

The Power of Silence

Coaching by Quality, not Content

By Dr Angus McLeod

If you give anyone a new toy, they naturally want to use it. Thus, when given a set of 'coaching skills' we want to use them. In our practise groups we find eager trainees firing questions at their coachees like machine gun fire. I have seen coachees muddled and shell-shocked by the onslaught! In fact, it does not matter what ammunition the coach uses. But they need to know when to hold fire! Keep shooting and the results will be poor – silence is an effective, indeed essential tool in the coaching armoury!

Prelude

Sting, the singer-songwriter, says that silence between notes can be more important than the notes themselves. Sting cites the opening bars of Beethoven's fifth symphony (da-da-da---daaaaaa-----da-da-da---daaaaa). Here the portent of things to come hangs in the air like a cudgel. Mahler and Shostakovich magically handle these spaces in music, Chopin more delicately. These 'silences' are no longer about simple 'listening' because they inspire a concentration of inner feeling; an emotional and physical response and representation of the music that has to do with the hearer's unique self. It is the graceful gift of intervention (notes) together with silence that is a useful metaphor for skilled coaching. Our coaching may be classical but whatever the music, it will flow, it will have some order (including a beginning and an end) and it will often contain echoes of earlier phrases within it.

Why is silence so important in coaching? Catharsis, that great leap of the coachee to a new understanding, always happens when hearing is suspended. Whether the coach is talking or not, catharsis is an inner and entirely remote experience of the coachee. The world around has disappeared, including, often, the coach as well. It seems logical that catharsis is more likely to occur when the coachee is not attending to the outside world but to their own inner realm of consciousness. The coach must therefore be the conductor of the whole piece, not the musician. The coachee will play their own music and at their own pace.

Silence is Golden

From co-counselling we learn that the first level of work with a client is a silent contract where the counsellor provides a caring space and excellent attention where the client brings their issue and expresses it, and their learning, within that dynamic. Steve Breibart (TSO Communication) and I have run courses where we use a similar dynamic to give coaches, invariably for the first time, experiences where their coachee finds their own solution without verbal (or physical) intervention from the coach. Sometimes significant catharsis occurs. This is not at all unusual. (By physical

intervention I mean smiles, nods, shrugs etc). Of course, the coachee expects to do the work. There is a clear difference between the average coaching engagement (coachee thinks that the coach will do something to them) and the exceptional one – in other words, coaches need to set the scene for coaching so that the coachee understands that most of the ‘work’ will be their own.

When to use Silence

In the normal run of performance coaching it is usual to make interventions and I do not recommend an entirely silent session! However, in engaging the coachee, it is important to understand that silence has its place and may help achieve breakthrough. In NLP we might call this pacing but I have only encountered one other NLP coach whose ability to use silence within the pacing framework produced a significant change in the coachee. Most coaches miss the opportunity to support their client to that point.

Silence in coaching is active attention. It is this attention which provides the evidence for continuing to allow the silence to continue. Sometimes the clue for silent intervention is the coachee’s hesitation or confusion - their processing of speech may be muddled or disjointed due to emotional factors. The inexperienced coach will ask a question for clarity, the exceptional coach will wait.

‘Catharsis, that great leap of the coachee to a new understanding, always happens when hearing is suspended’

If the coachee’s brain is struggling it is likely that there is left-right brain traffic occurring and this can lead to significant learning. So what should the coach do? In the SAS (Special Forces Regiment) they train their soldiers to become ‘grey’. Their minds are wholly active but they become unobtrusive and remain unnoticed in a crowd. Similarly, the coach needs to be grey, wholly attentive and respectful of the coachee’s space but not a ‘force’ within it. That means having no concern for self, just for the client. The coach will respect the space and work of the coachee.

The coachee may give other signs that silence may be useful. Where the coachee is agitated a skilled question may make a difference. If there is processing going on after that intervention then silence is likely to be the best intervention.

Of course, the coach’s projection can inspire an unnecessary silence. If your own psyche is throwing up feelings which you think significant for your coachee, then it is necessary to let those go and attend more fully to the client. Coaches can be wrong, coachees never are.

Effective Silence

Silence in coaching can only be fully effective where the coachee accepts total trust and support from the coach. The coachee may feel awkward about silence if their coach is uncomfortable about it. The coach must therefore feel able to fully be with their coachee. In the SAS this might be thought of as a ‘grey state’ but as a performance coach I find it helpful to think of this state as like that of a relaxed and

considerate fellow-traveller. I am still an essential part of the dynamic; I cannot go to sleep! My attention is in the space, sensing and attending to the state of my coachee. Silence has then become an intervention for change, not simply a tool.

Coaches sometimes feel conflict where they are thinking about the presumed need for the next intervention and hence not providing the best attention for the coachee. I sometimes think of the brain as a computer processor. It can only process so much and if you commit too much processing to the next step, there is less available for attention. It is useful for the coach to trust and believe that the intervention will come when needed. Our NLP experiences suggest that when we do this, it typically becomes true.

Finale

Silence is a powerful tool, Like every new skill it needs practise to become familiar and expert with its use. It is worth developing these skills – it is in the inner world of the coachee's head that significant shift occurs. If the coach fills their world with noise then opportunities will be missed.

Silent Engagement

- The coachee needs to expect silences in the dynamic
- Silence permits inner feeling and/or dialogue
- Catharsis is always an inner experience free from the coach's voice
- The coach needs to provide active attention

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