

## 3 Levels of Listening, 'Co-Active Coaching', Kimsey-House et al (4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2018)

The Co-Active Coaching model highlights that listening is both a natural gift and a skill that can be developed, and it is essential for building trust and creating impact. It introduces three levels of listening: Level 1 – Internal (self-focused), Level 2 – Focused (deep attention on the other), and Level 3 – Global (sensing environment, energy, and intuition). Mastery of these levels enables coaches to listen with presence, expand awareness, and foster transformation

***“To be truly listened to is a striking experience, partly because it is so rare.”***

When another person is totally with you, leaning-in, interested in every word, eager to empathise, you *feel seen and understood*. People open-up when they know they're really being listened to. They expand. They have more presence. They feel safer and more secure as well, and trust grows. A true commitment to listening well is important in any conversation, but it is especially critical to effective coaching.

Listening is a talent each of us is given in some measure. People who become coaches tend to be gifted listeners to begin with. But *listening is also a skill that people can learn and develop* through training and practise. Masterful coaches have taken their abundant gift and brought it to a high level of proficiency - indeed they use it with the same unconscious grace an athlete uses in the sport, or a musician in a performance.

Most people do not listen at a very deep level. With the pressure and pace of their everyday occupations and preoccupations, they survive by just getting by... Who has time for anything deeper? For coaches, listening in new ways, is key.

In everyday listening, we listen mostly to the words. The focus is on what you said, and what I said. Think of all the arguments in which the crux of the fight was the precise words that were used:

“That's not what you said!”

“That's what I meant.”

“But it's not what you said!”

## “3 levels of listening’ cont.

Another common occurrence in life and organisations, is how tenuous the actual *connection* is, in conversations. We start a conversation, but within seconds we've disconnected to process the words internally, or to pay attention to one of 100 other distractions, whether they are also important, just attractive, or simply nagging... *Instead of really listening, we start thinking about what will say next*, we look for a comparable story... we get caught up in our own feelings, we take things personally, we listen at a superficial level as we *evaluate and judge* what the other person is saying.

**Effective coaching requires effective listening that is both attuned and adept.**

The best listeners know how to maximise the listening interaction. ‘Interaction’ is the right word too, because *listening is not simply passively hearing, there is action in listening.*

### Awareness and Impact

*Awareness* includes the information we receive, and what we hear, with our ears. But we also listen with all of our senses, and with our intuition. We hear, see and experience sounds, words, images, feelings and energy. When we are attentive to all the information we draw in from our senses, we are multifaceted receivers with many receptors of various kinds, all of which are taking in information: we notice the pace of the delivery, the pitch and tone, the modulation of the voice; we sense the pressure behind the words; the words might be soft or hard edged, tentative or enrage. We listen not only to the person, but simultaneously to everything else that is happening in the environment. When we're together in person, or in a video conference setting, we can observe body language as part of the communication. Over the phone we sense emotion, and the silence is often filled with revealing information. Since we can't hold the flow to analyse, discern and interpret meaning from all the incoming sources, the key is to stay open be aware and remain receptive.

The second aspect, *impact*, points to the effect of our listening on others – specifically, the impact of the coaches’ listening on the coachee.

*To be an effective listener you need to be conscious not only of what you were listening to, but also of the impact you were having when you act on your awareness.* Most of the time this consciousness occurs just below the surface, while your attention is still on the other person.

## “3 levels of listening’ cont.

### Level 1- Internal listening

*“The purpose of information gathering at Level 1 is to meet your own needs... listening at Level 1 feels disengaged and inauthentic, and it ultimately undermines trust.”*

How

**At Level 1, our awareness is on ourselves.** We listen to the words of the other person, but our attention is on what it means to us personally. At Level 1, it's all about me: my thoughts, my judgments, my feelings, my conclusions about myself and others. Whatever is happening with the other person is coming back to us through a diode, a one-way energy trap that lets information in but not out. We're absorbing information by listening, but we're putting it in a trap that recycles it. At Level 1 there is only one question: what does this mean to me? Another indication that you're operating at Level 1 listening is a strong desire for more information: you want answers, explanations, details and data.

The purpose of information gathering at Level 1 is to meet your own needs... Level 1 informs us about ourselves and what's going on around us. It's also where we figure things out and understand. It's very important.

