Beyond "Active Listening": The Benefits of Developmental Listening Grounded in Laske's *Constructive Developmental Framework* (CDF)

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Introduction

There are many ways of listening to others' flow of words. *Active listening*, especially in coaching, is understood as a neutral attitude in which one listens to the content of clients' speech utterances, trying to be "objective" as well as "engaged" emotionally. This kind of listening largely excludes listening for pattern or structure, but it is nevertheless a good beginning for thinking developmentally. In light of findings of the developmental sciences, Active Listening is not quite good enough for helping clients.

What, then, is developmental listening, and what does it contribute to coaching beyond active listening? In a nutshell, it is a form of structured listening, both in the sense of being a methodologically and pedagogically well defined learnable Amental process, as well as due to the fact that its focus is an understanding of the structure of clients' thinking and meaning making. And since this structure is the basis of clients' actions and behavior, to discern it for the sake of coaching is of high importance to the profession as a whole.

Link of Developmental Listening to Extant Maturity Models

Let me begin this short text about developmental listening by pointing to some aspects defining the nature of such listening, and further to the **skills** that need to be mastered in order to become a *developmental listener*.

To make myself clear I would like to refer to the diagram below:

Key Post-Formal Maturity Models
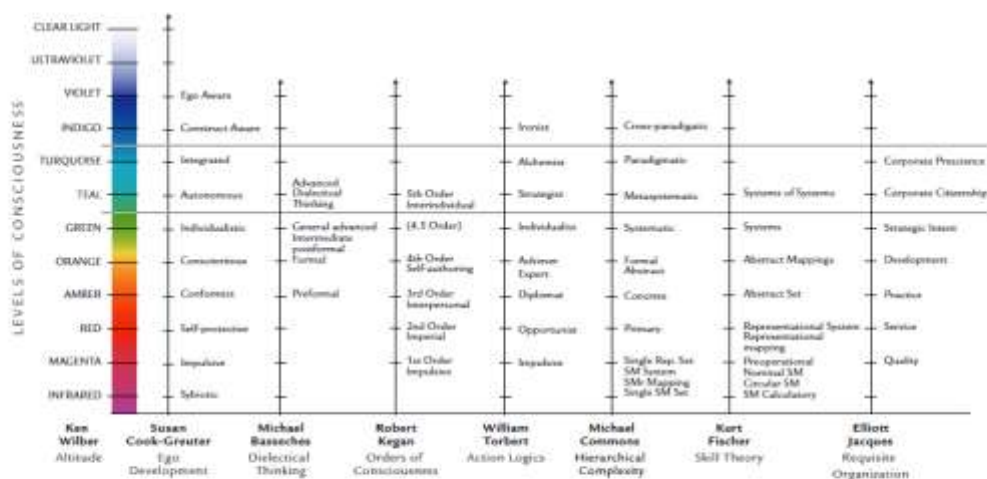
Since about 1975, a number of different models of human maturity have been developed in the United States, especially at the Kohlberg School of Harvard University. Some of these models are based on semi-structured interviewing (referring to an interviewing protocol that can be adapted to different clients and situations), and therefore directly involve deep listening.

Among the 7 models shown, the following two require validation of empirical findings by way of evaluating the structure of individual interviews which in turn requires expert competence in the interviewer. Without sufficient interviewing competence the interviewer will fail to obtain valid developmental data.

The two maturity models in question that require for their use deep developmental listening are:

      a. M. Basseches' model of cognitive development (1984)
      b. R. Kegan's model of social-emotional development (1982; 1988).

Without adopting for their use expert developmental listening, these models remain pure ideologies and abstract theories that are no different from the remaining 5 maturity models shown in the diagram. In short, these two models are based on developmental listening and have only theoretical but no practical value outside of it.

CDF is based on Developmental Listening

Importantly, it is the very essence of Laske's *Constructive Developmental Framework* that these two models – that of Basseches and Kegan -- are intrinsically linked. It is also of the essence that a psychological (behavioral) dimension which is based on a psycho-dynamic questionnaire deriving from H. Murray's work has been added.

