.

There are passive, non-responsive and active listeners. Active listeners interact in a two-way conversation or exchange and, therefore more effective communication takes place. Listeners do communicate with speakers. To be a successful listener, it is best to listen not only to the words but also to the intentions behind the words, to look at the speaker's body language and to listen to non-verbal cues.

- Convey a positive, encouraging attitude.
- Sit in an attentive posture – don't slouch – I'm guilty of that!!
- Remain alert but comfortable.
- Nod in acknowledgement.
- Make good eye contact or match (remember not to mimic) eye contact.
- Ignore or eliminate distractions.
- Tune in to the speakers feelings.
- Look like a listener!
- Don't fidget, play with rings, hair etc.
- Don't for goodness sake look at your watch!
- Don't use the coaching session, as a chance to sit down and have a breather – listening is tough but very rewarding work.

I remember a senior manager asking me why I looked tired. I had done three coaching sessions that day, all with people who were different styles to myself. First I had to adapt my style (tiring, but rewarding), then I had to listen intently (tiring but rewarding) and then I had to coach them through some issues and aims (tiring but rewarding). I was tired but also happy that I had supported these people to motivate themselves. The manager could not believe that, as he saw it, "sitting down and chatting to people" was tiring! If you don't come away from a coaching session tired but happy then you haven't been coaching!!

What about taking notes?

Notes can be a memory-jogger and a distraction. Taking notes can stop you listening and leave you one step behind the speaker. If you are taking notes then do it in some form of shorthand. I now tend to use mind maps – I find that I can keep up with the conversation without losing eye contact and the track of the conversation. They also are useful when revisiting the issues or goals at the next coaching session.

Oh, before I finish this issue, **TURN THE DAMN MOBILE PHONE OFF!!** If you are going to coach then turn your attention to the coachee. Forget the "I'm waiting for an important phone call" nonsense!

If you are to be a successful coaching manager then you must give your coachees the attention they deserve. You have to listen intently and understand what is going on, if you are to coach them to greater things.

If you want to learn more about listening then read *A Practical Guide to Effective Listening* by Diane Bone. London Press 1988.