

Lesson 5

Active Listening

In a world where most people are more interested in talking than listening; in getting their point across rather than appreciating the other person's point of view; and in distracting themselves rather than interacting, listening is a lost art. If you can demonstrate to your coaching client that you are really listening to what she is saying, you will answer a deep need and help her take a major step toward the clarity and purpose she seeks.

Some coaching and therapy models are built entirely on active listening. Active listening means that you pay close attention to what the client is saying and you reflect his communication to him so he becomes more aware of what he is feeling and what he really wants. This is a highly non-directive approach, as it empowers the client to clarify where he stands, and discover or formulate the direction that works best for him.

Here are some *basic elements and techniques of active listening*:

- 1.** Build a foundation with your client using your presence and the attending skills we covered in lessons 4 and 5.
- 2.** Put aside any notion that your role as coach is to be an answer person, advice giver, or to know what your client should do.
- 3.** Recognize that your client has the wisdom and wherewithal to recognize her true choices and direction.
- 4.** After giving your client space to explain his situation, or vent if necessary, reflect to your client what you have heard him say. (Exercises and examples below)
- 5.** Ask your client if she resonates with the reflection you have just offered.
- 6.** If your reflection resonates, your client will probably move to another level of insight, expression, or aspect of the situation he is dealing with.

7. If your reflection does not resonate, or resonates partially, invite your client to say more about what might be a more accurate truth for her.

Here are some *examples of active listening interaction*:

1. Repeat verbatim.

Client: *“My son is doing poorly in school and I don’t know how to get him to improve his grades.”*

Coach: *“Your son is doing poorly in school and you don’t know how to get him to improve his grades.”*

While this technique may seem simplistic, you will be amazed at how validated your client will feel to know that he is heard. If he is not fully in touch with what he is feeling or how he is acting, a simple reflection may bring significant insight. If your client feels that no one else in his life hears him, and you demonstrate that you do, you will be rendering a huge service.

2. Reflect the essence of the statement.

Client: *“I got to work late, my boss chewed me out, I had a fight with my coworker, and I lost an account.”*

Coach: *“So you had a pretty lousy day at work.”*

3. Reflect unspoken feelings.

Client: *“I found out that my boyfriend is exchanging lots of emails with his old girlfriend. I’m about ready to leave him.”*

Coach: *“It sounds like you’re pretty angry and perhaps jealous.”*

4. Reflect an unspoken choice or intention.

Client: *“I went to check out a graduate school, but when I couldn’t find a parking space, I turned around and came home.”*

Coach: *“I’m hearing that you are not highly motivated to attend this school.”*

Note that in all cases the coach does not attempt to analyze or steer the client in a direction. The coach is simply offering the client a mirror of what she is saying or feeling. The coach is not attached to being right, figuring things out for the client, or fixing. Each reflection is simply an offering to the client with the hope and intention that the coach’s statement will illuminate where the client stands, aid the client to gain self-awareness, and move from there.

To develop your active listening skills as a coach, practice in daily situations such as when your mother phones you; or your spouse tells you about his day at work; or in your conversation with your contractor. Every moment of practice will make you more effective with your clients.

Exercise:

1. Repeat verbatim:

Client: *“My brother and sister want to put our father in a nursing home, and I don’t want to do it.”*

Coach:

2. Reflect the essence of the statement:

Client: *“My gay partner and I want to have a civil union, but the stupid government won’t approve our marriage or give us the benefits we deserve.”*

Coach:

3. Reflect unspoken feelings:

Client: *“I want to attend a seminar. I’ve maxed out my credit card and asked my mother for a loan, but she said no. I’m not even sure if I could get off from work to go even if I did have the money.”*

Coach:

4. Reflect an unspoken statement or intention.

Client: *“I want to go on a vacation with my cousin, and my husband doesn’t want me to go. I told my cousin to book me the ticket.”*

Coach:

Further Exercise:

In your interactions with others today and tomorrow, step back from your role as doer, fixer, or knower, and simply reflect to others what you hear them saying. Note their reactions, and how your active listening helps both of you gain awareness, bond more deeply, and clarify next steps.

Affirm:

**I pay close attention to what my clients say
and I let them know they are heard.
My clients deepen in self-awareness
because I reflect what they are expressing.**