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Motivational Interviewing techniques – Reflective listening

Abstract

This short article focuses on the skill of reflection within motivational interviewing (MI). It identifies three different types of reflection – simple reflection, overstated reflections and understated reflections and identifies when each has a role in a coaching conversation.

Key words: listening skills, reflection, motivational interviewing, reflective listening, motivational interviewing skills.

Motivational Interviewing

As noted in the main paper within this edition (Passmore, 2011), MI is a sophisticated technique and one best used by advanced practitioners who are already skilled in using the core skills in coaching such as open questions, active listening, summary and basic reflection. In this sense MI is well suited as a skill for coaching psychologists who already draw upon behavioural, cognitive behavioural and humanistic interventions within their coaching practice. It is however different from each of these approaches, while drawing on elements from all three (Anstiss & Passmore, In Press).

Reflective listening

Reflective listening is one of the key skills within MI. In popular language ‘listening’ often means just keeping quiet; waiting for our turn to talk. This level one style of listening is unhelpful in even basic coaching. Competent coaches should be aiming to listen at level 3 or 4, with excellent coaches occasionally stepping in to work at an interpretive level, sharing their insights where this is helpful to their coachee.

Table 1: Five levels of listening

Level 1: Waiting to speak –at this level we are simply waiting for our turn to talk
Level 2: Basic listening – at this level the listener focuses on the words being said
Level 3: Attentive listening –at this level the listener focuses on the words and tone of the communication to understand the true meaning.
Level 4: Active listening – at this level the listener listens to the words, tone and body language of the speaker and is aiming to understand what the speaker is intending to communicate
Level 5: Interpretive listening – at this level the listener is seeking to beyond the intended communication, they are interpreting meaning from the whole communication both intended meaning and unintended communications.

At level 1 some might be drawn into one of the road blocks statements (Gordon, 1970). These statements include directing, cautioning, moralizing, agreeing, reassuring or labelling. For the client who is stuck such behaviours are likely to increase the ambivalence towards change. The MI coach is trying to leverage change through building change talk and thus unstuck the coachee.

If the coach is to avoid these road blocks what else can the coach say? That is not to say there is not a place for open questions, challenge or affirming statements. However, reflective listening serves a different purpose for the MI coach.

Simple reflection

In using ‘simple reflection’ the coach tries to understand the meaning of the coachee and reflect this back, capturing the words, phrases and critically the meaning of the coachee’s communication. Using a reflective statement is less likely to provoke resistance. For example if the coach asked about the meaning of the statement, this directs the coachee to step back and reflect on whether they really do mean what they have said. As an example the coach could ask: ‘*You’re feeling unsure?*’ This is done through an inflection, with the tone rising towards the end of the sentence. In contrast the coach could use reflective listening to reflect back “*You’re feeling unsure*”. This involves using a neutral tone throughout the sentence. The reflective statement communicates understanding and becomes a statement of fact. Such statements are more likely to encourage the coachee to talk more about their emotional state. As the coachee talks they think about this state and draw out for themselves the evidence of why they are feeling as they do.

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Reflective statements can be quite simple and often can involve reflecting back a single word or pair of key words from the coachee's story.

A more sophisticated series of options however are also available to the coach. These involve over-stating or under-stating the reflection. The use of these and the frequency of use will vary with the coach's skills, as inappropriate use can leave the coachee believing their coach is not listening to them and undermine the coaching relationship.

Understated reflection

This is best used when the coach wishes the coachee to continue exploring an issue. The coach may select to reflect back a lower level of emotion than that communicated by the coachee, for example the coachee communicates 'anger', the coach may select to reflect back a lower intensity of 'anger', such as using the word 'irritation' or 'annoyed'. This works well with British coachee's where understatement is a feature of British culture. The key skill is to avoid understating to the extent that the coachee feels that the coach has not listened to what has been said. This takes both a high level of listening to the whole communication and a high level of skill of sophistication in selecting the right word to reflect back – highly articulate coaches thus have less trouble than those with a more limited range.

Over stated reflection

In contrast if the coach selects to amplify the emotional content and over state the emotion compared with the coachee's original communication, the likely effect is for the coachee to deny and minimise the emotion.

Once again the dangers of the coachee feeling they have not been heard are present and in a British cultural context this is further magnified. As a result the coach needs to be careful and limited in their use of over statement, to avoid danger to the coaching relationship.

Differences between coaching & counselling with MI

These responses can be useful when helping the coachee explore the two sides of an issue. In MI the coach wishes to help the coachee develop stronger arguments for change and to minimise the arguments in favour of indecision or inaction. This contrasts with counselling where a specific outcome is in the mind of the counsellor, such as giving up alcohol or drug use. In coaching, there is less likely to be a vested interest (although this varies with the nature of the coaching assignment), however the coach is seeking to encourage the coachee towards a deeper understanding of the issue and towards a decision for action.

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Conclusion

Reflection is not a passive process. It is the coach who decides what to reflect on and what aspects to ignore. In this way the coach can direct the attention of the coachee and encourage them to focus on aspects which may help them to reframe the situation or move forward.

References

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