

Ep #168: The Most Important Coaching Skill



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With Your Host

Lindsay Dotzlaf

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Hey, this is Lindsay Dotzlaf and you are listening to *Mastering Coaching Skills* episode 168.

To really compete in the coaching industry, you have to be great at coaching. That's why every week, I will be answering your questions, sharing my stories, and offering tips and advice so you can be the best at what you do. Let's get to work.

Hey coach, I am so happy you're here today. I have a great episode – I think it's great anyway, we'll see – prepared for you. I'm really excited to talk about this today and I wanted to just kind of let you in on what's going on behind the scenes.

I have mentioned it a little bit, but one thing that is happening, we are approaching the two-year anniversary of The Coach Lab, which is my lifetime access foundational coaching skills program. And over the last almost two years, I've learned so much just by coaching all the clients, interacting with my clients, getting all the feedback.

It has been really incredible. And I am currently in the middle of creating all kinds of new material for The Coach Lab, which feels really, really fun. I love thinking about this stuff. And one thing about The Coach Lab, I say it's foundational coaching skills and it is for brand new coaches. But it's also for seasoned coaches who want to come in and really just refine those foundational skills.

So wherever you are in your coaching journey, The Coach Lab may be for you. So maybe check it out. But I am in the middle of just creating a bunch of new content. And so as I'm going through it, there are some things that I'm just going to be like, oh yeah, I want to share this on the podcast. Especially some of the topics that I feel like I can kind of cover and do like a brief overview in a way that will be really helpful for you in a way that you can have takeaways just from listening to the podcast without having to join to learn it.

Although, of course, you should definitely join. And everything that I teach here, there's just a difference in like what I can do on the podcast versus

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what I can do in a program. So everything I teach here will be kind of like a high-level overview of some of the concepts I'll be teaching there. And then, of course, inside The Coach Lab we also have coaching and we have community and all of that.

So even if there is a little bit of overlap, which I love because I love being able to just provide some of this for free for those of you that may not be ready for that kind of commitment right now or might just be here listening for fun or are listening because you use some of these skills and you're not coaches, but you use them in your life or in your job or whatever.

So for so many reasons, I love to share these things. And this is one of them that as it came up today I was like, oh yeah, I need to record an episode on this. So today we're going to be talking about what I think is one of the most important skills you can have as a coach. And it's something that I actually haven't covered before.

I realized, I think, that when I first started this podcast and when I was first creating The Coach Lab, I think I kind of took this skill for granted. And after almost two years of coaching people in The Coach Lab and seeing how often this topic comes up in many different ways, I'm just going to go ahead and declare that it is one of the most important skills you can have as a coach.

And I'm so curious, I wish I could just be in the car with you or wherever you are. I don't want to be in the shower with you. I wish I could just hear you answer, like, what do you think I'm going to say? Now, my guess is that whatever it is, it's probably in the title of the episode. So if you saw that, you're cheating just a little bit.

But if you just think about, as a coach, what is one of the most important, doesn't matter, this crosses all niches, everything. What is one of the most important skills that you must have? Like you have to, this isn't optional as a coach.

Are you ready? The answer is listening. Now, I know that might sound obvious or you might be like, wait, what? No, we need to know how to ask

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questions and create awareness and all of the things that I talk about, right? But what I see come up all of the time is coaches who aren't great at listening and then trying to problem solve things that are happening in their coaching that I know could be solved by just slowing down a little bit and being a better listener.

So that's what we're going to talk about today. We're going to talk about listening, why it's so important and kind of what gets in the way of being a great listener. Things to listen for, like when I say listening, what do I mean by that? All the different ways that it's really important to listen closely to your clients. And I think maybe I already said this, but what gets in the way and how to solve that. Okay?

So first, why it's important. First, it's kind of obvious, right? You have to listen in order to know what your client is saying, to hear what they're telling you, to be able to understand what it is they want help with, the goals that they're setting, why they're hiring you, all of those things. But when you think about the actual coaching that you're doing, so not when you're teaching necessarily, and not when you are maybe strategizing.

