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Fearless listening: the hidden factor behind the power of fearless consulting

Through reflection and enquiry into his personal consulting practice and that of some 100 executive coaches, Erik de Haan, the author of recently published *Fearless Consulting*, looks at the vital skill for consultants of listening without fear.

Fearless Consulting

2,000 years ago Plutarch pointed out that although most professionals spend a lot of time and effort in learning to speak better, it is the faculty of listening that really deserves this investment. In my opinion, the same is still true for many professional executives and consultants today.

Almost a year after publishing *Fearless Consulting*¹, I realise that I never made explicit the aspect of consulting that underpins my whole approach to the profession. This aspect is quality of listening, or the fearlessness of really listening well. This article seeks to explore further and underline the relevance of fearless listening in consulting practice.

The art of listening remained somewhat implicit throughout *Fearless Consulting* because it is so difficult to speak or write about listening. After all, where there is speech, there is no (full and fearless) listening. When you speak or write you are in 'sending' mode, while if you listen you are in 'receiving' mode – and it is impossible to be fully engaged in both modes at the same time. Therefore readers listen more than writers. Even for readers, listening may

acquire a 'consuming' flavour: the kind of listening that leaves us largely absorbed in the main threads of the argument with little room for listening between the lines, listening for ambiguity or for unresolved, open issues.

Generally, how does one enter this state of mind that is consulting, the state of mind of high-quality listening? I believe the short answer is: by noticing what is going on with this client at this moment in this relationship. I believe that consulting actually exists only in the here and now. If I can be truly involved in what is going on at present with my client, I have already done most of my 'consulting work' for this moment. Consulting begins and ends with a joint focus by client and consultant on improving the situation of one of them: the client.

Fearless Consulting

The aim in *Fearless Consulting* was to reflect on the temptations, risks and limits of the profession and to get consultants thinking about their profession, with questions such as:

- What does 'consulting' really mean?
- What does it mean to be a consultant?
- What sort of dilemmas can consulting entail?
- How can consulting degenerate into something that is no longer consulting?

The book considers a number of puzzling questions such as:

- How can one distinguish a consultant from a flatterer?
- As a consultant, how does one handle ambiguous and ambivalent clients?
Can one in fact consult with ambiguity?
- Is consulting free from power?
- How can one be irresponsible without behaving irresponsibly?
- How can one let go without letting the other person go?

An example of the need to listen well, consult less

If consultants are able to detect the irony in a presenting problem, they may often save themselves a lot of work. We discovered this a little late, some ten years ago, when we were asked to facilitate a programme on project management for Nike Europe in Belgium. Over the previous years, the Nike managers concerned had made a considerable effort towards becoming professional project leaders: reading books, attending courses and seeking to implement learning, but for some reason this had never brought them the hoped-for improvement in their work.

After some preliminary conversation and agreement on the programme design, we started to facilitate the first module on project management. The managers responded enthusiastically, inquiring about ways to complete projects more successfully. When it came to the writing of a project plan and the need to map project goals, results and milestones, someone gave an unexpected response: "This won't work over here. We always follow our company motto *Just do it!* which inspires us to believe that nothing is impossible so long as we dedicate ourselves to it one hundred percent. So it won't suit us to create a lot of paperwork first and only then to begin to actually do things." This was such a compelling remark that we decided to use the remainder of the module to listen to the participants and the circumstances under which they might be prepared to commit to any planning ahead and thereby to complement their motto.

We decided to cancel the rest of the programme because we were convinced that there was no lack of knowledge or training in the field of project management. The strong company culture and motto of Nike had led to repeated ironical requests for training in the field of project management. As far as I know, this might still be the case.

Permission for example kindly granted by Nike

Why is listening fearful?

Listening often seems the easiest thing in consulting: the interest is there, the empathy is there, listening skills have been developed to a sufficient level, etcetera. Consultants often think that consulting has not really begun when they are 'only' listening. We often overlook how crucial and fearsome 'just' listening is, and many of us overestimate our own listening skills. To quote Plutarch (1st Century A.D.) again: "Some people think the speaker has a function, while the listener does nothing"².

In fact, listening is the only communicative skill that we need in order to be skillful in all other communication, and the only one that even experienced practitioners feel that they still have a lot to learn about. This is partly because even accomplished listeners have sub-optimal skills. There is always a lot going on that any listener may miss, as there are very few signals and it is a struggle to read them well. Also, our fears often decrease our faculty of listening, even if we are not conscious of them or don't attach sufficient weight to them.

Reviewing my own difficulties with listening, I have come to conclude that there are four basic fears that block my listening at different times. These are only *my* fears; the reader may have others not mentioned here.

1. The fear of not contributing enough or not being useful enough. This is a central theme for many consultants (see our research on critical moments for coaches³) and has to do with the fact that the consultant is not in charge, and not himself responsible for results that ultimately belong to the client. Naturally the consultant can become apprehensive of not doing enough or contributing enough to the solution of his clients' problems. When the consultant is 'only' listening, this fear is heightened and may develop into a distraction which itself precludes 'only' listening.

2. The fear of not understanding enough. The struggle for understanding is always part of the work of the listener. Once the listener becomes aware of how much he is missing, and of how much more there is he could also be listening to, this fear of not understanding well is heightened.

3. The fear of exposure of self. When we are listening carefully, we are offering our full attention and we are trying to 'let in' as much information as we can. This means we suspend our judgements of what we see and hear, and we develop empathy for our clients. We also let go as much as possible of our own interpretative processes and our own agendas. This can leave us feeling awkwardly exposed, vulnerable, and open to potential client critique or rejection. This fear is heightened when something that the client says or does appears critical towards us.

