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## Are you there?

*Fans of the work of Ingmar Bergman, will appreciate the importance of silence in human interaction. In coaching too, silence can be golden. But just how does that work in a telephone session? **John Charlton** explains*

Silence is a really important part of good coaching. A good coach knows silence indicates reflection,” says independent coach Marianne Craig.

However, coaches need to know how to work with it, particularly if they’re coaching over the phone. Those new to phone coaching, and even the more experienced, may wonder whether the client is reflecting, distracted or even if the line has gone down. It can be tempting to jump in with another question. Of course, silence will crop up in face-to-face sessions but it’s easier to apply other senses.

As David Clutterbuck and Zulfi Hussain point out in *Virtual Coach, Virtual Mentor* (2009): “If we can’t hear anything we worry that the other party has been cut off.”

There are ways around this without using a webcam. Gladeana McMahon, chair of the Association for Coaching UK, and a coach since 1990, says: “You have to evaluate what type of silence you are dealing with. If you think they’re [the client] struggling, you use prompts such as: ‘How are you feeling?’ ”

Coach Caroline Talbot says if she's not sure why the client is silent, she asks: "And what's happening now?"

### **Why phone coaching?**

Phone coaching is very popular in countries with large geographical distances such as the US, and its popularity is spreading in the UK. Craig has more than 4,000 hours of coaching under her belt, about 80 per cent of which has been over the phone. She is passionate about its potential.

"The telephone and Skype, like the internet, have opened up a whole world of global communication and made my work really viable internationally. To have such intimate coaching relationships with individuals in Rio, Bangkok or Athens is a joy and a privilege – all from my home office in Brighton.

"When there is good rapport between coach and client, the skilled phone coach creates a learning space that is open and welcoming. Just as with face-to-face, the coach knows how to keep quiet and to allow their client the space to explore their thinking, to find their solutions and to grow and develop."

Erik de Haan, director of the Ashridge Centre for Coaching, says: "The pros are considerable: no travelling, the ability to do good work over long distances and, the greatest advantage, a superb focus as the voice enters deeply, while the mind is still free to freely associate and think. Good phone coaching has a similar quality to lying on the couch for analytical sessions – a great freedom for thinking but also a little daunting in terms of: 'What is the other person thinking? What will happen next?' That, though, is an anxiety that is actually conducive to good coaching."

Many feel phone coaching is actually more intimate. Glynis Kozma of Aspire Coaching says: "Some clients see face-to-face as more intimate whereas in reality I have had clients tell me things over the phone which I suspect would not have passed their lips if I were sitting opposite them."

Professor David Clutterbuck, practice leader at Clutterbuck Associates, points out: "It can be more egalitarian. There is some evidence that people feel more comfortable about power gaps arising from gender, race or hierarchy."

He also cautions that "only really experienced coaches with exceptional listening skills should rely on phone coaching. It works best for skills and performance coaching and less well for transformational coaching".

Clutterbuck says there is also the issue of shallowness to contend with: "It's hard to get into depth, not least because most people struggle to pay full attention when a phone call goes on for more than 45 minutes. There are also communication difficulties, for example, it's hard to spot discontinuities between speech and body language."

### **How does it work?**

The mechanics of phone coaching are broadly similar to other coaching – a similar number of sessions, robust contracting and so on – although there are some differences. Phone coaches typically email documentation, including, for example, questionnaires and the contract that the client and, where appropriate, the employer/sponsor, enter into.

Of course, it's wise to have signed agreements returned in hard copy via the post, especially relating to rates and payment terms and conditions.

Many phone coaches seek a face-to-face session before launching into it. Ed Modell, president-elect of the International Coach Federation (ICF), says: "I always have at least one face-to-face meeting with my clients before I do phone coaching so that we can visualise how each other looks and even some of our mannerisms."

Michelle Lucas, a coach who set up Greenfields Consultancy in 2003, says she holds a "chemistry session" with potential clients to establish if coaching is really what they need. She asks them about past coaching experiences they may have had, what they want the coaching to address, what their manager may want from the sessions and objectives.

"It's a two-way thing that establishes if they need coaching, counselling or maybe training."

Some believe sharing photographs can help to build a bond. David Rude, of Life and Leadership Coaching, who likes to use Skype, asks the client to send a photo of themselves if they don't have video access.

Once the phone sessions are agreed and underway, technology, as McMahon says, "can be a challenge. If you use Skype you can have delays".

It goes without saying that a reliable line is essential. This usually, if not always, means a landline, plus that other

essential tool – the headset.

“I prepare for my phone coaching sessions by getting in a comfortable place in a room all by myself with no distractions,” says the ICF’s Modell. “I use a headset so my hands are free to take notes during the call. Otherwise there are no special preparations.”

Coaches should also recommend that clients find a quiet place, free from distractions. “In the first phone session I usually ask a client how they are sitting and whether there are any distractions. From then on I work as I work face-to-face,” says de Haan.

“Perhaps the greatest challenge of phone coaching is that it requires the client and coach to eliminate other possible distractions that might interfere with deep and direct listening and communicating with each other,” says Modell.

