

Chapter 6 - Listens Actively: Measuring Empathetic Listening

The International Coaching Federation's competency 6, Listens Actively, requires coaches to have an open mind for the client's way of communicating and an open approach that integrates the client's language into the coach's language. While a coach should recognize the value of understanding and honoring their unique, authentic self, coaching as a skill requires the coach's attention to be focused more on the client's expression of the client's unique and authentic self.

In practice, Listens Actively means that the coach will use the client's language as part of the questions they ask, the reflections and observations they offer and tools they provide. The coach is not the expert of the client's agenda, but rather the expert on the coaching approach of integrating client language into open, meaningful and effective exploration. When a coach listens actively, the client is able to hear themselves think and create solutions and paths forward that work for them as individuals.

This chapter unpacks the elements and markers of success for competency 6—Listens Actively.

1. Considers the client's context, identity, environment, experiences, values and beliefs to enhance understanding of what the client is communicating

Element one highlights the range of what the coach is listening for. Coaches are not trained to simply listen for details of a situation with the intention of resolving the problem on behalf of the client. Coaches are also not trained to simply focus on any one aspect found in element one. Instead, coaches are trained to listen to the client as a complete person who is made up of information, beliefs, history, hopes for the future, interesting language and interesting ways of expressing that language.

In comparison to other conversations, the coach is skilled in hearing the other person as a unique individual making space for the way the client sees the world and themselves even if they communicate and hold different perspectives, values and beliefs than the coach. This allows a coach to support someone who is considering a decision the coach would not make for themselves—not nudging

the client toward the coach's desired direction. There are limits and boundaries to this (which will be covered in our chapter on coaching ethics); however, coaching provides an approach to helping conversations that can bridge significant gaps in beliefs, experiences and ways of thinking. The coach is open to hearing these things from the client and uses the client's way of communicating to inform their own approach to the conversation.

2. Reflects or summarizes what the client communicated to ensure clarity and understanding⁶

Reflections and summaries are two types of statements a coach may offer the client to help the client hear their own words played back for them. There are other, similar reflective statements a coach may use in a coaching session outlined in chapter 7. Coaches reflect the client's language back in order to help the client consider their thoughts and how they express those thoughts. This can also be a helpful way to support the coach's own clarity about the client's situation and context.

It should be noted that reflecting and summarizing should not be done in excess and should not focus too much on the coach's full understanding of the client's situation. While the coach and client often work better when they are "on the same page," taking too much time to verify details of the client's agenda, situation or background can decrease the time spent on gaining new insight and exploring progress towards the client's desired outcome for the session. Coaches should be particularly careful to avoid a pattern of summarizing or paraphrasing consistently throughout the session.⁷

Also, while coaches can offer summaries to demonstrate listening, at times it is better for the coach to prompt the client to summarize their ideas or learning for themselves as a way to deepen the insights gained from the session.

3. Recognizes and inquires when there is more to what the client is communicating

⁶ Also, marker 6.7: "Coach succinctly reflects or summarizes what the client communicated to ensure the client's clarity and understanding."

⁷ In my experience as a coach assessor, some coaches have developed a habit of offering a summary or paraphrase nearly every time the client is done speaking. This pattern—client's response, coach paraphrase, coach question, repeat—can feel overly formulaic and can lead to a less empathetic connection between the coach and client.

The coach should not only be listening for what is being said by the client, but should also consider what might not be said as well. When a client is expressing one thing in their words, but appears to be communicating something else with their body language, it can be helpful for the coach to prompt the client to reflect on the potential contradiction. At times, the coach may offer their own interpretation or intuition for the client's reflection.

Of all the elements of listening actively, this is the one that represents the most risk. Coaches are often taught to avoid introducing the coach's interpretations, assumptions and intuition when possible, but at all times the coach's assumptions and intuition will present in the background of the coach's thinking. When a client says a certain word, the coach will have an initial assumption about how the client is using that word. When a client raises their voice or takes a deep breath, the coach will naturally have an instant interpretation of what might be behind this change in the client's expression. These natural moments of assumptions and interpretations can be seen as additional data points for the client's consideration, but should never be offered as fact.