This has been done in order to confront the challenge that arises when a coach is asked to link, in his mind and work, the "vertical" dimension of development with the "horizontal" dimension of behavior. **Wherever only 1 or 2 dimensions of CDF are used, and its tripartitue nature is thus neglected, one by force reverts to the orthodox maturity models shown in the diagram above.** This means practically that whatever dimension(s) of CDF are left out by the user in his assessment of clients will haunt him as well as his client (whose actual positioning in the world will be misconstrued).

For this reason, an expert user of CDF cannot be content with mastering just one of CDF's three dimensions. To become a competent CDF user, s(he) will have to master **two very different listening skills** both of which rely on understanding and internalizing the respective model:
   c. Social-emotional listening
   d. Cognitive listening

Developmental listening is initially exercised in one-hour semi-structured interviews, but once learned it is applicable to all situations in which understanding others is of high priority. While in social-emotional listening the listener/interviewer is focused on how the client makes meaning of life and work experiences, in cognitive listening attention is focused on how the client conceptually constructs his/her "world" or social environment, in particular the work environment (in CDF also called the client's "internal workplace").

In both kinds of developmental listening, its use is focused on "reading the structure" of a client's emotional and intellectual being (life), and using one's ability to "read" the developmental level on which the client lives emotionally and *thinks* cognitively, particularly for the sake of developing coaching plans and coaching interventions that are specific to the unique individuality of the client.

In short, when using CDF the coach is not stitching together pre-defined or "canned" coaching models (as in most contemporary coach training) but rather develops his/her own "coaching model" based on data s(he) herself has gathered through interviews with an individual client, simultaneously adding data about the psychological profile of the client that falls outside of adult development. As a result, coaching based on CDF amounts to a new coaching paradigm, not just an enrichment of existing coaching models.

Let us now investigate the specific challenges posed by each kind of developmental listening.

What is Cognitive Listening?

In terms of coaching, an individual's thinking can be said to be about answering the question "what can I do and what are my options?" When thinking about this question further, it becomes clear that it relies on CONCEPTS that one is using to construct the peculiar world one lives in as an individual. No two individuals are alike, which means that to understand individual clients, one has to research how they uniquely construct "their world" in terms of concepts at a particular time in their life.

This is exactly what the cognitive interview in CDF is defined to achieve. The interviewer has learned a theory of thinking according to which mature adults transcend logical thinking by way of a higher form of thinking called "dialectical" (or "transformational") thinking. S(he) has thus learned "the four moments of dialectic", in terms of which one can assess clients' construction of the world by concepts under four different but related aspects:

1. *C: Context* (the world seen as an assemblage of stable contexts)

2. *P: Process* (the world seen as being in perpetual motion)

3. *R: Relationship* (the world seen as being composed of inter-related elements)

4. *T: Transformation* (the world as it is ontologically, embodying context, process, and relationship, and therefore is experienced as being in unceasing transformation).

In CDF, each of these fours aspects of the world is captured by a number of individual THOUGHT FORMS (7 for each aspect) each of which focuses attention on a particular

dialectical moment. The coach has learned such thought forms and has acquired the skill to direct a client's thinking in the direction of each of the four moments.

While engaging in conventional conversations will not suffice, by using a semi-structured interview protocol the coach can precisely assess a client's present structure of thinking. Based on such a one-hour interview, paying close attention to the client's use of concepts, after transcribing and evaluating the interview the coach can give feedback to the client in at least three different ways:

- The client's present fluidity of thinking (in the use of concepts)

- The balance or imbalance between the four aspects named above (C, P, R; T) in the client's present thinking

- The discrepancy of the client's critical and constructive thinking, where the former is based on Process and Relationship thought forms (P, R), and the latter in terms of Context and Transformation thought forms (C, T).

As an expert user of CDF, the coach can give cogent, written or verbal, feedback to the client about these findings. This has both a general and a practical benefit. In general terms, a coach can help clients understand in what *phase of cognitive development* they presently are, where "phase" refers to a person's present ability to construct reality close to what it "really is", objectively, rather than constructing it in a ego-centrically distorted way. "Phase" of cognitive development touches upon how far a person is able to transcend formal logical thinking, and thus has acquired an appreciation of the deep complexity of reality. And practically, the coach can help the client understand the "dialectical form" of his or her problems, which is quite different from the problems' formal-logical form.

