



Glenn Livingston, Ph.D.

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# How to Become a Better Listener



Glenn Livingston, Ph.D.



Sharon Livingston, Ph.D.

The  
New York  
Times

Entrepreneur

ADWEEK

CRAIN'S  
NEW YORK BUSINESS

Originally trained as a psychologist, Dr. Glenn Livingston has helped literally thousands of clients. Along with his wife Sharon, he's sold consulting, teambuilding, and workshops to big names like AT&T, Nextel, Panasonic, Whirlpool, Novartis, Lipton, Colgate-Palmolive, Kraft, and Panasonic. Their work, research, and theories have been seen in major media publications like The New York Times, Entrepreneur Magazine, Crain's NY Business, AdWeek, America West, and more!

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# Introduction

I think most coaches are good listeners...better than other people. And most coaches would probably evaluate themselves similarly. But since listening is hands down the most important skill a coach employs, there's always room for improvement.

And there's a LOT more to listening than just hearing. It's important to know how to optimize your listening skills so you don't miss a key piece of information when your client finally becomes brave enough to share it.

Most coaches these days practice over the telephone or Skype. And there are both positives and negatives to this arrangement.

Distance coaching allows you to serve clients all over the world. Which is great, especially if you have a narrow coaching niche.

It's also very convenient, allows you to work from home, and keeps operating costs low—something absolutely essential for beginners.

But the downside of phone coaching sessions is you *can* miss some things due to being unable to see your client. You won't know, for example, that she just crossed her arms when you asked an important question. You can't see him break eye contact when discussing his mother.

Body language can be an important tool in coaching.

That's why listening skills are particularly important in the modern era. Just like a blind person, you have to power-up your other senses to make up for what you can't see. You have to listen for things you normally wouldn't hear during an everyday phone call with a colleague or a family member.

Which is why I developed this quick read on listening skills to help you make the most of your sessions.

I hope you find some of these skills useful... even surprising. And I hope you pass them on to your clients.

Everyone can improve their communication skills by learning to listen better.

# Distractions

It's much easier to get distracted while talking to someone on the telephone than when you're sitting right across from you.

Think about your last few telephone conversations.

Other people, email, texts on your smart phone, daydreaming, other calls, dogs barking, computer games, your kids, etc. are just a few of the million and one distractions when you work with clients via telephone or Skype from home.

On a cell phone, it's worse. People often talk while they're ordering fast food, driving, shopping at the grocery store... even when they're using the toilet!

So the number one priority before you begin all of your coaching sessions is to remove as many distractions as possible. Settle down in a quiet place so you can concentrate on your client. They deserve it (and so do you!)

Sure, there are always emergencies and air conditioner repairmen and Fed Ex workers who show up in the middle of a coaching session. Those things are out of your control.

Just be sure to eliminate the distractions you *can*.

## Avoid multi-tasking

One of the biggest temptations while talking to someone on the phone is to do something else. It's a habit that people get into talking to friends and family. One of my friends says her best friend always calls while she's washing dishes. If you are on a lengthy road trip, you may be tempted to squeeze in a couple of clients while you're driving.

Although it's tempting, don't multi-task. It's not only ineffective (*read "The Myth of Multitasking" if you don't believe me*), but it can be dangerous. That's because if you do coaching right, you're encouraging your clients to talk to you about very important goals, dreams, and relationships in their lives. If you try to respond when you've only half-heard what they said, you're MUCH more likely to lead them astray!

Running several companies, I have to admit I've become a master at doing more than one thing at once... but I have a hard and fast rule when it comes to conducting a coaching session. I never drive or do anything else at the same time. It's too easy to get distracted and miss the most important parts of the session.

## **Create a quiet place**

One of the best ways to avoid outside distractions is to create a quiet place in your home where you can take calls. Dedicated office space is ideal. Let your family know when you are in your quiet space, you really aren't available except for true emergencies.

Close the door to keep pets from making noise or distracting you. You may also want to turn on a white noise machine to keep you from being distracted by noises in other parts of the house.

If you don't have a dedicated office, set a designated time. Let the family know that between 7 and 9 p.m. on Wednesday you'll be in your bedroom and unavailable. That space will be off-limits to everybody else, unless there is a real emergency.