When used poorly, a coach might allow these interpretations and assumptions to diagnose and direct the client by asking leading questions and offering ideas designed to "fix" the client's current state or agenda. When a coach allows their intuition, assumptions or interpretations to stand as fact, then the coach's role will inevitably shift to being more of an expert. Instead, in these cases, coaches should either set aside their intuition and return to open exploration; alternatively, the coach could offer their intuition briefly and openly prompting the client to openly respond.⁸

Even with the risks involved, this element of active listening is still very important to the coaching process. Coaches should recognize their own thinking about what the client might not be communicating openly, and make meaningful choices of how to use such thoughts for the client's own exploration and progress.

⁸ Reference to 4.4

4. Notices, acknowledges and explores the client's emotions, energy shifts, non-verbal cues or other behaviors

Coaching works because a client is generally not able to pay attention to all of the content they are considering and expressing around their agenda. We are a bundle of emotions, thoughts, values, beliefs, stories and identities. These show up in what we say and what we express. When a coach is present for a client, the coach is able to see what the client doesn't see—mirroring back what the client is experiencing and expressing.

This element of active listening forms the basis of some of the most powerful movements in coaching. When a client shifts their behavior and demonstrates emotions and energy shifts with their tone of voice, facial expression, pace of speech, and other non-verbal shifts, the coach has an opportunity to help the client reflect on what is under the surface of the verbal language the client is using. Ideally, this reflection comes in the form of a fact based observation or fact based powerful question. While the coach's interpretation of the client's emotional state or what might be behind the client's non-verbal cues can be helpful, it introduces risk into the coaching that can get in the way of the client's exploration. Consider the following examples of fact based observations and powerful questions and compare them to the interpretation based observations and questions:

Fact Based Observations - These observations call out facts of the client's expression and then simply hands the observation back to the client for their own interpretation with an open question.

- When you mentioned your manager's name you rolled your eyes just now. What's under the surface?
- You just got really quiet. What are you recognizing?
- Your tone was getting stronger and stronger as you were talking that through. What's happening?

Interpretive Observations - Each of these observations introduce the coach's interpretation, and should be prefaced with asking permission or at least by letting the client know from the beginning that this is the coach's interpretation.

The observation should be followed by the coach asking the simple, open question as before.

- Could I offer my take?... You seem pretty upset about your manager. Maybe your relationship with your manager is the real issue. What do you think?

5. Integrates the client's words, tone of voice and body language to determine the full meaning of what is being communicated

This element of active listening is not an instruction for coaches to interrogate their clients' use of specific words, tone or body language in order for the client to determine the client's meaning. Instead, this element encourages coaches to integrate the client's words, tone body language into their questions and reflections to help the client better understand themselves. In this way, the coach acts as a mirror.

Questions, reflections, observations and other inputs from coaches should feel familiar to the client's own way of communicating so that when the client hears whatever the coach has to say, it acts as a prompt for the client to better understand who they are, what might be the root of the challenge they are experience, and what they really want from the coaching session.

When a coach does not integrate the client's expression into their questions and reflections, the coaching feels formulaic and distant. There are many lists of questions provided to coaches to help them get started, but these questions will not help the client nearly as well as questions and observations based upon the client's own way of communicating.

6. Notices trends in the client's behaviors and emotions across sessions to discern themes and patterns

This element highlights the importance of holistic listening. The coach is not just listening in the present moment, but across the session. If a client started the session with a grimace and ends with a smile, the coach may highlight the change in behavior for the client's reflection—"At the beginning of our

conversation, your shoulders were down and you had that big sigh when you mentioned the situation. Now you even laughed at the whole story. What made the difference for you?”

This same exploration can be offered as a coach reflects back what they have seen change for the client over multiple sessions—“When we began working together, you told me that you believed ‘I am really not cut out to be a leader.’ Now, your company has recognized you as a leader through this promotion. How have you grown through this journey?”

These examples offer a sense of how these questions and reflections can impact the client’s understanding of their situation and (more importantly) they can impact the client’s perception of themselves. As the coach opens themselves to hear the client’s language in each session, the coach is better able to recognize these trends in the client’s story.

6.1: Coach’s questions and observations are customized by using what the coach has learned about who the client is or the client’s situation.