But when you are asking questions, when you're getting very curious with your clients, when you're helping them create awareness, when you're helping them decide what something might look like in the future or how they want to move forward. Yes, it is important for you to ask great questions, but even more important, and I would argue they go kind of hand in hand, is being able to get out of your own head and listen to what your clients are telling you. Listen to the words that they're saying. Listen to how they're saying it.

I have been thinking a ton about this as I've been creating the new content and thinking about how I want to teach this. And one thing that I have realized after coaching so many of my clients on this is listening really goes hand in hand with curiosity. Like you can't be super curious and not be a good listener.

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I mean, I guess you could be. When I think of that, of someone who's super curious and not a good listener, I think of like a little kid who's just like asking questions before you're even finished answering the last one, right? I think one of my daughters was like that when she was younger. It was like question after question after question. She was super curious. She just didn't actually care what the answer was.

It was like scratching that curiosity itch versus really understanding as a coach why it's important to be curious and why it's important to explore and then really help your clients create a deep awareness and a deep understanding of themselves. I think that all comes from, first, being a great listener.

One thing that I teach, you've heard me talk about it here on the podcast and we talk about it a lot inside The Coach Lab is how to ask great questions. And when I was considering, you know, while I'm redoing some of this content I was considering like, what's the best way to teach that? Because I have a really hard time thinking about, like if you go to my website, I have, I don't know what it's called, a freebie, an opt-in, I guess, that is just a list of questions. A list of open-ended coaching questions.

And while I think it's great and I sometimes get a lot of feedback about it and it always surprises me. I do think it's great, but there's always been this thing that's like, I don't know why, but just is that very helpful? I don't know. And I realized this is why, because I can give you a list of great questions all day. But if you aren't really being curious, if you aren't really listening to how your client is answering the questions or even listening to what they're saying in order to know what to ask, it doesn't really matter.

You can have the best possible questions and use them in ways that aren't very useful. Like that's not going to make you a great coach, right? Or you can ask the best possible questions, but then not actually listen to the answer, not pay attention.

So I want to dive into kind of what gets in the way. And there are lots of different things, there are lots of ways that shows up. And I guarantee, even

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if right now you're thinking like, no, I think I'm a really good listener. Even if you're thinking that, I bet I have things on this list that do happen to you. So I'm going to kind of go through it and then kind of tell you how to solve for them.

But first I want to just kind of address what are things that you can be listening for? So when I say listening, what might you be listening for? Because it's not just the words that your clients say, okay?

One thing is when you're coaching and when you're interacting with your client, just listening for changes in them. Changes in their voice, in their tone, in their cadence, changes in their mood, just being perceptive of what's going on with them. Just like noticing.

And you don't even always have to address it. You don't have to say, oh, I noticed your mood just changed or the cadence of your voice changed. You don't have to always point it out, but sometimes just noticing it.

Sometimes you can actually ask, oh, I just noticed something happened. There was just a shift in your energy, in your mood, in your demeanor or whatever, however you would say it. What happened? Can we explore that? Just you noticing that in a client can be so powerful.

It might even be something that they didn't even notice, right? Like, oh, I'm not sure. Well, I guess I just all of a sudden felt very insecure or I all of a sudden felt defeated or whatever it is. It might just bring up something that otherwise wouldn't be addressed.

Another thing you can listen for is just the way your client specifically uses words. So instead of just kind of listening and getting an overall picture of what they're saying, sometimes being very tuned in to specific words that your client is using, words that they use to describe themselves or that they use consistently that you can see like, oh, they have a belief about this thing, they say it all the time. Like maybe that's something you would address.