## **Ditch the electronics**

Everybody is aware of the distraction that smartphones and computers have on our lives. Don't let them interrupt your coaching session. Here are some tips to help keep you from getting distracted with technology during your sessions:

- Don't use your phone or computer as a clock. Wear a watch or use a wall or desk clock.
  - If you are using your cellphone, set it so that calls coming in during your coaching session go straight to voicemail.
  - If you are using a landline or Skype, turn the cellphone off. Avoid the temptation to just turn off the ringer. It will light up and maybe vibrate when a call, text, or email comes in, and those cues can be distracting.
1. Turn off your computer monitor. Close your laptop. Turn off your tablet. Mute the sound on all these devices.

Limiting external distractions helps keep you focused on your client and not on things going on around you.

# Being present

If you are of a certain age, you probably remember the teacher calling roll and answering, "Here!" or "Present." If you think about it, this procedure made sure you weren't just there in body. It prepared you to be there mentally, too. Being present is a difficult task for most people in our society.

Not being present means you've checked out. You are in your head, distracted by something going on in your mind. Unlike the external distractions, internal distractions take practice to overcome. It's important for coaches to practice being present in the here and now.

We live in a world where the vast majority of people are not present. Most people are dwelling on something that happened in the past or making plans about the future. We are not always aware we aren't present, but we sure do know when someone isn't being present with us.

A friend of mine went to breakfast once a week for years with a colleague who just wasn't there.

"I could tell she was thinking about her next appointment, or that she wanted more coffee and was looking for the waitress and wasn't listening to me," my friend said. "It was frustrating trying to talk to her because it was so obvious her mind was anywhere but with me."

Nobody is present all the time. We all get consumed thinking about what we're going to do next, what else we need to do today, and maybe even thinking about what we're going to have for dinner. And sometimes serious situations threaten to consume us, like when an elderly parent is in the hospital or a teen child is acting out. But when we're in a coaching session, practicing presence is very important because clients will respond to it.

In fact, it's *because* hardly anyone has the experience of people being consistently present for them that doing so is so powerful!

Here are some of the things going on in our minds when we're not present:

- Thinking about the future. We're thinking about our next appointment, our plans for the weekend, chores we need to do, etc.
- Thinking about the past. We're thinking about our *last* appointment, an argument we had with a family member, or reminiscing about our childhood.
- Daydreaming. We start to half-listen, and instead go to a vacation in the Swiss Alps in our minds.
- Rehearsing. We are thinking about what we want to say next. This is very common in coaching situations.

- Waiting to say something. We heard something that needs clarification or a comment, and we don't hear the rest of the conversation because we are focusing on getting a chance to speak.

You can get away with not being present when you're coaching somebody via telephone to a point, but if you coach people face to face in an office, it will be obvious that you've checked out. *(Unless you sit behind them like a psychoanalyst!)*

Not only is it frustrating to the client, every time you check out you risk missing something important which could really help them.

Here are some tips to help you stay focused and present:

- **Know what triggers your mind to wander.** What are you feeling when you check out? Are you bored, tired, angry, anxious? Once you determine what makes you avoid being in the present, take care of the trigger before a coaching session starts.
- **Focus on your breathing.** Being conscious of your breath can turn off the chatter going on in your head. If you've ever practiced meditation, you've probably noticed that the more you tried to focus on shutting off your thoughts the more you thoughts you have. Distracting yourself by focusing on, or even counting, your breaths will quieten your mind.
- **Work on being mindful.** Many people do things mindlessly and aren't even aware of it. We focus on other things while we're driving, doing household chores, or even while we're watching TV. We all multi-task, but if we do it all the time it robs us of the ability to concentrate on what we're doing. Practice keeping your mind on the task at hand, even if it's just washing windows. It will help you learn to be present.
- **Give yourself a reminder.** Put something you love, like a clay pot your child made or a shell you found at the beach, on your desk. Remind yourself every time you look at it to be aware of what is going on around you at the present moment.
- **Write a quick notation when you find yourself wanting to speak.** This will help you get back to listening mode a lot faster. Don't write a long note. Just write a word or two like, "Trigger?" "Similar experiences?" It will take you a second, and then you don't have to worry about forgetting what you wanted to ask about or clarify.

### **Becoming more present will make you a much more powerful coach.**

People can sense that you're really there, and they'll love you for it. You'd be surprised how many people go through an entire day without anyone being present with them.

The next time you're at a restaurant or grocery store, make eye contact and smile at a worker while being present. You'll experience the joy that a person gets when they realize that someone is present in the moment with them.

## Being engaged

Engagement is the way we actually *show* people we're present. In face-to-face coaching sessions, engagement is performed primarily through visual cues, like making eye contact, leaning forward when listening, or nodding your head. But when you're using the telephone or Skype, it's a little more difficult.