6.2: Coach inquires about or explores the words the client uses.

Markers 6.1 and 6.2 are the demonstration of elements 6.1 and 6.2. The coach’s questions and observations should be informed by what the coach has received from the client. In order to customize questions and observations, the coach must allow for some space in the session for their own thinking. This allows the coach to provide a more meaningful question or observation than what might first occur to them.

Note, as previously mentioned in this chapter, this guidance is not a directive for the coach to demonstrate full understanding of who the client is or the client’s situation in order to make a correct diagnosis or suggestion to resolve the client’s agenda.

While the guidance in Chapter 4, Evokes Awareness, provides more in-depth measurement for these markers, consider the following example to illustrate markers 6.1 and 6.2

6.1 and 6.2 Scenario

In the first session working together, the coach had helped the client consider their goals for the coaching program. He client had expressed the desire to work to be considered for a promotion during the next cycle in 6 months. For the next 4 months the coach and client worked together in various areas of growth (effective delegation, addressing feedback, and becoming known as a developer of leaders). The client had also determined that the topic for the 5th month should be on effectively telling the story of their growth and accomplishments based on their manager's and mentor's guidance,

In today's session, the client arrives demonstrating lower energy than usual and immediately lets the coach know that they would like to talk about a new project they are thinking about proposing to their manager for the rest of the year. What should the coach consider doing next as part of the agenda setting for the session?

Less Effective

- Ask the client, "What do you want by the end of the session as we look at this project you are thinking about?"
 - This example "checks a box" of agenda setting, but it is not responsive based on the shift in energy and agenda.
- Ask the client, "Why don't you want to focus on effectively telling your story as a leader? Wasn't that what you said we would be working on today?"
 - This option should provide the reader a bit of a sense of discomfort while reading it. The double question seems to carry a bit of judgment with it which could seriously dampen the rapport between the coach and client. This question could be done well with a few adjustments though: "If I could challenge you [permission], last time you mentioned that you wanted to focus on effective storytelling [reflection], what's change [simple, open question]?"

More Effective

- Reflect the client's earlier intention for focusing on effective storytelling then ask, "What might have shifted since we last spoke?"
 - This option uses the client's words of "effective storytelling" while also reflecting on what the coach has already learned from the client's journey from the previous goal setting. This allows the client to reflect on their previous perspective and weigh if they should return to the idea of storytelling. The client might also reflect on their own hesitation around the idea of storytelling.

- Ask "How might this project idea relate to the storytelling you wanted to focus on this month?"
 - This allows the client to openly reflect on the potential connections they might be thinking of making between this project and telling their story of effective leadership. If the client is shifting the topic from storytelling to the project out of fear or concern for the original intention, this question allows the client to share a bit about the disconnect that might be present between the two directions.

- Reflect that the client seems to be showing up with much less energy than usual then simply ask, "What's different about today?"
 - This option does not explore the client's language, but its simple focus on the current state of the client and how it is different than normal allows the client to openly reflect on the question without the coach's influence on how to direct the question. Sometimes the simple question is more effective than using multiple elements from the client's language.

6.3: Coach inquires about or explores the client's emotions.

While some coaches consider the realm of emotions to be in the domain of therapy, most coaches agree that emotions are inseparable to coaching around thinking and behaviors. Ethically, coaches should avoid overly focusing on the client's feelings, though most sessions benefit from some reflection on the client's

emotions and what impact they are having on the topic at hand. Exploration around emotions should be done in such a way as to help a client gain better awareness of their “whole self” while helping the client consider how these emotions may be influencing or will influence their thinking and behaviors.

6.3 Scenario

The client shows up to the session with a simple agenda focused on better managing their calendar. They would like to use today’s session to better use their time and want to walk through the major events planned for the upcoming week to see if there are any additional moments for strategic planning—an area they were told to be working on by their manager. The coach is struck by how simple the session agenda appears to be, and also recognizes the client’s somewhat dismissive attitude as she describes the agenda focus and the need to find more time for strategic planning, regularly shrugging her shoulders and slightly shaking her head. What should the coach do in response?

