Expansive Listening: An Essential Coaching Skill

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As coaches, our primary tools are listening and questioning. It’s time we take responsibility for how we’ve listened and the questions we’ve asked. It’s time we listen and respond in new ways.

**First, A Reckoning**

We have asked many questions that were disguised in armor, that marched out with the intent to corner someone and provoke a fight. We have asked many questions that were proud of their brilliance and intellectual prowess, questions that sauntered forth with research tucked under their arms, assuming that erudite arrogance was acceptable in the halls of learning institutions, when really, those questions were simply a form of aggression. We have asked questions that were feebly disguised manipulations: we thought ourselves considerate to dangle the correct response, which justified our anger when they didn’t say what we wanted them to say.

Some of us discovered that our conversational militarism conflicted with our values, and we shifted to seemingly less violent tactics. We deluded ourselves into thinking we were listening: we maintained silence while the other person spoke, and when they stopped, we paused, praising ourselves for withholding for two seconds, and then we said what we thought we had to say. This, however, is not listening. This is simply a technical skill of calculating seconds and monitoring utterances. We manipulated listening and responding to silence the other.

And then there is righteous indignation, the holiest of listening/responding aggression. Please know, I’ve been a master at this, as many can testify. This is the listening we do when there is only one heavily guarded mental gate through which all sounds pass into the fortress of Right. The sentries don’t hesitate before beheading anything resembling Wrong. No time for deeper understanding, no time to see the bigger picture, no time to hear the pain, no time for curiosity or compassion because that gate stands on Urgency. Justification has been amassed in volumes of injustices and statistics and THERE IS NO TIME. We know who we are, those of us who have perpetrated this kind of listening.

There are other questions to acknowledge, other ways we’ve listened. We’ve listened so that we can figure out how to Fix It, so that we can be the brilliant ones, the ones with all the answers, the source of all knowledge and solution, the ones whom others need, the ones with the power. We’ve listened with pity, seeing the other as smaller and weaker, watching them shrivel in front of our gaze, thinking ourselves betters. We’ve listened because we want affirmation, asking questions with a need for validation woven into our vowels.

So much violence has been done under the auspices of listening. With this, we must reckon.

Your constricted ways of listening have hurt others as well as yourself; they have cut you off from possibilities, in yourself and in others, possibilities that may have led to transformational impact on those you aspire to serve and on the world. Your constricted ways of listening may feel comfortable and familiar, you may feel momentarily satisfied when using them, but perhaps you crave more–real impact, real connection.

Constricted listening will ultimately suffocate you. You don’t need it. If we take responsibility for how we’ve listened, and if we recognize the fundamental power of listening, we can develop new ways of being with others.

**Stepping Forth**

Don’t be ashamed of your ways of listening. Begin your journey of transformation by listening to yourself, to the story of your own righteous indignation, with compassion and curiosity. Practice expansive listening inward. You must start there in order to make different choices when you listen to others. This can happen.

You may be afraid as you embark on expansive listening because this is unfamiliar terrain. You may feel uncertain and vulnerable. You may feel pain and grief. You will be okay.

Your questions can be generous. They can invite honesty and dignity. Within you, there are invitational questions, warm questions that embrace the other. Ask questions that don’t need answers, that simply raise a worthy thing to contemplate.

Allow your questions to come from the kindest, most tender part of yourself, the part that melts when petting a baby animal or gazing into the eyes of someone you adore. Let your questions find form from a memory of being in a wild and open place, or from a transcendent musical composition, or from a passage of wise text. What might be possible if questions emerged from sacred places? Could you ask questions that evoke in the other a gasp of delight, a look of awe and wonder?

Expansive listening takes courage. It takes practice. It takes fierce commitment to a different way of being. This kind of listening and questioning requires a voyage into the deepest unknown. You need not abandon all opinions nor dishonor your experiences. You need to be willing to be changed by what you hear.

Don’t be afraid by my warnings about this journey: we were made to do this. Our hearts and minds are designed with tremendous capacity for flexibility and expansion; they are ready and waiting for us to set sail.

**Beyond the Horizon**

Here’s what you have to gain: relationships that redefine what it means to be with another; connections that create new definitions of intimacy; partnerships with colleagues, bosses, students, families (your own and other’s) in which you feel open, accepting, grounded and clear-headed, in which you feel hopeful and effective.

You will find a source of power within that can be accessed to transform your moment-to-moment levels of joy and satisfaction, your daily physical experiences. You will sleep better. Your back won’t hurt. You will wake up in the morning feeling calm, enchanted by the sounds of the birds at dawn. You might find yourself eating more leafy greens.

You will feel comfortable within your own skin. Your demons will find their playing grounds shrink and eventually, they will recede into the corners of your brain where neural networks cease to operate. You will find a source of love for yourself and for other living beings that thought only existed in fairy tales. You will no longer doubt.

That’s all.

I know&mdash;this is a tall order to promise. And yet I’m willing to do so, because it can be done. I speak from personal experience; I speak from having witnessed transformation in others. Listening is the place of beginning. I’m giving you a map and pointing at the start.

**The Questions Themselves**

What does it sound like, you are wondering, to ask questions that emerge from expansion? I will not offer you the sentences, nor phrases or words, because I trust that you can find them. You are prepared with terminology.

The people with whom you talk, to whom you listen will not care about the precision of the language. They will forgive your clumsy sentences and questions that ramble if you have listened expansively and asked a question that comes from humility, trust, possibility and love.

Think about it&mdash;that’s all that you want too, right? To be listened to with love? It would be such a relief to be listened to like that.

Here are some slightly more concrete tips to guide you on this exploration:

* Don’t hurry your questions.
* Take deep breaths while you listen.
* When the other person finishes talking, say, “Thank you. Tell me more.”
* Don’t talk too much&mdash;not more than a third of the total time.
* Speak slowly.
* Say, “I need a moment to think,” before you respond.
* During your moment to think, look out a window and let your mind wander. Don’t worry about what they’re thinking. Taking time to think is honorable.
* Soften the space between your eyebrows, relax your arms, let your jaw drop, and smile slightly.
* Think mostly about the place from which you are listening and make a choice to do so from a place of expansion and love.

Now, go forth and practice. I will see you on the journey.