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Fit to listen? An initial exploration of "coach fitness"

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Abstract

Beyond formal training and coaching supervision, the coaching literature has had relatively little to say about what it means for coaches' to be fit for purpose. As such, this article explores what it might mean for coaches to be in a state of readiness for the work they undertake. It does this by isolating listening as a core skill set, whilst also identifying its challenges and the various demands it places upon the listener. In respect of these challenges, attention is then drawn to the importance of energy management, with a model of dialogical fitness presented and briefly discussed to help identify practices that might build such a state of fitness. The paper concludes with some possibilities for initiating research in this area.

Keywords: coaching, listening, energy management, self-regulation, performance

Introduction

Whenever questions related to excellence in coaching have arisen in the coaching literature, attention has tended to turn towards the possession of coaching competencies, capabilities and capacities (Blumberg, 2014; Pour & Herat, 2013; Wise & Hammack, 2011; Hawkins & Turner, 2020), the education and training of coaches (Grant & O'Hara, 2006; Lane, 2017), their maturity (Clutterbuck, 2010) and, increasingly, the value of coaching supervision (Gray, 2017; Hawkins & Turner, 2017; Birch & Welch, 2019). Occasionally, these elements of coach development are presented together and discussed in detail. For example, de Haan (2008) has previously labelled them "ways of excellence" (see p. 155-242), whilst also reflecting the value of vipassana (insight) meditation for his own practice. To be clear from the outset, this paper recognises the contributions that competency models, formal training, coaching supervision and adopted personal practices, like meditation, can make to coaching effectiveness through the development of practitioners. Indeed, this has been so widely recognised (e.g. Spence, Cavanagh & Grant,

2006) that it need not be re-visited here. Rather, this paper seeks to address a more fundamental question, one that has not been adequately addressed in the scholarly literature. Namely, to what extent do coaches come to coaching conversations in states of readiness for the work they undertake? Or, more specifically, are they psycho-physiologically *fit for purpose?* Whilst such questions could be explored in relation to many aspects of coaching (e.g. asking questions, goal setting), this paper will be limited to a brief exploration of listening and some apparent pre-conditions.

Listening as a core component of coaching

It seems uncontroversial to claim that listening sits at the heart of coaching, as general agreement can easily be found amongst academics (e.g. Cox, 2013; Woodcock, 2010; de Haan, 2008) and practitioners (e.g. Whitworth, Kimsey-House & Sandahl, 1998; Klein, 2015; Skiffington & Zeus, 2003). In an interesting analysis, Cox (2013) proposes that listening is one of the reasons why coaching has been widely adopted in workplaces, because "speech appears to have gathered more power than listening" (p. 42). Coaching is valued, so the reasoning goes, because of the antidote it provides to superficial, habitual forms of listening. The committed listening of the coach not only creates rapport, it also permits articulations of client experiences to be heard. In so doing, listening "becomes the first part of the dialogic process that will ultimately lead to the resolution of the coaching task" (Cox, 2013, p.42). This illustrates a simple point. It is hard to coach well if one is unable to listen well. Interestingly, whilst the virtues of listening are greatly feted in the coaching literature, little has been said about its inherent challenges and, most relevantly to this paper, the various demands that listening places upon coaches.

The challenges of listening

The problems associated with listening have been a focus of scholarly work for many decades. In an interesting early analysis, Wiksell (1946) noted that while listening and reading appear to activate similar mental processes, a number of factors seem to make reading a less *demanding* mental activity. This is because a reader can, (i) control the rate of information processing by varying reading speed, (ii) take time to reflect on the message by pausing to think, and (iii) easily recover from moments of inattention by re-reading passages of text. In addition, a reader gets a relatively clear message, as they only have to read words on a page, words that may have been proof read and edited to safeguard clarity. In contrast, listening confers none of these

advantages because listeners have to keep up with the speaker (as pausing others' speech can be problematic), risk becoming distracted if they reflect too much, risk losing track if they become distracted, and tend to be reliant on the speakers' vocabulary, accent, and speak habits for message clarity, which will vary greatly.

