

Silence and its role in coaching practice

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This is the third article in an occasional series of practitioner articles; the previous articles (Turner, 2016; Turner, 2017) covered the topics of working with puppets and using walking as a mode of coaching. Much of this next article stems from an experience of working with candidates undertaking professional coaching qualifications in West England and South Wales since 2015, alongside my own practice as an executive coach and young persons' mentor. The experiences of the coaching and mentoring students, who, later in this article, offer their own view of learning about the importance of the use of silence in their practice, have prompted me to look more closely at this topic.

Keywords: Silence, reflection, tool, practice and learnt

A brief scan through an opportunistic selection of coaching literature suggests that silence is a little covered topic dwarfed by the usual skill topics of questioning and listening (Stanier, 2016, Hill, 2004, Whitmore, 2010). More recently, Starr (2016), has briefly focused on silence and illustrated the ways in which it can be used as an important tool in the coaching process by helping to produce reflective moments, pauses in flow and quiet insights. A search of the Emerald Insight and PsycArticles databases for English language peer-reviewed articles featuring the terms 'coaching' and 'silence' produced only sixteen results, none of which had silence in the title or as a key word. Therefore, this article uses insight from named students to form a backdrop to the sparse literature on this topic.

This article is less about offering a new way of practicing coaching, but more of an exploration of a topic less well discussed or investigated by practitioners. It aims to focus the reader on silence as an intervention in coaching relationships and provide some provocations to the greater use of silence as a deliberate tool, elevating these skills to that of those more traditionally written about, such as use of questions or the descriptions of coaching models. Interested readers are encouraged to access Neenan (2009) or Crawshaw (2010) for a more deeper coverage of the detail of the coaching process.

Definitions of silence include several that sound negative in the coaching context, such as the synonyms: quieten, quiet, shush, still, gag, muzzle, censor, stifle and speechlessness, wordlessness, voicelessness, dumbness, muteness, taciturnity, reticence, uncommunicativeness, unresponsiveness.

Perhaps more helpful synonyms for the coaching context are:

quietness, quietude, still, stillness, hush, tranquility, noiselessness, soundlessness, peace, peacefulness, peace and quiet

The importance of silence in coaching can often be illuminated by looking elsewhere for definitions and ideas. The briefest of looks at computer science Dhulipala, Fragouli and Orlitsky, (2010) suggests that computer studies are interested developing, through the examination, of both electrical pulses and the gaps between these pulses, an understanding of the role of silence. This focusses on the fact that the pulses and the silences are of equal importance. Music too has a long history of using silence (including the famous John Cage piano musical piece called 4 minutes 33 seconds), where no notes are struck and, in the silence, music is formed, Kania (2010).

Turning my gaze to organisational literature, Vakola and Bouradas (2005) have suggested that supervisors and managers who are used to and more tolerant of silence create more trust and have a more positive effect on members of staff, breeding greater input into decision making and a positive employee attitude.

Cain (2013) and Maitland (2009) have both extolled the virtues of silence in everyday life, with Cain trying to find the voice of introverts within business life by identifying silence as '*a tool of contemplation*'. In addition, Maitland writes about the pleasures and powers of silence and how, in her very auto-ethnographic research, she notices silence causes '*...the dissolving of barriers*' and that silence, for her, becomes, '*...the presence of something that is not sound...*' (2009, p.29).

In forms of artistic impression silence is identified as being similarly important. For example, Qi and Wang (2010) write extensively about the role of silence in theatrical expression and communication. Here, they write about Harold Pinter's plays and his rationale for the use of silence:

The speech we hear is an indication of that we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke-screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silences fall we are still left with echo but never nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness. (p.30)

This quote may point to one possible function of silence within coaching and mentoring. As mentioned, and reinforced by student anecdotal evidence, below, silence seems to be one of the least understood of the skills needed to be a good coach (cf. Passmore, 2010). However, the coach or mentor is often in control of the place in which coaching occurs by setting the space, place and pace of the interactions (Heneberry & Turner, 2016). The gaps between speaking are important – not that the environment could or must be quiet; I am not talking about environmental noises and intrusions but the gaps between the questions and answers.

Some writers have made claims about silence and its use within coaching. Papatriantafillou (2014) suggests that silence is a way of communication:

It has many faces, can mean different things to different people, can communicate different things and its meaning depends on the context. Even though there are times that the use of silence can block communication, there is also the constructive use of silence, which enhances and strengthens it.” (p. 1)

She goes on to identify a number of different ways of using silence. Amongst the categories she identifies are caring, busy, mindful, magical and being centred.

However, since 2010 researchers have started to look in more detail at the empirical data offered in the understanding of silence in coaching. For example, Passmore (2010) suggests that silence is a power tool:

‘...which participants in this study recognised as useful in helping them reflect in a way they had not previously done about the issue.’ (p.54)

In a model in which Fillery-Travis and Cox (2014) coined the term ‘linguistically poor’, they have suggested that silence, whilst not linguistically rich (the other end of the spectrum), is rich in meaning and impact. Being termed as linguistically poor may sound like an anathema to a practicing coach. Micro examinations of any coaching conversation would always reveal silences, large and small; brief betrayals of thinking, perhaps, gaps between streams of co-produced words. What, for me, is emerging is a view of silence can be and should be an active ‘thing; another tool to use for the coach and coachee, not a mere marker along the passage and flow of a conversation. Fillery-Traivs and Cox's plea was that the many factors (which in this case includes coaching) in the actual reality of the dyad relationship need further forensic investigation and analysis.