### Audio cues

One of the best ways to let someone know you're listening over the phone/Skype is to give them some sort of encouraging response. We do this all the time when we're listening to others – we're just not aware of it. For excellent listening skills, be aware of how often you give your clients audio cues that you are listening.

These cues include saying:

- Right.
- I see.
- Mmmmm.
- Uh huh.
- OK

Even better is asking a simple, factual question every few minutes. Not giving your opinion, or asking them “why” questions. Just asking clarifying, factual questions.

Have you ever been on a phone call with someone and you weren't sure if they were still there? That's because they quit giving you cues they were listening. They may be multi-tasking, daydreaming—OR they might be simply processing what you're saying.

And everybody has had “that call” where they've continued talking after a dropped cell phone call. *(I once talked to my own coach for 15 full minutes before realizing the call was dropped. A pity, because I said some pretty powerful things!)*

### Encouragement

Some of the listening techniques I'm outlining here work well with *established clients*. Remember to establish trust and create a comfortable environment for new clients before you began to probe into their lives too deeply.

You can offer encouragement by letting established clients know that you are interested in what they are saying. Here are some techniques to help them feel like they can reveal more and that you are listening to them.

- **REINFORCEMENT:** When they have touched on a new topic or something you think is going to be key to helping them meet their goals, say something like, "Let's talk about that," or "Tell me more." You've just told the client you heard what they said and are interested in exploring the matter deeper.
- **RECALL:** Ask how they are doing with previous concerns. If a client has talked to you in a previous session about a particular topic and then starts talking about something completely different in the next one, you can ask her to bring you up to date on the previous subject. She'll know, and appreciate, that you remembered what she said before.
- **CLARIFYING:** Don't let something slip by that you don't understand. Sometimes a client talks too fast, drives through a tunnel while on their cell phone, or simply just doesn't communicate an idea well. Be sure to ask them to repeat themselves so you can understand their point. If you still don't understand, let them know what's interfering – "Your cell phone is cutting out," or "I sometimes have difficulty understanding you because you speak kind of quickly" – and ask them to repeat it. Be sure not to blame them for the miscommunication. Make it about *your* ability to understand.
- **VALIDATION:** Letting somebody know they've done something well shows that you're listening and makes them feel like they're making solid progress. Say things like, "I know that was difficult for you to discuss. You're being very courageous." Or, "So you did x, y, and z this time when your ongoing problem occurred. That's a huge step in the right direction." Refer back to your initial sessions when you learned what motivates your client to offer validation.

Being engaged and validating your clients will let them know you're present and actively listening. And guess what? When you practice being engaged, you're less likely to get distracted!

# Understand communication style

In psychology when we talk about communication, sometimes we refer to people as either internal or external processors. The terms refer to the way that human beings process information. It's helpful to understand the difference between internal and external processors and how it affects listening skills.

Internal processors tend to take information in and think about it. They usually think before they speak and have things thought through before they say *anything*. Internal processors like to mull things over.

External processors are the exact opposite. They process information by thinking out loud. They'll throw out a lot of information, and by the time they're done talking their opinion may be completely different than when they started the conversation.

It's pretty straightforward to listen or be with an internal processor.

But it's more challenging with external processors because they tend to interrupt, or throw so much information your way while you're processing that it's difficult to distinguish what they've discarded vs. decided upon.

One of the best solutions is to more consistently intervene with clarifying questions. Ask factual questions and let them process out loud until things start to make sense.

## Let people finish their thoughts

If YOU are external processor as a coach, this can be difficult. Because you're likely very ready to chime in and say something about what your client is saying way before they're ready to hear it. And what your client usually needs is to finish their point. And if they don't get to do so, you're likely to miss something important.

With an internal processing coach, the listening problem isn't interrupting, it's distraction. Internal processing coaches quickly go into their own heads and start thinking about thinking what they'd like to say next. And because of this, they miss what the client is saying. *(Which could be essential if the client is an external processor.)*

The solution to this listening problem is to focus on what the person says until they stop talking. It takes practice. Remind yourself not to say anything for a couple of seconds after someone speaks. You'll get all the information you need and they'll get that you are really listening to them.

Don't beat yourself up if you get distracted or interrupt others. We just can't help it. The average person speaks between 130 and 170 words a minute. We hear and process up to 500 words a minute. **We think much faster than we talk.** That's why distractions are

so common in communication. There's plenty of time to think about other things while people are talking.

Here are some other things to consider to help you stop interrupting others.