More recent reviews highlight other challenges. For example, in a social neuroscience analysis of listening, Spunt (2013) points out that listening requires engaging with the what, how and why of speech acts. That is, when one listens to someone speak they must engage with *what* was said, or the denotative meaning of the utterance; *how* it was said, both the perceived nonverbal aspects of the speaker's voice (e.g., tone and inflection) and accompanying motor behaviours (e.g., facial expression); and finally, *why* it was said, or the inferences about the speaker's underlying state of mind (Spunt, 2013). The simple conclusion from such literature is that listening tasks are effortful and without adequate reserves of energy to perform them, coaches would struggle to sustain concentration, vary their speed of information processing, detect coherence in verbal and nonverbal messages, and/or discern meaning in client stories.

A curious lack of empirical work

Beyond general agreement on the importance of listening, coaching scholars have had little else to say about listening in the context of coaching. Where empirical work has been reported, the findings have been limited to the recognition of listening as a common factor in the coaching process (e.g. de Haan, et al, 2013), whilst other papers have been more practically oriented. For example, in Woodcock's (2010) paper, The Listening Guide was presented as an option for coaches to "seriously reflect on the ways in which we listen to our clients, learn from them, and form relationships with them" (p. 144). Outside the scholarly literature, descriptions of active listening practices are common and are often organized into simple taxonomies that specify different types of listening (e.g. Starr, 2010; Whitworth et al, 2007; Scharmer, 2018), or described in terms of how good listening can optimise or "ignite" the human capacity to think (Kline, 2015). In sum, whilst listening is uniformly endorsed by those who write about coaching, much of the work is descriptive and does not yet seem to have acted as a catalyst for research into listening in coaching.

Interestingly, listening has also been under-researched in business contexts. According to Flynn, Valikoski and Gran (2008), this can be partially explained by a negative perception that listening is a "soft skill" and of

questionable value as a topic of business research (Flynn, Valikoski, & Grau, 2008). However, as listening is highly valued amongst coaches, such an explanation seems implausible in the coaching realm. One possible explanation is that coaches might see themselves as highly skilled listeners by virtue of the training they receive and their constant use of the skills. If so, they may take high quality listening for granted and never question the assumption. Given coaching research has typically been closely tied to the needs and interests of practitioners (Spence, 2007), if there is a lack of intellectual curiosity amongst coaches about listening, then it is likely to have helped stifled scientific enquiry.

Insights from Auditory Science

For many coaches, listening may seem effortless, given the intrinsic interest they have for the work (i.e. coaches love to coach) and their use of listening environments that seem optimal (e.g. private offices). However, as Strauss and Francis (2017) point out, "conditions are rarely optimal, and a wide variety of factors have been identified that, individually, or in combination, may serve to make understanding speech more difficult" (p.809). In their view, the difficulty can reside in either the talker, the listener, or the communication channel. As will soon be argued, the extent to which difficulties arise in the listener - the coach - will have a lot to do with the attention they give to personal energy management.

At this point it is useful to explore the auditory science literature, in particular recent work on listening effort (e.g. Pichora-Fuller et al, 2016; Strauss & Francis, 2017; Brannstrom, Karlsson, Waechter & Kastberg, 2018), as this can provide a conceptual basis for understanding listening performance in coaching contexts.

Tasks demands, motivation and effortful listening

As mentioned earlier, listening is an effortful mental activity that requires an availability of energy. In auditory science, *mental effort* is defined as "the deliberate allocation of mental resources to overcome obstacles in goal pursuit when carrying out a task", with *listening effort* "a specific form of mental effort that occurs when a task involves listening" (Pichora-Fuller et al, 2016; p. 11S). According to the Framework for Understanding Effortful Listening (FUEL; Pichora-Fuller, et al, 2016), the amount of listening effort invested in any human interaction will vary as a function of (i) the demands associated with the listening task, and (ii) the motivational arousal of the

listener. To use an example, in an astronomical lecture about black holes, a learner might find the listening task complicated by the presentation of complex ideas and technical language, but also by the lecturer's rapid speech or the constant rattle of an air conditioning unit. However, the FUEL model predicts that if the learner is strongly motivated to acquire knowledge about black holes, s/he will be able to sustain their listening effort over time despite the challenges. Interestingly, it also proposes that the demands of a task can reduce listening effort, not as the result of mental fatigue and depleted energy but, rather, lost motivation. For the student of astronomy, effort might diminish when the lecture content moves from black holes to quasars, or when s/he decides they are not capable of understanding the lecture content.