*Coachees need to be at Level 1. That's their job – to look at themselves and their lives, to process, think about, feel, understand...* but it's definitely not appropriate for the coach to be operating at this self-absorbed level for any length time. Coaches – being human – will naturally have moments of losing focus on the coachee and being at Level 1. The practice for coaches is to return to connection with coachees at levels 2 and 3 as quickly as possible.

The person you are talking to can feel the difference between genuine listening and faux listening, and it has a negative impact. We've all been trained to decode these clues since we were children... a conversation when the person you are talking to is listening at Level 1 feels disengaged and inauthentic, and it ultimately undermines trust.

### Level 2 – Focused Listening

*“The coach is like a perfect mirror that absorbs none of the light. What comes from the coachee, is returned.”*

How

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## “3 levels of listening’ cont.

**At Level 2 there is a sharp focus on the other person.** Sometimes you can see it in each other's posture, both people are leaning forward and looking intently at each other. There is a great deal of attention on the other person and not much awareness of the outside world... when you as a coach are listening at Level 2, your awareness is totally on your coachee. You listen for their words, their expressions, their emotions, everything they bring. You notice what they say, how they say it; you notice what they don't say, you see their smiles, or hear the tears in their voices. *You listen for what they value, you listen for their vision, for the unique way they look at the world. You listen for what makes them come alive in the coaching session, and what makes them go dead or withdraw.* Energy and information come from the coachee. These are processed by the coach, and reflected back. At Level 2, the impact of awareness is on the coachee. The coach is like a perfect mirror that absorbs none of the light. What comes from the coachee, is returned.

At Level 2, coachees are constantly aware of the impact their listening is having on their coachees. They're not constantly monitoring the impact, but they are aware. *For the coach, everything you need to know about where to go next in the coaching just happened, a second ago, if you're listening and aware.* Level 2 listening is the level of empathy, clarification, collaboration; it is as if there is a wired-connection between coach and coachee.

*At this level, coaches are unattached to self, their agenda, their thoughts or their opinions.* At Level 2, coaches are so focused on the coachee that the mind chatter virtually disappears and coaching becomes spontaneous. As a coach, you're no longer trying to figure out the next move. In fact, if your attention is on trying to come up with what to say next, some brilliant question proposed to the coachee, that should be a clue you are listening at level 1, inside your own experience.

As a coach listening at Level 2, you not only hear the coachee speak, but also notice all that is coming to you in the form of information: the tone, the pace, the feelings expressed. You choose what to respond to, and how you will respond, then you notice the impact of your response on the coachee, and receive that information as well.

**The key is awareness.** It's as if time slows down, and the surrounding noise is dimmed, while you intently focus your attention on the person. When you connect at Level 2, it's as if the message is: I have time for you.

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## “3 levels of listening’ cont.

### Level 3 - Global Listening

*“To listen at Level 3, you must be very open, and softly focused, sensitive to subtle stimuli; ready to receive information from all the senses: in your own sphere, in the world around you, in the world around your coachee... The environment itself is giving you information you can use in your coaching even when you can't instantly articulate what it is you're sensing. Sometimes this environment is shouting. Sometimes it's whispering.”*

When you listen at Level 3, you listen as if you and the coachee are at the centre of the universe, receiving information from everywhere at once... Level 3 includes everything you can observe with your senses: what you see, hear, smell, and feel; the tactile as well as the emotional sensations. Level 3 includes the action, the inaction, and the interaction.

If Level 2 is laser-focused, then Level 3 is like a radio field. Though radio waves are entirely invisible, we hear their music. But it takes a special receiver to pick up Level 3, and most people need practise because they don't even make use of this realm of listening most of the time.

*One of the benefits of learning to listen at Level 3 is greater access to your intuition. Through intuition you receive information that is not directly observable...* At Level 3 intuition is simply more information. As a coach, you take in that information and respond, then you notice the impact: how did your response land? What did you notice about that?

Level 3 awareness is sometimes described as environmental listening. You notice the temperature, the energy level, the lightness or darkness, both literally and figuratively. Is the coachee's energy sparking, or flat? Is she cool, distant, or on fire? Like a butterfly ready to fly off? Or a hawk, with its talons gripping tightly?

You learn to trust your senses about that, and you could always just ask: “I get the sense that you're in an awkward place. Are you? What's that about?” Anyone who is successful at influencing people is skilled at listening at Level 3. These people have the ability to read their impact and adjust their behaviour accordingly: *awareness, and impact, and the ability to dance with whatever just happened.*