Experientially, then, for the interviewer/listener cognitive interviewing equates to "reading the structure of the client's present thinking". The listening required to do so is a listening focused on the concepts clients use in an interview focused on their work in three different domains ("Houses"): the tasks they carry out, the organizational environment they work in, and the professional agenda they follow in their own work and career.

Over time, listening to and focusing on concepts and their interrelationships becomes spontaneous, even intuitive. In developing CDF users' cognitive listening capability, a coach is no longer just an "active listener". He has moved on to become a "structural" or "dialectical" listener, since in his work s(he) is guided by knowledge of conceptual structures that, embodied in thought forms, help read "how the client thinks" (one might say perhaps "the client's mind").

What is Social-Emotional Listening?

In terms of coaching, social-emotional meaning making can be said to be about the question "what should I do and for whom?" Answers to this question derive from one's present value system. This system has been internalized due to living in a particular community and national culture, and thus has become "one's own". However, over the life span each individual is building his or her own value system which, in the end, may transcend the value system of the community of which s(he) is a part. Social-emotional autonomy is measured by the relationship between cultural conventions that one has absorbed and is identified with, on one hand, and the form a person's personal integrity takes. The latter may clash with the former, on account of which the individual may experience hardship or death.

Experientially, social-emotional meaning making is about the question where a person draws the line between what is ME and NOT-ME. NOT-ME comprises everything a person feels is foreign to her. Over the life span, this line moves from being focused on one's own survival needs and interests to encompassing not only the social world of one's culture, but all of humanity regardless of race and creed. In the end, "you are me" or "nothing human is foreign to me" is the outcome, where the "me" has shrunk to a tiny speck in a universe that will go on without "me".

The line between ME and NOT-ME is best thought of as an oscillation between the two extremes. When we freeze this oscillation, we speak of "developmental stage". Much more essential than "stage" is the oscillation from which it emerges, and therefore the transition between stages as well as the spread of stages across a range peculiar to an individual. The social-emotional range of a person speaks to his/her developmental risk and potential, as well as to the strength of the person's developmental comfort zone or "center of gravity" at a particular point in life.

For grasping where exactly an individual presently draws the line between ME and NOT-ME, deep listening is required. For this purpose, the social-emotional interview provides two important tools:

1. A set of verbal "prompts" chosen by the client, which becomes a focus of attention for both parties in the interview (e.g., "control", "important to me", etc.)

2. A process of "hypothesis formulation" in the coach which comprises as its essential ingredient a process of playing "devil's advocate" that is crucial in testing each formulated hypothesis.

As can be inferred, social-emotional listening, just as cognitive listening, is a highly complex structured mental process that has little to do with "hearing" per se, and

transcends "active listening" by several magnitudes. It is an interpretive process that requires thorough training and excellent thinking capability.

While a prompt defines a topic or domain of discourse that is strictly adhered to for 10-12 minutes (since more than 5 prompts are almost never used in an interview), an hypothesis is a formulation in the coach/listener's mind that asserts what stage of social-emotional development a group of sentences of the client may be spoken from. More simply, social-emotional listening skills have to do with hypothesizing and testing the *meaning making generator* that produces the client's sentences. (This generator corresponds to the sense making generator, or *concept coordinator,* in the cognitive interview.) The coach has to be able to relate a number of verbal prompt and associated hypothesis regarding the client's stage to each other over the course of one hour. In the end, administering a social-emotional interview is a process of testing *one's own* social-emotional hypotheses regarding a particular client's development in the context of what the client is saying.

In both interviews, the essential difference is that between (social or psychological) content and (developmental) structure. Essentially, any content can be spoken from any social emotional level. Therefore, it is not the content of what is said that matters. Rather, what matters is how the content of what is said is articulated *in terms of a person's self concept and self image*. And this is a matter of structure, not content, that is, a matter of level of social emotional development.

Social-emotional listening, then, is focused around particular themes that have emotional weight (prompts), and these themes are investigated by the coach/listener in regard to what their discussion says about the client's meaning making at a particular point in time.