Less Effective

- Ask, “What do you need by the end of our session as we look at your calendar?”
 - When exploring the client’s agenda, it is important to explore the significance of the session topic and use the client’s language and expression as part of the agenda exploration. When a client is beginning the session with expressions that seem to indicate something under the surface of the agenda it is a missed opportunity for the coach to move on with a basic agenda setting question rather than offering to explore the client’s expression.
- Ask, “What next step can you take to make more room for strategic planning?”
 - This question prompts exploration around potential resolutions to the client’s stated agenda. However, because of the client’s expression we can be fairly sure that more should be explored around the client’s inner state or emotions before pushing for a resolution.

More Effective

- As the coach sees the client's expression, the coach may simply ask, "What emotions are coming up for you as you say you need more time for strategic planning?"
 - This is a simple approach that might miss out on the opportunity to reflect the client's expression, but it openly allows the client to consider how they are feeling and how these feelings may be impacting their desired outcome for the session.
- Highlight the client's behaviors she is using to express herself as she mentions strategic planning. Then openly ask what might be happening under the surface for the client as she is sharing.
 - This fact-based observation reflects the client's expression, which is tied to her emotional state. Offering an open question here allows the client to share how these emotions might be impacting her perception of the feedback she has received or the expectation she spends more time in strategic planning.

6.4: Coach explores the client's energy shifts, nonverbal cues or other behaviors.

Marker 6.4 is highly related to marker 6.3 since energy shifts, nonverbal cues and behaviors the client demonstrates while speaking are outward expressions of inward thinking and feeling. Coaches should be willing to openly observe these outward signs and ask open questions to help a client reflect on the connections between their emotions, thoughts and behaviors that are associated with the given topic. This holistic approach helps create awareness around what the client might really want going forward. Coaches should also be very careful about interpreting the energy shifts, nonverbal cues and other behaviors without openly inviting the client to respond to the interpretation. Often, it is best to highlight the shift in behavior and openly ask what might be under the surface.

Less Effective

- (Without the client saying they are afraid): I see you are afraid of your CEO. Why is that?
- (Without the client sharing they are agitated): What makes you so agitated today?

More Effective

- I can't help but get the sense you might be afraid of your CEO. But that is my interpretation of how you are expressing yourself. What's your perspective?
- I notice every time you mention retirement you pick up your coffee mug and put it down before taking a drink. I haven't seen you do this before. What's happening for you as you describe retiring?
- You just slowed down and even looked down as you mentioned what your manager said. What emotion are you feeling right now?

6.5: Coach inquires about or explores how the client currently perceives themselves or their world.

Where marker 6.3 focuses on the emotional state of the client, marker 6.5 focuses more on the thinking of the client. The way the client sees their world will impact their behaviors and decision making. The coach's role is not to change the client's perception of the world, but to help the client reflect on the client's current view of the world and any alternative perspectives that might be important to consider. While this marker seems simple on the surface, in practice it can lead to missteps that might severely impact the coaching relationship in a negative way. Consider the following examples:

Less Effective (Or not effective at all!)

- Have you thought of a better way to interpret your manager's behavior towards you?
- The client feels they are being impacted by an act of discrimination and are uncertain of what to do about it: "How do you know this was discrimination instead of just a simple misunderstanding?"

- The client believes they are not they type of person who can give presentations effectively: “Why are you so sure about that? I am sure you could do better if you just had more confidence!”

More Effective

- What other perspectives might there be on your manager’s behavior towards you?
- If someone in HR ask, “How do you know this was discrimination?” how would you respond?
- Could I offer a quick exercise?...What is some evidence for your perspective on being a person who cannot present effectively?...What might be some evidence that you are able to present effectively?...What impact are these other examples having on your perspective?

6.6: Coach allows the client to complete speaking without interrupting unless there is a stated coaching purpose to do so.

Marker 6.6 is very straightforward: Don’t interrupt the client. This marker is similar to ICF Marker 5.5, “Allows for silence, pause and reflection.” The success of a coaching session is not dependent on the coach speaking, but on the client processing effectively. If the client is exploring their topic, even for a lengthy period of time, the coach should generally avoid interrupting them. Coaches should also consider avoiding interrupting a client when they are demonstrating continued mental processing (often as they look up or around in search for their thoughts), or processing that can come in the form of note taking.