4. The fear of loss of self. Another fear when listening carefully, offering our full attention and being open as much as we can, is that we almost dissolve into the client's frame of

mind. I have often experienced a trance-like state when I was listening with all my heart and mind, becoming myself almost an extension of the thoughts and feelings of my clients. This risk of almost losing oneself in trance is heightened when we are listening to very emotional accounts, or to ambivalence and ambiguity, so that neither we nor our clients know what will come next.

Fearful dilemmas of listening

Interestingly, the four basic fears above seem to complement each other in pairs:

The first two are about:

- Underplaying the task that is involved in 'just' listening
- Being overly daunted by the task of the listener.

The second two are about:

- Becoming self-conscious about the vulnerability of being there for someone else
- Becoming self-effacing in the process of listening.

These two pairs of complementing fears can be pictured as dilemmas, showing the ambivalence of a listener. This matches a common experience with listening, i.e. when one fear disappears there is a good chance that another fear will pop up, such that the middle ground of 'just' excellent listening seems an almost unattainable state and a precarious balance. See **Figure 1** overleaf for a short summary of the two dilemmas. The axes in this figure are about appreciation of listening ('high appreciation' at the bottom to 'low appreciation' at the top) and about the focus of listening ('merging with self' on the left and 'merging with the other' on the right).

Figure 1.

Dilemmas of listening



An example of how our fears may influence our listening

This is just a recent and typical example of something that I experience with some regularity. It was the second coaching conversation with an HR consultant who is currently entering the coaching profession. As a support to studying for her MSc in coaching, she requested five coaching conversations.

After she sat down for the second conversation, the client did not know quite how to start, referred back to the first coaching session, fell silent, started again, faltered again, showed some embarrassment and started apologising for 'rambling'. When she got more into the conversation she related some incidents from her previous career as a manager and some experiences from the MSc programme, and then shared an array of doubts about whether she would be able to become a good coach. I listened attentively and pointed out some common themes, such as her tendency to attribute successes to others, including her teachers, sponsors and me, while attributing failures to herself.

After the conversation I made some notes about themes in the conversation and about areas to explore in the next session. It was only when I read back these notes that it dawned on me how vulnerable and diffident this client was. I had been very smart to point out patterns and analogies, to remember some relevant themes from our first session, and to highlight themes for future sessions, but I had almost lost my client in my failure to recognise where she was on an emotional level. Only with the help of my supervisor could I preserve the beneficial nature of this coaching journey and become less analytical and more supportive before it was too late. I had fallen prey to the fear of opening myself up, and by not doing so, failed to engage emotionally with the client.

Overcoming fears: ongoing research and practice

Any listener's wish would be to get over these fears, and to 'just' be listening, even in difficult circumstances where the issues are complex or we are ourselves somehow implicated. So, how do we work on our best quality of listening? Seriously getting involved in these questions amounts to acquiring a free ticket to a fascinating journey of picking up ever more 'gold dust' in life, as well as securing a way to improve many of our relationships and, on top of all that, to become better at consulting.

Recently, I have been studying the question of how to get over a listener's fears with about 100 coaches, half of whom are in their first year as a coach and the other half with at least eight years of experience. They have kindly communicated their own most critical moments to me, to do with listening to themselves and to their coachees, and I have tried to listen to their accounts of these moments⁴. We have reached only some early answers to the question, and they seem to be related to the following:

- The right intention, involving genuine interest, curiosity and commitment. This is what the book *Fearless Consulting* is all about
- Self-awareness, particularly when it comes to our own fears and to the relatively poor quality of our listening, however hard we try
- Just generally becoming more mature, which, according to Carl Rogers⁵, means becoming more open, susceptible, flexible, trusting, accepting and authentic
- Involving a consultant (or coach, or supervisor), as this person may help us to look at the fears themselves and resist the temptation of 'putting them away' or 'eliminating' them.

It is an all too human and ultimately biological reaction to want initially to eliminate fears, tensions, doubts and ambivalences by fighting or fleeing. Our clients display such 'fight/flight' impulses, often called defences, when confronted with tensions. However, we cannot deny them in ourselves either; not even when we are in the role of consultant. Before we know it, we are skirting around or ignoring these fears, or pinning them down with a firm interpretation. The more we consult, the more we ourselves build up long-term defences against our existential fears and doubts without realising that we are doing this.

I am grateful to Karen Welch who first spotted the omission in *Fearless Consulting* when it comes to fearless listening.

References

1. de Haan, E., (2006). *Fearless Consulting – Temptations, Risks and Limits of the Profession*, Wiley, Chichester.
2. Plutarch (1st Century A.D.). *On listening*. Translated by R. Waterfield, *Essays*, Penguin Books, London, 1992.
3. de Haan, E., (2006a). *Ik twijfel dus ik coach – spannende momenten van coaches uit hun eigen praktijk coachingpraktijk [I doubt therefore I coach – critical moments in coaching practice]*, Handboek Effectief Opleiden 40 (11.6), pp. 2.01–2.18. Followed by: de Haan, E. (2006b), *Ik worstel en kom boven – spannende momenten van ervaren coaches [I struggle and emerge – critical moments of experienced coaches]*, Handboek Effectief Opleiden, 40 (in print).
4. Ibid
5. Rogers, C.R. (1961). *On Becoming a Person – a Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, Constable, London. (See chapters 8 and 9 for what it means to become more mature).