Mental resources and attention. As cited above, Pichora-Fuller et al (2016) define the mental effort associated with listening as involving the "deliberate allocation of mental resources". In so doing, they make two important assumptions. First, that the *mental resources* needed for listening are already available. However, this may not be the case or, at least, not optimally. Given the authors also observe that "we hear with our ears, but we listen with our brains" (p. 6S), it is pertinent to consider what conditions help the brain to do this well. Second, it is also assumed that mental resources can be *deliberately allocated*. This also may not be the case, as human beings have a limited attentional capacity system (Ward, 2004), which is constantly challenged to select relevant inputs from one's sensory and perceptual field for further processing. For a coach working with a client, the attentional challenges will be both external, arising from the coachee and/or physical environment, and internal, arising from thoughts, feelings and/or body state information. As will now be argued, both the accrual of mental resources and their successful allocation are influenced by the energy management practices of individuals.

Energy management

It is not uncommon for authors in the personal and professional development genre to promote energy management, and notions of *balance*, as being essential to sustained high performance. For example, when drawing attention to the practices of elite athletes, Loehr and Schwartz (2001) noted how sports performance is optimised through the disciplined use of rituals that balance training-recovery periods. In contrast, they argued organisational performers do comparatively little to regulate their energy expenditure by resting regularly. Rather, these performers expend energy in a way that is linear, enduring and, all too often, injurious to employee health. In their view, organisations have much to gain from encouraging executives and employees

to become "corporate athletes", by adopting the energy management principles that guide most sports people

Another energy management concept widely promoted by high performance experts (e.g. Loehr & Schwartz, 2001; May, 2007; Wells, 2017) relates to use and renewal of energy across multiple dimensions (e.g. physical, emotional, mental, spiritual; Schwartz et al, 2010). Whilst demarcating energy into separate reserves might seem spurious, given the complexity of human energy systems (see Hockey, 2013), a more pragmatic view suggests these models can provide value by helping individuals to identify actions that can optimize their functioning. Extending this pragmatism to the present discussion, the paper will conclude with a brief description of a model focused on one's fitness for engaging in dialogue, of which listening is an integral part.

The Dialogical Fitness Model

According to Isaacs (1999), dialogue is the art of thinking together. More specifically, it can be described as a form of communication characterized by a quest for mutual understanding between people, via the respectful exchange of personal viewpoints. Amid the complexity of life, dialogue is valued for its generative potential, where future action can be collectively decided upon and shaped by those with mutual interests (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999). Increasingly, the skills associated with dialogue are being recognized as critical skills for coaching (Stelter, 2012; Lawrence et al, 2019) although, like listening, there has been little examination of its inherent challenges for coaches. For example, attempts to create dialogue in organisational contexts often involve dealing with competing agendas and power imbalances (Stacey & Mowles, 2016), challenges that a team coach would need to greet with clear thinking, good self-awareness and excellent emotional control.

So far, this paper has acknowledged that listening (i) is central to coaching, (ii) is a challenging task, and (iii) requires effort that varies according to the demands of the listening task and the listener's motivation. The paper has also reasoned that coaches might underestimate listening, assuming a level of proficiency for themselves that might not exist. Irrespective of the truth of this claim (and no data has been found to support it), there would appear to be some value in challenging coaches to consider their preparedness for listening. Or, more specifically, to encourage reflection on their physiological and psychological status before, during and after they listen to their clients. With this in mind, a model of dialogical fitness will now be

presented to purposefully expand the discussion beyond listening, and acknowledge the possibility that dialogue is now an important aspiration of practicing coaches. As shown in Figure 1, a number of factors are proposed to be important for creating a state of personal readiness for creating and maintaining dialogue, for which deep, focused, high quality listening is a critical component.