At times, the coach may need to interrupt the client, and when doing so the coach should be able to articulate a coaching-specific reason for doing so. If there is not a coaching-specific reason for the interruption, the coach should refrain from interrupting. Below are some examples of reasons for interrupting:

- The client is spending a considerable length of time venting about a given situation without exploring their way forward. Venting is a part

of expressing and can be helpful for processing when done in small amounts. However, a session that is primarily focused on venting will not be as effective as a session that unpacks a situation briefly and then moves towards exploring the client's desired outcome around that situation.

- The client is sharing details and stories for an extended period of time. A client should feel welcome to share their story, but coaches should help the client make the best use of their time around what they share. One helpful perspective is whether or not a client will be satisfied by the end of a session where they shared their story or details of a situation for the majority of the time. Coaching works best when the client feels free to share while also being challenged to work through what they share.
- The client is beginning to share, explore and process, but has not articulated what they are hoping to accomplish for the session. Here a coach may interrupt the client, acknowledging the client's work so far and sharing that they are hoping the client gets what they need around the topic by the time the session is complete. In this case, the follow up question might be a simple "R" question to help the client consider their desired result of the coaching session as they continue to process. Coaches should often consider interrupting in this way once a session reaches one third of the way through the given time if the client has not yet expressed their desired outcome. This interruption is not meant to serve the coach or the ICF's standards. Instead, the interruption helps guide the client's processing towards what they want to accomplish.
- The coaching session is running out of time. Once there is 5, 10 or 15 minutes remaining in a session a coach may need to interrupt the client to help the client consider their next steps and takeaways. This type of interruption should be handled with care so as not to express the idea that the client is wasting the coach's time. Instead, the coach should frame this interruption in service of the client.

6.7: Coach succinctly reflects or summarizes what the client communicated to ensure the client's clarity and understanding.

Oftentimes, when we hear our own words reflected back, we gain new insight to our perspectives, values, beliefs, emotions and our way forward. Because the success of a coaching session is dependent on the client's ability to process effectively, sometimes the coach should focus their time on helping the client hear themselves more clearly. This is where a coach might offer reflective language to help a client consider their language more carefully.

Note how Marker 6.7 is not focused on the coach's understanding of the client's language or the client's story. In fact, for PCC and especially MCC levels of coaching, the coach should become comfortable coaching around ambiguity for the sake of the client's exploration. Sometimes the client may not be able to articulate or divulge the information behind their chosen topic, and the coach should focus more on what language the client does provide to help the client do their own work. Marker 6.7 focuses on helping the client do that work with more clarity.

Below are 4 types of reflective language that a coach can use to support a client's understanding of their own words

- Summarizing
 - Summarizing is the most simple and straightforward form of reflective listening. Here the coach plays back segments of what the client has expressed, often in the order it was expressed. Often summarizing is best done when the client has expressed a considerable amount of topics, categories or concepts and could use a reflective pause to consider the journey of the session or coaching engagement. However, summarizing can be more effective for client learning when the coach prompts the client to summarize rather than having the coach provide the summary. Also, a risk of summarizing is that the coach will naturally have to leave certain details out of the summary, and this can lead to the coach taking a bit more ownership of what the client reflects on.
- Paraphrasing
 - Paraphrasing is a way for the coach to offer a slightly different perspective on the client's language. A paraphrase is where a coach reflects the client's concepts in the coach's own language. Coaches should generally focus on using synonyms and synthesizing the client's language efficiently while minimizing interpreting the client's

language and ideas. Having a slightly different perspective provided by the coach can help the client better clarify what they meant or to reflect on how their words sound to an outside perspective.

Paraphrasing should be done sparingly, focusing on the client's deeper understanding more than the coaches.

- Mirroring

- Mirroring is a reflective technique that focuses exclusively on the client's language, but is more direct and exact than summary. When a coach mirrors the client's language they use the exact words the client shared and often uses a similar way of expressing these words. Because of the more focused approach of mirroring, the scope of the reflection is often much less than summary. Mirroring is particularly useful in helping a client hear back the words they express and how they express them. When a client shares in a way that is different than they normally express themselves, a coach should consider mirroring this language back to the client. Mirroring can also be particularly helpful for coaching around communication to help the client hear how they are coming across as they prepare for difficult and high stakes conversations.

