Listening: Summarize Using Reflective Language[1]

We introduced the idea of repeating words when considering the approach to 'hot-words'. This is called Reflective Language and involves using those same words and phrases precisely. What is the point of that? The brain is largely geared to noticing differences to the norm. When we say a phrase, a neural pathway in the brain opens up which is like the lock in a door; the key is the phrase. When that same phrase is used in the same way, this key re-enters the lock easily without initiating logical, interpretive processing. When you listen well, you can reflect the words and phrases you hear in your responses.

Reflective Language helps the individual feel heard. More than that, they can stay more perfectly in their own story without having to negotiate with you about the world in your head. In fact, many of the most popular (and best listeners) that we know do this automatically, without thinking. These skills are easily learned and with practice can be advanced by even the most unbelieving executive. The best driver for that being an easy process is a genuine interest in other people!

When I am invited to do Master Classes in coaching, I use a lot of Reflective Language for the reasons above. Often, someone in the audience will say, following a coaching demonstration, that my coachee[2] must have noticed the unusual way I was taking. We then turn to the coachee and ask <u>them</u> what they noticed. There has not been an occasion when Reflective Language has been noticed by that individual. Let's see exactly what I mean in practice.

> *Tom: Irene is giving me Hell because I cannot release time for her project – we have our own time-issues. I feel exposed as she has previously used a situation like this to undermine me with colleagues and I only learned of it afterwards. I had to do some damage-limitation because she is very plausible.*
>
> *Angus: Tom, may I recap to check I get this right? Irene is giving you Hell because she wants time for her project? You are feeling exposed as she has used a situation like this to undermine you? Is that right?*
>
> *Tom: Twice actually.*

There is a lot more a good coach could do to take this conversation to any one of many productive conclusions. In this case it might just serve to say:

> *Tom: Twice! Okay what can I do to help in a nutshell? Or,*

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[1] For more detailed description and examples, please refer to McLeod, A (2003).
[2] Coachee is the most commonly used term for someone who is being coached.

> *Tom: Twice! Would you like me to intervene or is there another way forward in your view?*

These both acknowledge that you have heard the double experience. If Tom were struggling you might just offer solutions rather than encouraging him to find his own. We will develop a flexible management philosophy for this type of situation in the chapters under Motivation[3]. Reflective Language comes naturally the more you try. At first, try concentrating on the nouns and adjectives and that will give you confidence to do more and with good effect.

Listening: Summary Feedback

When you summarize it is then important to invite feedback to correct any misunderstandings. If your summary is way off what they feel they told you, then a process of 'summarizing the corrections' and subsequent feedback will be required to be sure that you are both fully on the same page. Where long-term misunderstandings occur, or a pattern of communication that is unproductive is common, you can bet that one of the issues is that of 'being heard'. The answer to that is in using Reflective Language to summarize what you have heard and then asking if your summary is correct. The mechanism stops long-term communication issues like these in their tracks.

Listening: Involvement in Decisions

In most cases, the people who report to us are able to help come to sensible decisions about the way forward. If you are not sure, give them the benefit of the doubt and ask them!

> *Tom, if you agree that this outcome is unsatisfactory, do you want to suggest some practical ways for moving forward to avoid this from now onwards?*

Their contribution will depend upon their abilities but will encourage more self-starting and hence less of your time in future.

Listening: Giving credit for ideas and actions overtly

When you listen well, particularly in team meetings, it is the case that ideas flow from different people. In the passage of time actions and plans take shape and these lead to success. Honoring contributions is sensible as we may not know who in the team is most possessive or proud of their ideas. If we want them to continue being creative and

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[3] See The McLeod 3 Zone Management Model

making contributions then a level of recognition is recommended. At the first stage it can be as simple as:

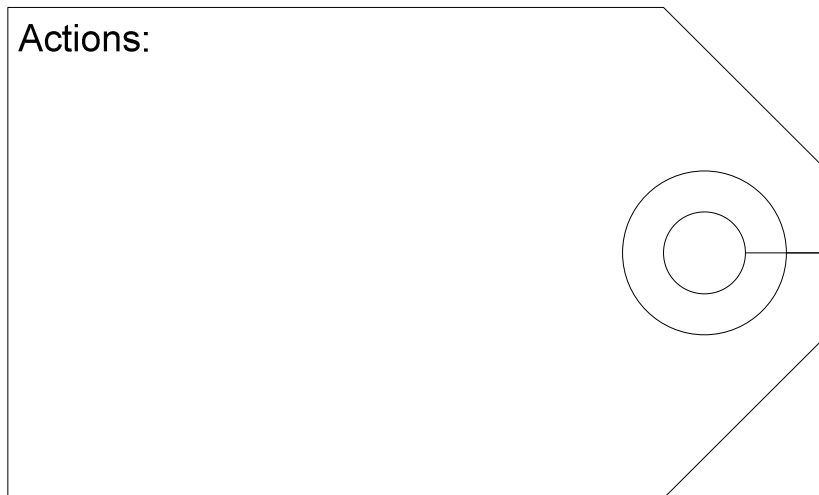*Tom, thanks for that idea, I'm going to write that down on the board.*

Many managers know that the bulk of creative development arises from the quality of, and the involvement of their team. And it can be a nice feeling to be associated very closely with their talent. However, being associated is not the same as taking ownership. In some reports, minutes and communiqués, it is appropriate to give the origin of the original idea even if that person is not on the circulation list. If it's a success and many people know, someone will mention it to them.

As well as the grape-vine, recognition may be due at the annual 1-2-1 or other 1-2-1 opportunity. These small tokens of respect can be greatly warming to people. Imagine such recognition happening to you.

Which of the listening skills we have covered could be development areas for you, if any? What will you do to improve your skills? Where will you test them and with whom?

<space for writing here – Actions>

Actions:

People Skill: Understands others

We know that 1-2-1s (including using the Wheel of Work) as well as informal conversations are helpful to learning about people's motivations. Quite a lot is also given away in language. I have been urging increased use of language skills and acute listening. Both will help to develop a greater sensitivity to the words people chose to use and the stress that they place on those words. This will increase your perception about the meaning behind the sentences but also impact on their level of motivation and de-motivation. The same applies to commitment.

> *We are a day behind schedule. There have been supply issues and I am not at all happy that the data-loggers were not in place. I think we can catch up if the delayed parts are here this morning.*

One person's 'not at all happy' is another's 'I am really pissed that you did not approve the purchase of the data-loggers last month. If you had, we would now be two days ahead of schedule'.

> *That project is going okay. Oh, I'd like to talk with you about the car plan for next year.*

The word okay has no passion in it. It's a low energy word. This, coupled with a change of subject to something else suggests that there is more we need to know and so should question to isolate what is missing. Is it motivation, commitment, or is something going wrong with the project itself?

As well as language, there is the aspect of the Real Thing, authenticity. Is what they say believable or not? Sometimes the instinctive feeling you have is more accurate than the logical (and sometimes not[4]). If a person you know says in a flat monotone, with no animation at all:

> *I am really excited about the prospect of running this project*

Then you can be pretty sure that they are not excited.

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[4] We look at the development of instinct about others in Part Three when we consider Emotional Intelligence