De Haan says: “It is essential to hold on to certain boundaries, for example, to treat the call with as much care as one would do in a one-to-one.”

### **Feedback**

Just as with face-to-face, the coach should be prepared to offer feedback at the end of sessions and the contracted period. Clearly they can take notes as the sessions progress but this must not distract from attentive listening.

“I always offer written feedback”, says Greenfields’ Lucas, “but it depends what the client wants. At the end of each session we reflect on what the client can take away. Then I can ping back [emailed] notes on what they’ve found most useful.”

McMahon believes it’s important to give the client progress reports “as you go along, much the same as in any form of coaching”.

Finally, coaches should ensure they are in an appropriate frame of mind. And they should be prepared to sit with, and use, silence.

### **Money talks**

According to research by the ICF\*, 42 per cent of coaches globally coach mainly by telephone and 42 per cent of clients prefer being coached this way. “We did see”, says the ICF, “that coaching over the telephone was more likely to be preferred by those clients working with a life vision and enhancement coach rather than those working with a business, executive or leadership coach. Also, clients in North America were more likely to prefer coaching sessions by phone than clients in other regions of the world.”

As for rates, Modell says, “from what I’ve seen most coaches charge the same rates for phone coaching as in-person coaching. It is even more cost-effective to do coaching by telephone because you need not either charge for or lose out on the time it would take the coach to travel to a face-to-face meeting.”

Craig says she charges the same for phone and face-to-face coaching, but that new coaches should charge less. She believes that rates range from £40 to £150 per hour, though executive coaches may charge from £200 per hour upwards.

The ICF coaching survey said the hourly fee reported by those polled averaged \$205 – or about £140.

Of course coaches might find they can conduct more phone coaching sessions in a given time than face-to-face ones and so can potentially earn more.

Views on the market vary. Lucas says that, generally, the market is “sticky”. Craig believes it is “very good”. She says her website has worked well for her in terms of generating interest and enquiries from people all over the world.

[www.coachfederation.org.uk/resources/icf\\_global\\_study\\_phtml](http://www.coachfederation.org.uk/resources/icf_global_study_phtml)

### **Telephone vs face-to-face: the pros and cons**

#### **Pros**

- It can be conducted from anywhere to anywhere as long as the parties have effective connectivity.
- It saves time and money as there is no travelling.

- Preliminary niceties are minimised.
- Listening skills are heightened.
- It is usually cheaper to conduct.
- Visual distractions are minimised.
- Settling in time should be shorter.
- Coaches can conduct more sessions and thus earn more.

## Cons

- Lack of non-verbal signals (though minimised with webcams).
- Use of diagrams or representational drawings is restricted.
- Use of the body as a medium is restricted.
- Intense nature of the medium means sessions can be very tiring.
- Easier for clients to be distracted, especially when on speaker phones.
- Technology is not fully reliable – with Skype there can be delays.

## Coaching at Work, Volume 5, Issue 5

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*Mrs Anji Marychurch* says:

[October 28, 2010 at 9:20 am](#)

A very useful article which summarises and mirrors my experience as a career coach and mentor. I initially transitioned from working with individuals face to face in 2002 and was a bit sceptical of it's benefits. About 75% of my clients are happy with this way, even tho' we usually find a way to meet if they are in the UK or Europe.

I am now a firm believer that working remotely can certainly achieve as great an intimacy and depth as I'd experienced previously when working F2F with individuals.

With now more than 3,000 coaching hours I would go further and say that greater disclosure is the norm on calls, helped by the fact that more people are used to this way of working.

Finally, I wholeheartedly agree with Ruth that the quality of the coach is key especially in the areas of creating a safe environment, building intimacy and trust with the client and using excellent listening – core coaching skills par excellence!

Anji Marychurch

[Reply](#)



*Ruth Paris* says:

[September 15, 2010 at 1:50 pm](#)

Thanks for a useful article, John. I was sorry to notice that nobody had commented so thought I'd break the silence so you know there is somebody here!

I'd like to echo the points made by Erik and Glynis about the positive aspects of telephone coaching: the freedom to dive straight to the heart of a specific issue with an intense focus enables people to achieve results that can surprise them if they haven't experienced telephone coaching before.

At Coaching on Call, where we offer on-demand telephone coaching, we consistently receive positive feedback from people who were initially sceptical about how useful a half hour telephone conversation could be, saying afterwards that they were able to feel safe to explore much more deeply than they would have in a face to face situation. Of course this is a testament to the calibre of our excellent coaches – I completely agree with Professor Clutterbuck about the quality of the coach required for this work but our experience strongly challenges his assumption that telephone work is shallow. I'd be interested to know other people's experience or thoughts on this. Best wishes, Ruth Paris

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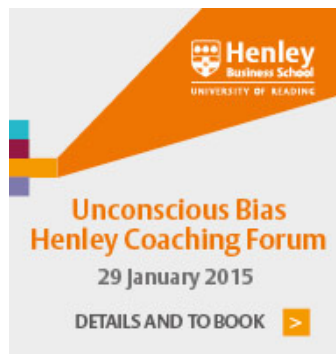
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