- Reflective Prompts

- Coaches familiar with Motivational Interviewing will be familiar with reflections used to help prompt a client to continue to speak about their desire for change and potential path forward. Coaches can use this similar skill supporting a coaching client's work as they unpack their perspective and potential path forward. Reflective prompts are often brief reflections of the client's language with a slight assumption, interpretation, or reasonable guess from the coach's perspective prompting the client to continue to share. In a way, reflective prompts allow the coach to communicate, "I hear you, keep going" in a way that helps the client think about their words. Reflective prompts are statements that allow a client to openly respond to them through the use of a downward tone; they are not asked as closed questions with an upward tone. Consider the following examples:

- Less Effective

- The coach offers, “You really care about what your manager thinks about you? (ending the sentence with an upward tone indicating a closed question)”
 - The client reacts to this question with, “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” In this case, the coach did not offer a reflective prompt, but asked a closed question.
- As you share, I’m noticing that you might be a bit frustrated at getting passed over for this promotion and it seems to be having an impact on your work which is making you a bit concerned with your 1:1s with your team which you are having...
 - This reflective prompt will be hard to respond to because of it’s length. Reflective prompts work well when the coach offers something simple for the client to respond to.
- You are really terrified of your boss.
 - This is a very simple reflection, but rather than offering a slight interpretation or light assumption for the client to reflect on (e.g. You might be just a little afraid of your boss.), the coach uses stronger language, “terrified,” that is more likely to cause the client to push against the coach’s interpretation.
- More Effective
 - You’re almost 100% sure about this decision.
 - For this example, the client was sharing that they are pretty clear on what they will decide to do about an offer a company made for a new role. The client doesn’t say they are “almost 100% sure,” but this language is very close and articulates a very reasonable assumption from the coach’s perspective. The coach ends this statement with a simple downward tone then offers space for the client to respond openly to the coach’s statement.

- You might have a little more confidence in this plan that you thought at first.
 - In this case, the client shared earlier in the session that they are a little uncertain about the plan moving forward, but after discussing the plan further with the coach something seemed to have shifted in the client's expression. Here the coach offers a bit more of a "reasonable bet" on what the client is expressing, but again ends the statement on a downward note and space for the client to respond.

Coaches may offer open questions, open observations and perspective, exploratory exercises or reflective language to help the client unpack their topic for a coaching session. All of these are options the coach gets to choose from, and there is no right ratio between them. Ultimately, everything the coach offers should be done in service of the client's better understanding.

Evoking Awareness 2: Offering Direct Statements with Purpose and Partnership

ICF Marker 4.4: “Coach partners with the client by inviting the client to respond in any way to the coach’s contributions and accepts the client’s response.”

ICF Marker 7.5: “Coach shares—with no attachment—observations, intuitions, comments, thoughts or feelings, and invites the client’s exploration through verbal or tonal invitation.”

Coaches should generally focus on asking questions and offering reflective language to help the client “do the work” for themselves in the coaching session. This allows the client to recognize their own capacity for development, awareness building, problem solving and resilience through change.

At times, the coach might offer more of a direct hand by offering “observations, intuitions, comments, thoughts or feelings” in order to help the client move forward in a coaching session. The coach might even offer suggestions for the direction of the session, possible ideas for a solution, or resources, tools or exercises to use during a session to guide the exploration. However, each of these come at a cost: The more a coach gives, the more the client relies on the coach.

To minimize this reliance, a coach should approach everything they give with the same considerations:

- “Is this for the client’s benefit, or is this based on my desire to feel valuable or my own need to ease the struggle of the client?”
- “What alternatives might there be in offering this?”
- “How can I best invite the client to openly respond, in any way, to what I am offering?”

Observations

Observations are the lowest risk option for what a coach might offer to a client. In a way, observations might be considered a form of reflective language.

