

How to 'Be Present' for Your Coachee

Earlier this year I attended the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) West of England Annual Conference. I was fascinated by an instruction that the excellent motivational speaker kept giving us. He told us to **be present** i.e. to be in the room with him not just physically but mentally, and not be distracted by what was going on around us or inside our heads. It's harder than you might imagine! For what tends to happen is that we hear something, and it triggers a thought, maybe of a similar experience that we've had, and before we know it we're caught up in our own story and far removed from the present reality.

When we first start learning how to coach, one of the hardest skills to master is to concentrate fully on the coachee and avoid any 'interference'. There are several ways to do this and 4 are highlighted below:

1. Prepare yourself

Get yourself in the right frame of mind – one where you're enthusiastic about the imminent coaching conversation and you're completely focused on helping the coachee achieve their goal. Give yourself time to relax, focus and prepare yourself and your environment. Make sure you have everything to hand that you might need such as notes from previous sessions (which you will have re-read), pen and paper etc. Create an uncluttered environment so that neither you nor the coachee will get unnecessarily distracted. Set yourself a clear goal relating to your own performance as a coach, then visualise success and hold the image in your mind of a win/win situation where both you and the coachee are absolutely delighted with the outcome.

2. Practise active listening

When we listen, we're often paying more attention to our own internal dialogue than to what we're actually hearing. We don't wait for people to finish their sentences before we start drawing conclusions about what they're going to say next. We **assume** we understand where they're going with their conversation and we can be completely wrong! So much can be missed by failing to listen and a coaching session can be significantly diminished. So, what can you do to listen effectively?

- Block out internal distractions
- Ignore external distractions and take action in advance to minimise them
- Demonstrate curiosity and a genuine interest in the answers provided
- Adopt a non-judgemental attitude
- Demonstrate you're listening through non-verbal signals such as nodding, and in-fills like "I see", "u-huh" etc.
- Use paraphrasing, summarising, and confirming e.g. "It sounds like..."
- Don't project your experience onto the coachee's story
- After asking a question, pause. Don't fill the silence with another question or your own suggested answer
- Use a high proportion of open questions

- Try to strike a 70:30 balance of listening versus speaking
- Acknowledge the coachee's achievements or progress

3. Pay attention to body language

According to the often-quoted Birtwhistle, 55% of the message we convey is through our body language, while 38% is through our tone of voice and only 7% is through the words that we speak. Our coachees are not blind to the signals we send off and in order for those to be good ones, some techniques to adopt are:

- Sit up straight and give the impression that you are alert and interested!
- Mirror and match body language in a positive yet inconspicuous manner
- Maintain comfortable eye contact – don't out-stare your coachee!
- Smile and use the coachee's name
- Adopt a positive tone of voice, especially at the start and the end of the conversation
- Pick up on signs of incongruence in your coachee's facial expressions and body language and challenge them appropriately

4. Make use of the senses

As our world is represented by the senses, we can create stronger rapport by identifying our client's preferred sense and matching it. So, if we notice our coachee frequently using language such as, "I see what you mean", or "It looks achievable" or "I get the picture", then it's fairly safe to say that that particular coachee will respond well to questions and responses framed by you in a **visual** manner. On the other hand, an 'auditory-type' might say, "It sounds difficult" or "Listen to this...", giving you clues to respond in a similar **auditory** fashion. The more **kinaesthetic** types will respond more easily to the question, "How did that make you feel?" as opposed to "What did you think about that?"

I'll let you into a secret. When I was starting out as a coach I failed miserably in this regard. Unbeknown to me, I displayed a very strong 'visual' preference and often phrased my questions in corresponding language. One day, after I'd asked my (non-paying!) client to visualise achieving his goal and describe this to me, I waited...and waited...and nothing! Picking up on his body language I asked him if he was having trouble doing what I'd asked him. With a look of utter confusion on his face, he admitted that he simply couldn't do it and, in fact, he didn't know what I meant.

Having personally gone through this quite unsettling experience, I now realise that coaches can find it very difficult to distinguish a coachee's preferred sense because they have so much else to concentrate on. My recommendation is to adopt a variety of question types so that the feeling of '**being present**' is maximised.

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