Student feedback on silence

In an effort to build on the nascent literature on silence within coaching, qualitative data were sought from candidates on a professional coaching qualification in West England. Each of these student coaches (some now qualified) have given their written consent to be named in this article and for their words to be published, unedited, in full. Active students in July 2018 were asked what they had learnt about silence whilst formally studying coaching and mentoring and undertaking assessed assignments about their practice:

Within in my practice I was already comfortable with silence and ‘staying in the moment’ with the client. I think what I have developed are my listening skills, staying with feelings. Enabling

me to reflect and think about what the client is saying, or what they are not saying. I can also reflect on moments where silence has enabled the client to respond to a question or consider their situation, reflect and think. In my practice using telephone coaching I have used silence within a comfortable supportive coaching conversation.

Jo Witherstone

I'm learning that silence is a useful tool, although to describe it as such seems wrong and disrespectful. It can be very powerful and empowering because it creates time, space and freedom for something to happen. For the coachee, as far as I can tell, it is an elongated moment to process thinking which sometimes they seem to relish and sometimes makes them twitchy. It can also provide an opportunity for them to write notes which capture ignited thoughts. For me as the coach, it can provide a brief respite, just be peaceful or be an opportunity for me to check-in with my own thinking, behaviours and next steps. I'm learning to respect silence and have become more aware of its presence and how easy it is for silence to become silent in our busy lives.

Natalie Rothwell-Warn

We're taught to fill in gaps in conversation; silence is clunky, it feels awkward and wrong, so you pre-empt and think ahead as you strive to fill the gaps. As you develop your coaching practice you learn silence is really golden. It unpeels layers of thought, creates space for discovery and leaves you, the coach, room to listen deeply to what is and what isn't being said. You realise over time that the fewer words you say the better.

Hannah Maudrell

After running a start-up organisation for 16 years, and being expected to have all the answers, learning to be silent was a challenge. It was not easy, it required a lot of concentration for one un-practised in the art of keeping quiet and practicing active listening; however, with perseverance I began to appreciate that silence is an enabler for the exploration of increased personal awareness. It allows the client to consider their role in the topic being discussed and explore the options open to them.

During my learning I have discovered that considered questions and the application of measured silence empowers the client, encourages them to take ownership of their situations and aids them in developing ideas and plans to take control or initiative. I believe it is one of the most powerful tool in a coach or mentors' armoury.

Nigel Stone

Silence can be a powerful and an almost subversive tool. By using silence, you enter a 'liminal' space. The Latin definition of 'liminal' is of a threshold, a transitional place. This is a useful space for the coaching relationship. It allows an added period of reflection and understanding by either the coach or coachee that can be invaluable or just as important as words.

Andy Elson

Discussion

It is interesting to note that, despite the fact that no overt guidance was given to the candidates about what to say there may have been an element of my own tutorial interest in this topic by nearly asking the question!

A thematic look at these quotes from students of coaching and mentoring offers an insight into the reality of silences' existence in human conversations – not just passing pauses but something more profound, perhaps. The idea of silence as support to the coaching process is a strong one and many of the respondents saw this support in the form of another tool that had to use or call into use. Oddly, perhaps, silence was feared by some. This is the relativity of using silence as a tool for learning is that often groups seem disquieted by the use of silence, more familiar with the teacher talking. However,

with practice, silence was respected as if that aspect of listening and questioning had never been formally recognised or previously addressed.

Furthermore, several of the co-respondents had seen silence as being valuable not only as a tool for them but also as useful for the coachees to use to control aspects of the session. The idea of silence as a subversive space has an allure to it as the coach and the coachee call it into use either independently or in a synchronised fashion to allow for more-in-the-moment reflection, adjustment, thought and re-adjustment.

Many of the reflection noted above give prominence to the idea that silence, or the active use of silence, can aid reflection providing a space for thinking about a question, formulating an answer and actively constructing a protected space (one writer referred to liminal space) where magical understanding unfolds or moments are grasped to clarify both actions and thoughts.

Conclusions

This short article highlights the growing interest in the details of happenings between coach and coachee and exposes a comparative gap in understanding of the role of silence in the successes of the coaching process. Evidence from current coaching and mentoring students is that silence holds fascination for people who previously assumed that coaching was much more about talking and questions than listening. The statements from my student colleagues reveal how silence in a coaching conversation initially is not considered and even feels 'wrong' or clunky'.

All five respondents suggest that further acclimatization into the art of coaching reveals the subtle spaces that silence opens out into, from time for reflection, for transition and for discovery or even for igniting thoughts. Furthermore, my previous articles about coaching hint at ways of inducing silence thought and reflection (Turner, 2016) and introspective contemplation of other viewpoints (Turner, 2017). Further work needs to be undertaken using empirical data and auto-ethnographic reflections in order for the training of coaches, in particular, to be more impactful with greater light being shed on the topic of and use of silence.

Further work could be picked up by practicing coaches through, amongst other approaches:

1. Emphasising and mirroring the use of silence in training, supervision and reflective practice
2. Recording, with permission, coaching conversations and interpreting the subsequent transcript
3. Highlighting the role of silence in the paired coaching conversations through close examination of transcripts from live coaching sessions
4. Further detailed literature searches for the theory and practice of silence in other supporting professions such as therapists or professional worker who deal with people one-to-one.

I am indebted to Dave Tee for his help with the more theoretical aspects of this paper.

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