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Listening to details instead of making assumptions. So this happens to all of us. It even happens to me. If there's anyone listening that this hasn't happened, I'm so happy for you. And that feels very unlikely. Listening for all the little details instead of just making assumptions. So not just hearing kind of half of what a client says and then like, oh, okay, okay, I know where they're going with this. Now I can just start coaching. Now I can interrupt. Now I can dive in.

And, by the way, there are times to interrupt. That's a different episode. This is specifically about listening.

The next one is listening for commonalities between topics, noticing them. So this could be over even like multiple coaching sessions, right? Like really listening for, oh, it's interesting, this belief that they have about their relationship with their daughter, they have this exact same belief about their job and about this, right? Like this is just a thing they believe about a lot of things in their life. That's interesting. Let's explore that.

Or listening for when they contradict themselves. This is a big one. And clients do it all the time, especially clients that tend to have a lot of black or white thinking. A lot of like, well, it's either this or it's this. It's really easy to kind of poke holes in their story or show them how things don't align when you're listening closely and hear them contradict themselves, right?

When they say something like, well, this happened because that's how she always is. And then two minutes later or whatever, they're like, well, and then this one time blah, blah, blah, like telling a story about that person.

And you're like, oh, whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on. I thought you said they were always selfish. This feels like a really good example of a time when they weren't. That's kind of a silly example, but you see what I'm saying. Like when a client says stuff like that.

Or listening for when – This one I'm adding on. I didn't even have it on my list, but it just came up as I was saying that. Listen for when they use words like always, never, should, shouldn't, right?

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Things that are like, this is obviously just the way I think about the way the world works, the way things should be, the way I always talk about it this way. I never do this thing, right? Like the extremes. Like really listening for any time they use words that are extreme and just questioning that.

Okay, so let's explore some of the things that get in the way of being a great listener. And I'm going to start a little bit with some things that you might not even be considering when I'm talking about this topic, but this is also, surprisingly, something that comes up a lot, these first couple, in The Coach Lab.

And sometimes people are like, oh, can we talk about this here? Can I ask you about this? And they'll post about it in the community or ask about it on the coaching call, being distracted.

Now, sometimes being distracted is very obvious, right? That's something that gets in the way of listening. Being distracted by your environment, being distracted by things going on around you, all of that. That's kind of obvious. As a coach, you probably want to be in a space where you can just fully pay attention to your client, to what you're doing and to what they're saying.

But there are other things that can distract you that you may not have noticed before, or you may not have taken into consideration, or you have noticed and you just kind of think like, oh, that's not important or there's nothing I can do about that.

So what I mean by that, some examples of that are being distracted by clothes that you're wearing or things that are touching your body that just are preventing you from being fully present as a coach.

Being distracted by a messy desk or too many things, clutter, or I call it loud. Like noise, but not actual noise, but just physical noise in your office or around you. Being distracted by things that are going on in your own life that you, you know, maybe you just found out someone's really sick and you're just really distracted by that and having a hard time being present in your coaching.

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Being distracted by maybe you do your coaching calls on Zoom, maybe you're a brand new coach. And as far as you know, everybody does calls on Zoom, so that's what you decided to do. But you're really distracted by just seeing the client or by seeing your own face, right? Or thinking like, what is my client thinking right now while I'm coaching them? Or just all those little tiny things that can add up.

Those types of distractions instead of, like I say the best way to solve for them is to actually solve for them, not think like, oh, I shouldn't be distracted by that or if I just keep going, I'll get better, which may be true. But also why not do something about them, right?

So if you find yourself really fidgety or very, you know, like you move around a lot, you're very uncomfortable and you think you have to dress very professionally, I'm saying that in quotes, because to me the definition of that is different for everyone. And that means you're wearing clothes that you find uncomfortable or itchy or just whatever.

I have a rule, I am very – You've probably heard me talk about this – I am so particular about fabrics and the way things feel in my body. I pick clothes to coach in based on that, so that I'm not distracted, right? Like that's just one more thing that I'm not distracted by when I'm coaching.