Inspired by popular, practitioner-focused energy management models mentioned earlier (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001; Schawartz et al, 2010), the dialogical fitness model focuses on a core set of energy dimensions that include:

- Spirit – the sense a person has of their larger purpose, enduring values, and master motives. Important for coaching because it underpins listening effort with personal significance and fortifies motivation during moments of challenge.
- Cognitive – the capacity to utilise one's mental functions. Important for coaching because the ability to concentrate, hold information in memory, actively reflect, and hold multiple perspectives in mind are critical for meeting the demands of listening, and maintaining listening effort.
- Emotional – the capacity to maintain emotional states that are conducive to quality communication. Important for coaching because emotions like curiosity, interest, patience and hope can deepen relationships, making the self-regulation of these states important.

In this model, the physical dimension has been split into sub-components to help identify key sources of bodily energy, including sleep, nutrition, hydration and physical exercise. This is because each can deliver specific benefits to coaches for the listening tasks they undertake (see Table 1 below).

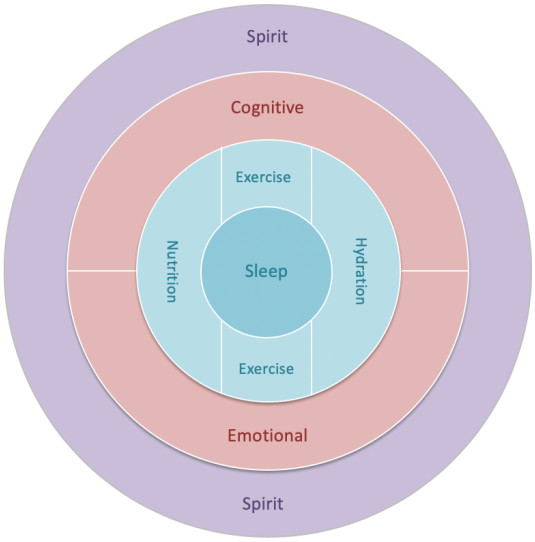

Figure 1. Dialogical fitness model

As indicated in Figure 1, sleep is assigned a pivotal role in the determination of dialogical fitness. This is because sleep deprivation has been found to have profoundly negative effects on human performance, particularly on tasks that depend heavily on executive functioning (e.g. sustained attention, emotional control, metacognition; Hockey, 2013). Whilst data from controlled attention models of sleep deprivation have previously shown that task interest can mitigate some of its negative effects (e.g. Pilcher, Band, Odle-Dusseau & Muth, 2007), the intensity and duration of the listening tasks in coaching suggest that being interested in what a client is saying may only offer partial mitigation.

Whilst a detailed description of the full model is not possible in this short paper, a few comments are offered on the remaining elements of the physical dimension (in line with the summarised information presented in Table 1):

Exercise (aerobic capacity). As summarised by Mandolesi et al (2016), considerable evidence exists to show that increased aerobic capacity (achieved through physical exercise) positively influences human cognition, by improving the heart's ability to deliver nutrient-rich, oxygenated blood to key regions of the brain. As a result of the structural and functional changes that follow, many

of the key executive functions invoked in listening tasks (e.g. working memory, response inhibition) appear to be enhanced.

Exercise (physical strength). Similar to the improvements observed for aerobic capacity, increases in physical strength (achieved through resistance training) are also associated with enhanced executive function and other benefits, such as less muscular-skeletal discomfort (Herold, Törpel, Schega & Müller, 2019). Notably, resistance training might assist listening performance by honing concentration, given the focus required to lift weights, and the absence of physical discomfort, such as lower back pain, that might otherwise act as a source of internal distraction during listening.

Nutrition. The importance of nutrition to high quality listening cannot be overstated (as it is arguably as important as sleep). This is because a person's nutritional profile determines the quantity and quality of the fuel they have for any task performance, with mental function heavily dependent on the availability of glucose, the brain's preferred source of fuel (Hockey, 2013). More specific to listening, it is possible to imagine how the composition and timing of food ingestion might impact performance (Hamidi, Boggild & Cheung, 2016). For example, the feeling of being bloated after consuming a high-fat meal, or the discomfort of a hypoglycemic attack hours after eating a high-sugar breakfast, have the potential to reduce listening effort, as attention is drawn away from the concerns of others and towards to the concerns of oneself.

