



# THE LEADER'S GUIDE TO **COACHING AND MENTORING**

HOW TO USE SOFT SKILLS TO GET HARD RESULTS



MIKE BRENT AND FIONA ELSA DENT

**FT** PUBLISHING  
FINANCIAL TIMES

# The Leader's Guide to Coaching and Mentoring

## The channels of communication

When you are involved in a coaching relationship you communicate via words (what you actually say), paralinguistics (how you say your words) and body language (what you do while talking and listening to others). In order to be truly effective as a coach you must understand the impact made and impression created by the way you communicate. In addition to this you must observe the way your coachee communicates with you and learn to read both the explicit and implicit messages being conveyed.

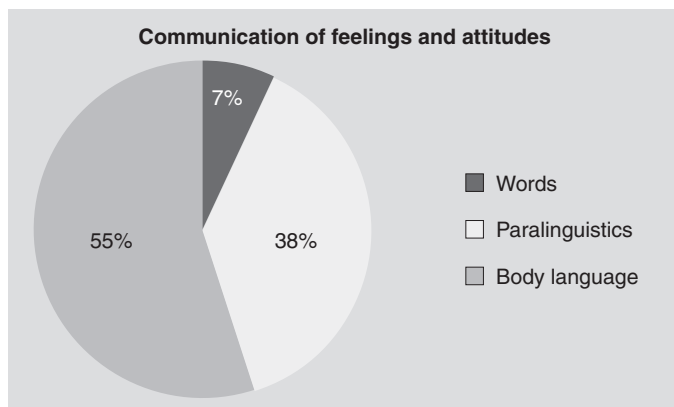
■ You must understand the impact made  
■ and impression created by the way you  
■ communicate

So, for instance, your coachee may be telling you about a challenging relationship with a colleague and saying that, *'it's going ok'*, but what you pick up from the way they are expressing their message both verbally (the words are not said with enthusiasm nor is there any indicator of why it's going well) and via body language (eye contact may not be held, and facial expression may indicate lack of belief) is that all may not be so well. The effective coach will pick this up and explore it. Of course, this has to be done in an empathetic way so that the coachee can share with you as much or as little as they wish. So you might say something like: *'I am sensing that you want to explore this a bit more, so tell me more: what in particular is going well and what do you think you would like to continue to work on to improve things further?'* By probing a bit further you have responded to your instincts that all is not well, yet you have not directly mentioned that the coachee's words and non-verbals are incongruent.

So, as a coach what do you have to be aware of? You need to understand and manage your own communication channels

and be able to read those of others. One of the early pioneers in the area of body language and non-verbal communications was Professor Albert Mehrabian, who explored the communication of our feelings and attitudes and the impact of the various channels of communication used. This information is of particular use to coaches and mentors. Typically, during any coaching or mentoring discussion you will be exploring feelings, emotions and attitudes. So what did he find?

He suggests that when communicating with others about your feelings, attitudes or emotions it is likely that only 7 per cent of the message is conveyed in the words, 38 per cent is conveyed by way of your paralanguage and 55 per cent is conveyed via your body language. (Be aware that this model is frequently misrepresented and these statistics only relate to communications relating to emotional intent.) There will be occasions when words have more importance than body language, for instance if you are sharing the annual results of your business, people will be listening for



**FIGURE 7.1** Communicating feelings and attitudes

Source: adapted from Mehrabian, A., *Silent Messages: Implied communication of emotions and attitudes* (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1972)

the data rather than watching your body language. What do these statistics mean for you the coach? Quite simply it suggests that we get most of our cues and clues about a person's **emotional intent** from their non-verbal behaviour rather than from the words they use. As a coach you must therefore be tuned into how people express their emotions.

■ As a coach you must therefore be tuned into how people express their emotions

This does not mean that you can ignore the words people say; we are simply suggesting that where feelings, attitudes and emotions are concerned you must focus more on non-verbal elements of the communication. Let's look at each of the three areas:

- **Words** convey our thoughts and ideas to others. The words we use and the way we construct the message are important in order to avoid misunderstanding and confusion. Words have real power, and it is important to think clearly about the words you use when coaching. Pay attention to the effect your language has on your coachee and be aware of the typical words and language used by them, so that you can pick up any nuances that could indicate changes in mood or emotion.
- **Paralinguistics** refers to the way you use your voice – your tone, pace, emphasis, volume, enunciation and silences. A change in the way a person is using their voice is one of the most powerful indicators of a change in feelings, emotion and attitude. The type of indicators you should be on the lookout for are:
  - **Variations in tone** can be a sign of changes in a person's feelings. For instance, a raised intonation can mean a person is querying an issue, or showing surprise or shock, while a decrease in tone can mean disinterest or anxiety.

