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Listening with Intention: how actor training might help teach and activate coach listening skills

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Edited for readability. Filler words and false starts removed.

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Awesome. That also took care of half my intro. Fantastic. She has a PhD, and he does a bit of acting.

[Referring to his introduction.]

When Brittany said I recently completed my 1.0 Essentials training, what she meant was that I had a baby a week after my course finished, so I sent in my hours on my way to the airport. I'm really glad to hear I've completed it, because I haven't even gotten that email yet.

So yes, I have been an actor for thirty years, and I have been a coach for less than a year. I have absolutely no intention of standing up here and lecturing a room of much more experienced coaches and my trainers, LouAnne, Jantell, John, Brittany, Edward, Britt. Thank you all very much.

But I do want to talk about something I feel I have brought to coaching, and that I'm continuing to try to bring to coaching, from my other life as an actor. That's listening.

In acting, listening is always active. If it's not, you're just dead on stage. It has to be active. So what I'd like to offer today is a hypothesis about some of the work I've been doing on listening. I'm bringing in a question I would love to talk more about, rather than an answer.

My hypothesis is that by borrowing some techniques from actor training, and by clarifying some specific actions in our own listening, we might be even better able to inspire meaningful change in our clients.

My career as an actor started quickly. I was working in a play in college, the theater company lost an actor, and the director came and plucked me out of college and gave me a career. That was very exciting. I also got to drop out of college for a while, which I desperately wanted to do.

I moved to New York and tried to launch, and it was going fine. I worked. I was on television for a couple of days. I got some great theater jobs.

Four or five years in, I was playing the Dauphin in a wonderful production of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Great stage. I had the most spectacular costume: huge wig, big gorgeous coat,

staff, tights, the whole thing. I delivered my big speech up on a balcony in spectacular light, looking out over a big audience.

I remember very clearly one night delivering the Dauphin's great comic line, "My horse is my mistress," and all I could think was, "I am terrible at this. I have no idea what I'm doing. These people are looking at me because I have some energy, I know how to use the language, and the lights are all on me. But I'm terrible at acting, and I need to stop this or go figure out how to do it."

And I did. I stopped for a while. I went back to college and finished my undergrad so I could go to a master's program. There I found myself studying with master teachers from the Moscow Art Theatre and some spectacular teachers from the Atlantic Theater Company, which created an acting technique called Practical Aesthetics.

After our first semester, three and a half months into this training and five or six years into my professional career, they decided we were ready for thirty seconds of acting. I had a thirty-second scene from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It was not the "Stella" scene. It was Mitch bringing Blanche home after a night bowling.

We were in a freezing cold stone lobby on the edge of a building that leaked. There were twelve classmates in folding chairs. There was nothing going on. I did my thirty seconds of Mitch and Blanche, and I burst into tears.

That teacher, a wonderful man named Scott Zigler, who teaches Practical Aesthetics, which is every bit as cuddly as it sounds, took me upstage and said, "What's wrong?" in that way that sort of means, "What's your problem, kid?" I said, "I just want to act like that from now on." He looked at me and said, "Well, okay. You can." And he walked away.

What I had done differently in those thirty seconds was listen. I had listened deeply. I had listened to change and be changed, and I had listened actively.

What I learned in that moment is that in acting, listening is the whole thing. In communication, listening is the whole thing. And as we all know, in coaching, listening is the whole thing. It's chapter one of John's book. It's chapter one of *Co-Active Coaching*.

In *Co-Active Coaching*, Kimsey-House et al. say there is as much information, sometimes more, in how the words are said as in the words chosen. Sometimes there is as much information in what is not said as in what is said. That sounds a lot like Konstantin Stanislavski talking to his students: "Put your emotional antennae out to feel the soul of another person. Look at me attentively. Try to understand the sense of my inner mood."

So when I got to Essentials, I thought, “Okay, there’s some overlap there. Great.” Until you get to the next Kimsey-House sentence, which is about listening intently at many levels and, of course, choosing when and how to respond, to intervene.

So now we’re supposed to be empathetic, and also make active choices, and stay empathetic, and not get self-conscious about it. That’s the hard part, because deep empathetic listening can be incredibly jarring. I did it for thirty seconds in grad school and burst into tears. Not inspiring for your client.

In the best moments, when we are, as John says, pretending to be someone else, it can really unmoor us. Stephen R. Covey says you sense, you listen, you feel, and he’s right. But you also manage the clock, and you manage your client’s focus, and you decide if it’s time for the inner critic exercise.

And if you’re me, you try to deal with the fact that your wife has the crying baby in the other room for this whole hour and is singing “Baby Beluga” for the tenth time, and you try to stay focused.

Here’s where Stanislavski comes in. He says, and the acting pedagogies he inspired have done some really cool work on this, that listening must have a subject and an object. Over time this has evolved into the objective, or action: what we are trying to get done in a scene.

When I envisioned this talk, I thought I’d do a whole bunch of actor exercises. I’m not going to. I’m going to jump to the end of the page.

In acting, we are always trying to get something done. I would never go on stage or onto a set without an active objective, with the test in the other person. The intention is big. It’s metaphorical, and it probably won’t get realized in the scene.

In that Mitch and Blanche scene, I remember very clearly, my action was to get someone to recognize her own self-worth. If you know *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche does not do that. Not in that scene, not in the rest of the play.

So in my acting technique, I am always trying to get someone to do something. Not a task, not an errand, but something that would align their life and their actions with their values. That’s what I found in coaching too. When I set an action like that, my deep listening and my executive function click into alignment, and I can do both at once. I can listen deeply and I can manage the clock.

I’m going to give you three examples.

1. I have a client who desperately needs to slay his dragons. We do great work. He's going through a career transition. He's fantastic. When I sit down with him, I try to get him to slay his dragons.
2. I have worked with someone I try to get to be his own guide.
3. And I've worked with someone I try to get to reach for the brass ring.

You get the idea. I'm not putting my hand on the scale. I'm not trying to get them to take this job or that job, or fire this person, or think about this career change. I'm giving myself an action that lets me focus my intention and my listening on the other person while still functioning as the coach, the guide, the person in charge of the clock.

Meissner says, sorry, Sanford Meissner, problematic acting guy with some good ideas, says that listening is sharpest when we are really doing something. So when we get back to action, I am trying to get the client to do something for themselves. That's where we get synergy, and that's where we get lasting change.

So I offer this hypothesis:

> *If we add a specific action to our listening, and the test of that action is in our client, we are trying to get them to do something for themselves rather than trying to inspire them. If that action engages and excites our metaphoric engine, then we can, with more specific intention, ignite meaningful change in our clients' lives.*

If we can get them to slay their dragons, be their own guide, or reach for that brass ring, then we can hopefully encourage them to step into a higher and more ethereal life.

It gives us a tool to listen with that does not put our hands on the scale of the session, but that does, with direct intention, set that higher bar of inspiring meaningful change. Thank you very much.