Hydration. Closely linked to nutrition is the requirement that humans remain adequately hydrated, within tight limits. Indeed, it is well reported that cognitive performance declines rapidly after normal water volume drops by as little as 2% (Patsalos & Thoma, 2018). When this is considered alongside evidence indicating that thirst sensations decline with age (Begg, 2017), the possibility exists that many professionals function in a state of chronic, mild dehydration. Aside from the negative cognitive effects, this can be problematic for listening as dehydration can result in headaches, irritability, and feelings of sluggishness.

Clearly the model presented above needs greater explanation and discussion. Nonetheless, it has been presented here to offer a starting point for thinking about coach fitness and, more specifically, the sort of preparatory actions a coach might need to take to ensure they are ready to listen well. It is hoped the discussion might provide the impetus for some initial research in this area. As such, some directions for future research will now be offered.

Table 1. Beneficial effects derived from acting on physical dimensions

Dimension	Action	Effects	Impact for listeners
Sleep	Increase duration (quantity); control technology use (quality)	Cerebral BF & metabolic rate decrease; glucose & ATP concentrations increase	More alert, better distraction control & behavioral self-regulation
Exercise (aerobic capacity)	More incidental exercise; high-intensity physical activity (HIPA)	Improved cardiac efficiency (lower BP/heart rate); better white-matter integrity	Better executive function (incl. working memory, response inhibition)
Exercise (physical strength)	Weight-bearing exercise; stretching & flexibility training	Greater bone density, less muscular-skeletal discomfort, improved concentration	Greater sustained attention, reduced LBP/more physical comfort
Nutrition	Eat more whole foods; reduce high fat/sugar foods	Reliable supply of vital nutrients to brain (incl. glucose)	"Happy" GI tract, better focus, less susceptible to hypoglycemic attacks
Hydration	Increase daily water consumption; eat high water content foods	Optimises cellular health, blood volume & blood pressure	Increased cog. reflection, improved judgement & decision-making

SOURCES: Barnes, Guarana, Nauman & Kong (2016); Hamidi, Boggild & Cheung (2016); Herold, Törpel, Schega & Müller (2019); Hockey (2013); Neck & Cooper (2000); Noguchi, Glinka, Mayberry, Noguchi & Callaghan (2019); Patsalos & Thoma (2019).

Future research

One avenue for future work would be conceptual in nature and involve a more comprehensive mapping of dialogical fitness factors. This is because the model presented above has been modified from performance models (e.g. Loehr & Schwartz, 2001) that lack firm theoretical and empirical foundations. Such work might include drawing on established adult developmental (e.g. Kegan, 1994) and psychological theories (Ryan & Deci, 2017) that can help build a more complete picture of what coaching readiness really means.

Another avenue for future work would be to investigate (apparently for the first time) listening proficiency using practitioner samples. This could occur

in at least two ways. First, baseline data could be assembled on coach listening performance, using a mixture of established self-reports (e.g. the Active-Empathic Listening Scale; for a description see Keaton, 2018) and more objective physiological measures, such as pupillometry and skin conductance (Alhanbali, Dawes, Millman & Munro (2019). Second, once performance measures have been established, these could be used to investigate a question that flows naturally from this paper. That is, to what extent do indices of physical and psychological status correspond to high quality listening? Is it the case, for example, that well-nourished, well-hydrate listeners show themselves to be more alert, more patient, and better at utilising active listening skills (e.g. paraphrasing) compared to those with poorer nutritional and hydration profiles? Does sleep status have anything to do with perceptions of working alliance (Gessnitzer & Kauffeld, 2015), perspective-taking capacity (Cavanagh, 2016) or other facets of coaching that reply heavily on listening?

Conclusion

This paper has deliberately focused on one part of the coaching process: listening. This has been done because, whilst listening sits at the heart of the coaching process, it has rarely been explored in any detail. This may be because coaches are assumed to have listening "covered", possibly because of the training they get and/or constant on-the-job use of the skills. Whatever the reason, it seems that coaching scholarship would be enhanced by the emergence of theoretical and empirical work in his area. Whilst formal training and coaching supervision will continue to be important for supporting high quality practice, practitioners also stand to gain from any clarifications that can be provided on the physiological and psychological bases of their performance.

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