Base Metal...

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Introduction

Paul revisits an article from June 2020 this month, considering elements of coaching remotely via digital means, and particularly the place of silence.

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Digital Silence

Since the changes wrought by COVID, many of us have continued to coach virtually. Prior to that, my strong preference was always to meet face-to-face for coaching, but if that period taught us anything, it has put a spotlight on what is possible digitally, and at a more than acceptable level. Granted, there are limitations of working in this way, but it is clear that such video interactions now form a natural part of our ongoing lives, both professionally and personally. And, as many others have also observed, the advantages of not having to travel and of our clients being more able to manage their own time more, are not insignificant. International and time zones barriers are easily surmountable, and the footprint of coaching (whether for the coach or coachee) is reduced.

What struck me this week however was how one potentially significant element of many coaching conversations is qualitatively different in a virtual setting – silence. As Nancy Kline (among many others) has shown us, silence can be a very powerful tool in coaching, but one that often depends on other elements for its effectiveness. Coaching is a long way away from the classic negotiating paradigm of 'he who speaks next loses'. For silence to be effective for a coachee, attention is key, alongside the ability to effectively hold the coaching space, and both of these are more difficult virtually. For a start, the fact that webcams are never in the same place as the screen display (which typically only shows the head and shoulders anyway) can have a significant impact on how as a coachee we feel that we are being attended to in a deep and meaningful sense. Small gestures, facial expressions, vocal elements of engagement or assent come across less readily, all of which contribute to the risk of the digital medium becoming much more of a divide than a desk or table might be.

Maybe as a coach, I have to work harder visually to signal that ongoing level of attention (which might be partly why so many coaches are expressing susceptibility to 'Zoom fatigue'). All of this potentially has an impact on the quality of silence in a coaching context. Which leads me to perhaps the most significant element here – how, as coach or coachee, can I distinguish between meaningful, chosen, coaching silence, and the (not infrequent) digital glitch/freeze or loss of connection. Over a digital link, it is very easy to assume that any significant period of silence is a result of technological failure, rather than a natural (and potentially useful) part of the session, and that assumption seems

to be relevant for both coach and coachee. I have observed potentially significant trains of thought in a coachee interrupted by the question "are youstill there?" or the "you seem to have frozen" comment, and that moment is very difficult to regain.

Part of this, stems from a societal or cultural rejection of interactional silence, and part perhaps from a (justified) lack of trust in the technology. I'd hazard a guess that if we weren't all experiencing outages, connection drops and freezing in our digital meetings, this might be less of an issue, but at present, I find myself asking whether I have 'lost' my client, or whether the technology has cut off my ability to hold the space. Similarly, the temptation (on both sides) to 'fill' silence seems significantly greater in such digitally mediated interactions.

I am therefore left with several questions for myself as a coach:

- Do I notice myself becoming tempted to 'fill the silence' when coaching virtually?
- What strategies might I use to improve my coachee's experience of my attention when digitally mediated?
- How can I still use the power of silence effectively in remote coaching?

Book review

"Shut Up and Listen! - the truth about how to communicate at work", Theo Theobald and Cary Cooper, Kogan Page, 2004
This book is a practical guide. It includes chapters on Listening - how and when and Listening and talking, with advice on making presentations, using voice mail, and dealing with cultural differences. There are numerous recommendations, for example from David Clutterbuck: "… the critical quality of a good communicator is the ability to adapt to the other person you're working with."

"Presence - how to use positive energy for success", Patsy Rodenburg, Penguin, 2009
More than thirty short chapters include one devoted to listening. The book is based on a concept of three circles of energy: self and withdrawal; bluff and force; and connecting. "Listening is an acquired skill …unless you listen in Second Circle [a place of awareness, noticing and accepting background noise] you do not hear properly". Amongst many quotations are the words of Percy Bysshe Shelley from "To a Skylark": "The world should listen then, as I am listening now."

"The Art of Listening in Coaching and Mentoring", Stephen Burt, Routledge, 2019
Introduced by "Listening is the heart of coaching." The textbook on the subject.

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"It is better either to be silent or to say things of more value than silence. Sooner throw a pearl at hazard than an idle or useless word; and do not say a little in many words but a great deal in a few." Pythagoras

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