- **Remember it's about them.** Listening to what they have to say is more important than what you need to say to them, at least while they are speaking.
- **Close your mouth.** I mean literally, close your mouth. If you listen with your lips pressed together, you won't be as inclined to open it to speak. You can also put a finger to your lips to help you stop interjecting.
- **Take a short note.** This is particularly helpful if you're working with an external processor. If she hasn't seemed to settle on a conclusion after throwing out a number of ideas, you can ask her questions based on short notes. "So, you mentioned you wanted to buy yellow sneakers, and then you mentioned red. Did you settle on one color or are you going to get both?"

There are several reasons people interrupt each other. Sometimes it's based on competition. Sometimes it's impulse control. No matter the reason, learning to stop interrupting others will make you a better listener.

## Listen for the sub-text

Coaching people can be like being a detective. You don't always just pay attention to the obvious clues. You have to listen closely to pick up on the sub-text, or underlying issues the client is communicating.

In face-to-face communication, it's easier because of the visual cues. (*A client sniffing over the phone could have allergies or be crying. You would know for sure if you could see her with tears streaming down her face.*) Here are some of the things to listen for instead:

### Emotion

Do you detect a little anger in a statement? How about sadness? Is your client sounding incredibly joyful discussing a possibility or reaching a goal? Listening for emotion is a powerful tool. It keeps you focused on what the client is saying, and it gives you information you wouldn't have otherwise. For example, a client may say she is OK with a decision at work, but if she sounds angry, she may not be as happy as she is letting on.

If you aren't sure if a client is experiencing a particular emotion, you can clarify with a simple statement like, "You sound like you may be a little angry about that. Is that true?"

## Ideas

Part of a great coaching relationship is brainstorming ideas. There's always more than one way to build a mousetrap, as the old saying goes. And sometimes, even after a client has made a decision about a particular course of action to reach a goal, they may come up with a kernel of an idea which represents a much a better solution.

Often clients have great ideas they're afraid of even mentioning. They may be afraid of failing at something, or have talked themselves out of trying because they don't think they have what it takes to make it work. Listening for ideas helps you uncover some of those secret dreams your client is frightened to pursue...

And bringing them to the forefront gives the client the experience of "thinking new thoughts"... something they'll thank you for again and again!

## Don't make assumptions

We all make assumptions when coaching. It's our way of "filling in the gaps" when we don't know the details. The key point is knowing when something is an assumption and when it's really a fact. Otherwise it will negatively impact your perception and your ability to listen to your client. Because you'll be looking for facts to support your assumption, and will be less open to those that don't.

Writing a note allows you to have your assumption and literally file it away for later evaluation.

**Another tactic is to float an indirect test.** For example, if you think the client might be frightened of losing freedom if they adopted a time management system, you might ask something like, "One of my clients was afraid if he tried managing his time that he wouldn't have any flexibility. What do you think about that?"

An indirect question doesn't put the client on the spot.

We're all shaped by our experiences and histories. They can't help but color our perceptions. But sometimes we let our past experience affect our ability to hear what other people are saying because we're too eager to validate our own assumptions...

We prefer to stay in the comfort zone of what's worked for us in the past.

Here's an example of how assumptions can color our perceptions of others: One of my friends (*let's call her Tammy*) said she had a graduate school roommate (*let's call her Sally*) whose husband (*let's call him Bob*) called her up to 20 times a day.

Sally would call Bob when she left her dorm room to go to class. Then she'd rush to call again as soon as she got back. The phone calls were so important to Sally that Tammy and her classmates began to assume she was in an abusive relationship with Bob. After all, Tammy thought, Bob's being very controlling to require all these calls!

At one point, Bob called campus police when Sally didn't call him immediately after class. At that point, Tammy and her classmates decided it was time to intervene.

They asked Sally about her marriage.

It turns out Bob and Sally had survived Hurricane Katrina and the violent crime which plagued New Orleans for months thereafter. They'd gotten in the habit of keeping close tabs on each other's whereabouts. They became hyper-vigilant about crime.

In fact, what they were demonstrating was a form of post-traumatic stress disorder... and they'd developed a reasonably good coping mechanism. It wasn't abusive at all, but rather, very re-assuring to both of them.

Assumptions hinder our ability to listen.

When you realize you've got an assumption—and we all do!—take a short note or just mentally file it away and KEEP LISTENING.

## Conclusion

Better listening skills help us in every aspect of our lives. They help us become better spouses, children, siblings, friends, employees, employers, and coaches. People are starving to be heard, and good listeners instill trust, confidence, and make people feel like they matter.

Improving your listening skills is one of the key elements that will keep you old clients coming back and will help you get new ones. And you can teach the same listening skills to your clients so that they can improve their relationships as well.

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