Difficulties of Developmental Listening

There are many ways in which developmental listening can fail in the sense that it does not yield valid evidence about a client's thinking or meaning making. The reasons for failure are manifold. A coach may fail to be deeply enough schooled in the underlying theory; s(he) may be unable to put the theory into practice in interviewing, for reasons having to do with the coach's own present level of development or psychological profile, or both. Or else, developmental listening may fail because of lack of practice and rehearsal of interviewing. It is the task of a good mentor to bring these factors to light when working with a particular student. This is also the central task of teaching CDF, in whatever language.

For instance, it will be clear by now that adopting a cognitive stance in social-emotional interviewing' or a social-emotional stance in cognitive interviewing' will lead to failure because no valid developmental evidence can be gathered by the interviewer. These two types of interviewing are truly different and many coaches never learn to keep them distinct. On the other hand, many excellent coaches learn to fluidly switch from one type of interviewing to another in their coaching sessions (not in their interviewing), having developed a good intuition about what kind of intervention is needed at a particular time in work with a client.

Conclusion

One might ask why anybody would want to undertake such ardent learning as developmental listening seems to require.

My answer would be that developmental listening is a tremendous tool in communicating with people in, but also far beyond, coaching. Developmental listening has to do with being able to "stand in another person's shoes", emotionally or cognitively, and forget about one's own interests, designs, and plans, at least for the duration of developmental interviews. Such listening transforms the coach into an observer of how other people construct the world they live in, and gives strong clues as to why a client has the problems in life and work that they say they are having. Because these "problems" are essentially all due to the way in which the person constructs the world for herself, and have little to do with what the problems "actually" are. (Most humans acquire this insight "the hard way", by suffering.)

Developmental listening cannot blossom when taking either a factual or philosophical stance. It is also not a psychological matter. It is a learned "epistemological" aptitude which is focused on HOW PEOPLE KNOW THE WORLD (cognitive and social-emotional ways of knowing). And how people know the world will always determine how they fare in the world since they have constructed this world for themselves.

For a coach to be able, through developmental listening, to enter this world with a client, fully aware of sharing with the client *the human condition*, is a tremendous gift since all of us find it difficult, at least at times, to know who we are and what, on account of who we are, befalls us or what we should or can do.

How to become a developmental listener

In my view, the best way to become a developmental listener can be formulated in the following way:

1. Do <u>not</u> assume that you understand what people "mean" by what they say.

2. Do <u>not</u> assume that your thinking is alive as long as you do not make the effort to analyze the structure of another's person's thinking.

3. Do <u>not</u> assume that language is a medium of description of existing or even future things, but rather a medium for creating the world before others' eyes and ears.

4. Assume that to be an "active listener" in the developmental sense of the term you need to decipher patterns and structures that define your client's behavior, including speech behavior and, more generally, the human condition.

5. Assume that clients' speech flow is generated by an internal cognitive or social-emotional generator that you have to decipher by scoring transcribed interviews.

6. Assume that "presence" in the developmental sense is an expression of your developmental knowledge, both theoretical and procedural, and of embodying it based on experience with it.

7. Assume that in interviewing you are giving the gift of having the client "feel" and "think" in a way never experienced before.

8. Assume that you can make a client "shine" by helping him or her to focus attention on the inner self and its oscillations around a social-emotional and/or cognitive center of gravity.

9. Assume that in practicing developmental interviewing you will come to see the social world in a more highly transparent way, as a creation of human speech.

10. Assume that while you may be a beginner in developmental listening, you have all the resources you need to shine as a developmental listener.

About the Author

Otto's work in developmental interviewing and listening is based on his being a musician as well as experienced psychological and developmental researcher and interviewer.

Otto Laske PhD PsyD is Founder and Director of the Interdevelopmental Institute (IDM) in Gloucester, MA, USA. He is the creator of the *Constructive Developmental Framework* (CDF) taught at the Institute to an international student body. Documents of Otto's work are found at www.interdevelopmentals.org. His artistic work is found at www.ottolaske.com. He can be reached at otto@interdevelopmentals.org.