



# TYLER WILSON

Do you find people more interesting now  
that you are actually listening to them?

by James Wilson



# “Do you find people more interesting now that you are actually listening to them?”

Let's be honest – there are probably a small number of people whom you have sat next to at dinner whom you would prefer not to sit next to again. 'Emma' was in that category for me so it was with a heavy heart that I sat down at my allotted place next to her at a dinner last October.

“So”, my wife asked as we drove home later, “how was Emma?”. “Emma,” I said, “is a remarkable woman and we had a great conversation. She was telling me about her work at the local Citizen's Advice Bureau and how frustrated she had been that the funding from the Council had been withdrawn and the office closed. Undeterred, she set about raising sufficient funds to open another office. She was telling me some fascinating stories about how she overcame the red tape to achieve it. And we talked about some new things she would like to do and how she might go about doing them”.

“Goodness me,” said my wife (with wifely insight), “do you think you find people more interesting now that you are actually listening to them?”.

The more I thought about that question the more I recognised that I have had some amazing conversations over the past 12 months. Central to what has made those conversations amazing has been my enhanced level of listening and a heightened awareness of the part I can play in someone else's thinking.

## So what have I been doing for the past 30 years?

If pressed before undertaking my executive coaching training, I would have said I was a very good listener. After all, I have been listening to clients for over 30 years as a commercial litigator – and to my fellow partners for the last seven of those years as the international Senior Partner of a law firm. I would have said that 'listening' was a large part of my day job.

However, once I began to consider the framework of different levels of listening outlined by the Coaches Training Institute, I realised that many of my conversations<sup>1</sup> were taking place at Level 1 - frequently my questions were aimed at fact finding (to serve my needs not those of the person I was speaking to) and seeking to 'cut to the chase' so I could impart my advice or suggest a solution. Rarely did I find myself in a Level 2 conversation - 'locked into an absorbing and intensely concentrated conversation' and 'most definitely in flow with the client doing most of the talking'<sup>2</sup>. More rarely still, would I have found myself at Level 3, 'radio-field listening' where my intuition was fully in tune with the client and there were moments of real connection.

I found a lot of resonance in the statement that 'most people don't listen, they are just waiting to speak' – indeed, when I raised this in a partners' meeting in my law firm recently, one perceptive response was “we aren't waiting to speak, we are just pausing to reload”!

## The Impact of the BCP

I can remember quite distinctly the first coaching session where I was able to look back and recognise that my listening had reached Level 3. The session, with 'Adam', started at quite a superficial level – with Adam taking quite some time to explain why he had not completed the action plan (covering a number

<sup>1</sup> As described by Witworth, Kimsey-House & Sandahl: Co-active Coaching (Nicholas Brealey Publishing; 3rd edition, 2011)

<sup>2</sup> Jenny Rogers: Coaching Skills (Open University Press; 3rd edition 2012)

of issues relating to his goal of changing careers), which he had mapped out at our previous session. As he completed his list of things that had been taking up his time I simply asked: “and what else has been diverting you?” (‘diverting’ had been his expression). That opened up a deeper explanation about being distracted by the difficulties he had been having getting access to his children who now lived with his recently divorced wife. We talked some more about what he would do to overcome this hurdle.

Throughout this part of the discussion, I had been listening carefully to his intonation and to his choice of words, intrigued as to where his thinking might take him next rather than offering solutions myself (which is what I would probably have done a year ago). That deeper listening sparked a moment of intuition that prompted me to observe: “I sense there is something else you haven’t told me...?”. After a moment of silence, Adam spoke for about 10 minutes, hardly pausing for breath, about how his elderly father, who lived in the US, had called shortly after our last session and told him he was disinheriting him and his children and intended to leave everything to Adam’s sister. Adam, for whom family values are really important, said he was bewildered; it had become the first thing he thought about when he woke each morning and it was absorbing all his energy. When I asked what he wanted to do about it, he said that he was so deflated that he just did not have the energy to do anything about it. So I asked him: “if you were at your strongest and your most resilient, what would you do about it?” There was a long pause before Adam replied: “I would get on a plane to the States and I would go to see my father to talk it all through”. And that is exactly what Adam did. He did not get all the answers he wanted from his father but the act of going and having that difficult conversation unblocked his enthusiasm and energy to pursue his career transition goal once he returned.

## What have I learned about listening?

That session with Adam, and a good number of others since, brought home to me the power of listening and increased my understanding of the points made on the subject in so many of the books I have read during the BCP. The key points for me have been:

1. Knowing that we will not be interrupted is a phenomenal force for the mind.<sup>3</sup> Conveying to a client that they will not be interrupted is therefore crucial to creating the environment that empowers the client to complete their thinking. I have come to fully understand Nancy Kline’s view that we normally expect people to be listening to us just long enough to come up with a comment, a diagnosis, a solution, or a witty intervention – and as we sense them ‘revving to speak’, that slows our thinking<sup>4</sup>.
2. Effective listening requires a difficult balance between minimising the internal ‘noise’ in our minds, so as to bring complete focus on what the client is saying, and maintaining sufficient self-awareness about how we are reacting to what is being said. Our own body language can contribute to or detract from the client’s process of thinking. For example, nodding our heads gently can be seen as an affirmative action. While our intention may be positive, sometimes excessive nodding may affirm an unhelpful assumption just voiced by the client. Similarly, rapid nodding may communicate that the client should speed up because we are inadvertently indicating that we have the gist and do not need to hear any more<sup>5</sup>.
3. That session with Adam brought home to me that ‘radio-field’ listening, which is so crucial to sparking a moment of intuition, only happens if I am truly focused on the speaker. If I have not calmed the inner chatter in my mind it acts like ‘static’, blocking the ‘radio-field’ and inhibiting my ability to read all the signals.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Kline: More Time To Think (Cassell, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent discussion of this balance, see Jane Adshead-Grant: Are You Listening or Just Waiting to Speak (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2015)

4. There is an interesting inter-relationship between listening and asking good questions. It is often said that the biggest influence a coach can have on the direction of a client session is their choice of questions. There is a lot of force in that but it seems clear to me that the choice of question must be directed by what the coach has heard and sensed through really focused listening. It undoubtedly helps to keep the 'toolkit' of good questions refreshed and to practice them whenever and wherever possible – I have found that has given me confidence not to worry about whether I will think of a good question which in turn frees my mind to focus on actively listening.

Much has been written about the beneficial impact upon the client of good listening by their coach. By improving my listening skills as a coach, however, I too have gained two clear benefits. Firstly, I have been left after every great conversation over the past 12 months with a strong sense of privilege at being allowed access to the client's innermost thoughts and ideas. Secondly, the answer to the question posed by my wife is that I am definitely finding people more interesting now that I am actually listening to them.

James Wilson

James has spent the past 30 years supporting senior people through periods of crisis and significant change. Initially that involved advising shipowners in the immediate aftermath of major maritime accidents; latterly, it involved leading an international law firm, Ince & Co LLP, for seven years as executive senior partner during a period of significant transition following the global financial crisis.

During this period, the firm overhauled its governance and legal structures and transformed its partner performance and remuneration systems. James and Dick Tyler have now established Tyler Wilson Ltd ([www.tyler-wilson.co.uk](http://www.tyler-wilson.co.uk)) to offer coaching support to senior leaders in law firms.