- **Changes in the pace of speech.** For instance, if a person suddenly speeds up, this might indicate delight, distress or anger. While a slow pace suggests a person is expressing concern or thinking deeply before talking.
- **Emphasis on certain words** can highlight where an issue is focused. For instance, I *really* don't care! (Where the emphasis is on the *really*) might indicate the exact opposite.
- **The volume of a person's voice** can indicate several things. A loud voice might indicate anger, excitement or frustration; while a soft, low voice might suggest shyness or uncertainty.
- **Good enunciation**, where an issue is expressed clearly and concisely, would indicate confidence and knowledge. Poor enunciation, where the issue is expressed with a lack of clarity, will suggest uncertainty and lack of confidence. It would also make it hard for someone to understand the message.
- **Pausing and silence** is often a feature of a person's way of expressing themselves. What you need to watch out for here are changes in the patterns of pauses and silences that can indicate changes in emotion.

■ **Body Language** is a major aspect of the way we communicate and can unintentionally reveal many cues and clues as to how a person is feeling. Our physical behaviour in relation to our facial expression, gestures, posture, eye contact and proximity all contribute to the impression we are having upon another person.

Awareness of your own body language is vital as you must be aware of the messages that are seeping through to your coachee from the way you behave. Being natural is important. You should be your natural self and at the same time be aware of the impact of your body language on the other person.

As far as your coachee is concerned you must diligently observe their body language and in particular be aware of changes in typical patterns that might indicate changes in feelings, attitudes or emotions. It is these changes that signal when it might be appropriate to question, probe or explore the issue in more depth. When you do notice a change you may prompt them by saying something like, *'You look concerned?'* or *'You look a bit puzzled'*.

Let's look at some of the main areas to be aware of:

- **Facial expression** is the movement of our eyebrows, nose, forehead and mouth that leads to changes in the way our face is perceived. Slight changes in eyebrow movement, for instance raising the eyebrow, can indicate a change in mood towards or reaction to something.
- **Gestures** are the movements made by our hands, arms, fingers, legs and head. Again, a change in someone's normal pattern of behaviour is what you are on the lookout for when coaching. For instance, someone who normally sits very still with minimal gesturing who suddenly becomes very animated might indicate a change in feeling, attitude or emotion about the topic under discussion.
- **Posture** is about how people physically carry themselves. How you orient yourself towards others, sit, stand and move about are all indicators of how we are feeling. The way you position yourself during a coaching session is important, so be aware how you both sit as this can help get a session off to a good start. Sit upright in the chair, arms loosely in your lap and legs crossed in front of you – this is a fairly neutral posture that will enable you to develop your posture and body language in general as the meeting progresses.
- **Eye contact** is one of the most important aspects of body language; it is often referred to as gaze level. It has been found by researchers that people who make and hold higher levels of eye contact will tend to be regarded as

trustworthy, confident, assertive, capable and sincere. While those with low levels of eye contact are often regarded with suspicion, thought of as shy and retiring, and on occasions rude. However, it is important to be aware of the cultural context here. In some cultures it is considered impolite to look directly at someone for long periods. This is the case in some Asian and Middle Eastern countries and as a general rule you may find that women in these cultures avoid direct gaze with men.

– **Proximity** was first explored by Edward Hall in the 1960s when he categorised proximity into four distinct areas:

- Intimate – quite close, usually up to 18 inches and indicates closeness and intimacy
- Personal – usually between 2 to 4 feet and is often a feature of the way people behave with close friends and family
- Social – typically between 4 and 10 feet and used when interacting in social settings with people who are business colleagues or acquaintances
- Public – anything more than 10 feet often used when speaking in public or in large groups

Changes in proximity and some sort of physical contact may indicate the level of comfort between two people. Closeness indicates comfort while distance will not necessarily indicate discomfort but rather lack of intimacy. Again cultural preferences will have an impact here.

The most important thing is to be aware of your own and the other person's usual way of expressing themselves. Coaching is always a two-way process and your coachee will notice any changes in how you are expressing yourself just as easily as you notice their changes. It is important to listen and observe your coachee, but also to be aware of your own emotional reactions. If you perceive changes in your coachee's behaviour during your sessions this is a sign that it might be worth probing around the issue being discussed.