However, because observations feature the coach's view of the client's language it is important for the coach to invite the client to respond in any way to what the coach offers when making an observation. There are two types of observations to consider below:

Interpretative - Interpretive observations feature the coach's intuitions, interpretations or assumptions. Because of this, it is particularly important for coaches to consider how to openly invite the client to respond to the coach's interpretive observation. Coaches should consider obtaining permission to share an interpretive observation if the interpretation involves a higher level of risk and intuition. Consider the following examples:

- Could I share an observation?... I can't shake this sense that you don't want to be at your desk as you have our coaching session. Maybe it's nothing, but what are your thoughts?
- If I could share my perspective here, you seem nervous when it comes to being straightforward with your leader. What do you see, though?
- May I offer my take?... You know what you need to do, but you don't want to make a final decision. That's my take though, what's really happening from your perspective?

In each of these examples the coach asks for permission to share the coach's perspective, offers a brief observation, then openly invites the client to respond in any way to the observation.

Note that the coach does not ask the client to confirm whether or not the interpretation or assumption is correct using a closed question. Instead, the open question offers an opportunity for the client to respond however they want.

The reader may also recognize that these interpretative observations place the coach into a little bit more of a leadership role in the coaching session. These observations also carry a higher risk of stalling a coaching session if the interpretation is so unrelated that it acts as a distraction. Ideally, interpretive observations are used sparingly and when the coach gets the sense that the client might benefit more from an outside perspective than they might from other options of exploration.

Fact-Based - Fact-based observations carry much less risk and often provide some of the most insightful moments of a coaching session. Fact-based observations call attention to the client's behavior, expression, patterns of language, and shifts in tone or pacing then allow the client to offer their perspective on what might be behind what the coach observes. Fact-based observations are beneficial because they allow a client to reflect on the way their inner thinking and feeling are impacting their outer expression. Oftentimes, people are not that aware of how they are expressing themselves. A great deal of learning and self-awareness can be built by having a witness hold a mirror to one's behaviors while allowing them to openly interpret what they see for themselves.

Consider the following examples:

- When you played back what your manager said you started talking a lot faster than you normally do. What was it like playing that back?
- Ever since we started the conversation you have been looking over your shoulder from time to time. I'm not used to seeing you do this, so I wanted to ask what might be happening for you right now?
- When you said, "I get it" just now your shoulders went back and you let out a deep breath. What are you recognizing?

Sharing Ideas

At times, the client might ask a coach to offer their advice, recommendations or suggestions. In these moments, the coach may directly push against the request noting the nature of coaching does not rely on the coach's solutions but the client's. However, a coach might offer some ground in the form of initial ideas, related stories, coaching exercises and resources in order to support the client without having the coach step too far into a position of owning the client's strategic thinking and problem solving.

A coach may provide a few ideas that occur to them in the moment or have helped others in the past. When offering ideas, it is important for the coach to share succinctly and to invite the client to create their own version of the idea.

Avoid

- If I were in your shoes I would do _____.

- Have you ever tried _____?
- I would think if you did _____ that should help, right?
- Here are some ideas...Which of them do you want to try?

Consider

- When working around this topic, some of my clients have found these ideas helpful: ...What are your thoughts on these ideas?
- If I could make a suggestion, perhaps we could brainstorm a few ideas together. We could each share one back and forth then take inventory of what we come up with. What do you think?
- Here's an idea...What do you think of it? ...How would you make it your own, though?

Again, it should be stressed that providing these ideas the coach should weigh if it is best to partially step into the position of expert or advisor instead of fully embracing the position of coach. Every time a coach provides ideas it makes it a little easier for the client to rely on the coach for ideas in the future when they are stuck. Over time, this can create a dependency on the coach and diminish the transformative power of the client creating their own solutions.

Stories, Exercises and Resources

Coaches come from all sorts of backgrounds and experience, and while the coach's insights should not replace the client's, the coach may consider offering stories, exercises and resources to support the client's exploration.

Stories: Sometimes a client finds themselves facing a challenge or opportunity that is familiar to the coach. Perhaps it is similar to an experience the coach has had in the past or it is a type of challenge that the coach's client's have faced. In these cases, a coach might consider sharing the story of how they or others overcame and grew through stories that are similar to the client's. These stories should only be shared as a way to provide perspective and a sense of hope to a client rather than a ready-made solution—one person's story of success does not seamlessly translate to another's. Coaches should ask permission to share, share the story briefly, then ask the client what impact the

story might have on their perspective. Coaches should also be aware that the desire to share a story can possibly be more about the coach's own sense of gratification rather than the client's development. Sometimes clients grow most when they struggle well for themselves having a supportive coach help them write their own story of success.

Exercises: The wheel of life, SMART goal setting, mind maps, pros and cons lists...the list goes on and on. There are an infinite number of tools and exercises a coach could offer. A tool or exercise is provided by a coach who hopes to support the client's in-person experience (e.g. breathing techniques, visualizations, whiteboarding, etc.) or to support the client's exploration. These exercises might come from positive psychology, educational theory, health and wellness concepts, productivity tips, business ideas, and the coach's own experience coaching other people. This work is not focused on the variety of tools and exercises a coach could offer, but rather how they should be offered. When offering a coaching tool, the coach is offering to take charge of a portion of a coaching session, which places the coach in more of a direct position of authority while the coach is facilitating the exercise. Because of this, the coach should weigh the value of taking this leadership role and ask permission to temporarily change roles from coach to facilitator. When asking permission, the coach should briefly explain the idea of the tool or exercise and confirm whether or not a client would be interested in using it as part of the session. Ideally, the exercise allows for the client to co-design the experience and explore their chosen topic through the lens of the given tool or exercise. If a coach takes ownership for an extended period of time while trying to facilitate a coaching tool, then the client will be more likely to see the coach as the expert providing a potential solution or "correct thinking" around a given subject. As with everything in this chapter, coaches should offer tools and exercises openly and allow a client to create their own awareness around what the coach might offer.

Resources: Oftentimes resources come across as "homework" for a client to consider reviewing in between sessions. It could be an article on how to provide feedback, considerations for seeking a promotion, how to negotiate a salary, how to build habits and so on. Resources can be helpful to use in coaching engagements as a way to allow the coach to remain the coach and the resources to act as the expert. However, coaches should be aware that "homework" such as this can naturally lead to the client seeing the coach as a

mix of coach and teacher. While resources can be helpful, the client's ability to create their own solutions can have a more transformative impact in the client's life. When offering resources the coach should encourage the client to consider how the resource might be useful and explore any worthwhile insights the client has when reviewing the resource. If the client pushes against the resource it is important for the coach to follow the client's lead in identifying a more effective path forward.

Suggestions

Suggestions carry the highest risk out of all of the previously noted inputs from the coach. In a way, when a coach makes a suggestion, the coach is taking just a bit of power or force away from the client. At times, the coach's suggestion can be an effective way to help a client gain inspiration to come up with their own, better version of what the coach offers. At other times, the coach's suggestion moves the conversation away from an open, creative coaching process to a closed, validating and advising approach. Suggestions should be limited and used primarily to help a client do the work of the session more effectively for themselves.

Suggestions of Direction

Suggestions of direction have been mentioned before as a way to help a client through a rough case of "I don't know" responses. Before offering this light form of suggestion, the coach should allow space and narrow the scope of their questions. When offering a suggestion of direction, it is often best to

Suggestions of Solutions

The greatest form of taking ownership of the client's direction can be seen when a coach makes a suggestion of a potential solution. Generally, these suggestions should be avoided. When hearing a suggestion, a client's mind will turn from creative and strategic thought to validating whether or not the suggestion fits their situation. Every time the coach offers a suggestion, the client will often become more reliant on the coach providing suggestions in the future. Also, with very personal and important agendas a client might bring, the more a coach suggests a way forward the more the coach takes ownership of the client's

life—an arrangement that is contrary to the core values of a professional coach. If a coach offers a suggestion, it is usually best if the suggestion involves very technical or tactical topics, where the coach has previous knowledge that is easily verified by the client. In the very rare occasion the coach might consider it meaningful for the coach to provide a potential solution for a client's challenging situation, the coach should ask permission to offer the suggestion and create distance from the coach and the suggestion, encouraging the client to openly explore the suggestion for themselves (similar to offering ideas). Again, because of the impact suggestions have on the coaching relationship, coaches should avoid offering suggestions of solutions while relying on the client to determine their best way forward with the coach's support in finding that way for themselves.