When I was a new coach, I knew people were doing calls on Zoom. But I chose to do them over the phone because I was more distracted on Zoom. I've heard people, like some of you want to argue with me about this, even in The Coach Lab, people are like, no, no, no, but that's not true because on Zoom it's really important that you can see your client and that you can pick up on all the little things.

But what I would argue is that actually as someone who used to be, I've learned not to be, but as someone who used to be very distracted by just, like visually distracted, I was very good at when I was just on the phone. I was actually much better at hearing a slight shift in my client's voice or I could pick up on things way better then. Of course now I can do it over Zoom, but then I could do all of the same things just over the phone, right?

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So just because you think that's how everyone should do it, it's not actually true. There are so many different ways that you can coach. You have to think about what are the things that distract you and how do you remove those? Especially if you're a brand new coach. I just give you permission to try different ways.

Kind of going along with that too, is being nervous, right? Like being distracted by your own nerves. This might show up in coaching sessions, especially if you're new, especially for your first sessions with clients. It might also show up in consults or sales calls or connection calls or whatever you call them. Like when you're first talking to someone.

And by the way, listening, I would say, is like the number one skill that you can also use in those circumstances. Like in connection calls or sales calls, whatever you call them.

Here are a couple tips. So when I was new, I would get super nervous to do consults. And so, again, I didn't do them over Zoom. It made me way more nervous and I definitely didn't do them in person. I did them over the phone.

And what I would do is walk around my house and or do something totally mindless. Like if I was sitting down, I would have something to fidget in my hands or I would fold socks or doodle or just do something that kind of calmed that nerve, distracted the nervousness, so I could be fully present and listening to what the person was saying the exact way they were saying it to me.

That is true in coaching sessions as well, right? If you're really nervous in a coaching session, find a way not to be. Even if you are – And I don't mean you can't be nervous at all. Of course, if you're a new coach or if you're doing something new for the first time, if you're hosting your first group call or you're hosting whatever, it's totally fine to be nervous. But if there are ways that you can help yourself or that you can solve for it at all, then why not try, right?

One thing that I do, and this isn't always because I'm nervous. Sometimes it's just because I'm bad at sitting still or I'm very fidgety, I have a really bad

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habit of twirling my hair. And it annoys me, so I'm sure it annoys other people, maybe not. Although now that I said it, you're probably going to see it if you're in my spaces. But I try hard not to do it. So I'll have things on my desk that I can busy my hands with so that I don't do that.

I also talk with my hands a lot. So you can't see me right now because this is a podcast. But if you could see me, what you would know is that I'm moving my hands around a lot, even though no one's watching. And so just having something to have in my hands – Now, I don't want to ever distract my clients, so I always make sure that it's off screen.

There are lots of options. Whether it's like a smooth stone that you can rub, or I have this little acupuncture ring that I just run up and down my fingers. My clients always think it looks like one of those coil hair ties. So anytime they see it, they're like, oh, you play with a hair tie. It actually has little tiny, they're not needles, but they're like little pressure things. And I just roll it up and down my fingers. But I could do the same thing with one of those coil hair ties.

Whatever it is for you, right? Like just finding the thing, being aware and conscious. And some of you might have things that I'm not even thinking of that you do. I'm just giving you my examples, but find the things. Like how does it show up for you? What distracts you? What makes you nervous? How can you solve for those so that you can be fully present, listening, like in full listen mode, right?

Okay, the next thing is being in your head instead of your clients. Being in your head, trying to think of what to say next. Kind of like planning ahead in the coaching session. Now, this is different. Of course, if you're teaching or if you have a specific plan or a specific strategy that you're kind of rolling out in a session, that's different. That's not what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about when you're exploring, when you're helping your client create awareness around something, how to not be in your head trying to predict what the client is going to say, and then trying to figure out what

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you're going to ask. This is the one that comes up all the time in The Coach Lab.

And it's also the one that when I think about the list of questions that I have, that I'm like, you can have that list all day. You can have it in front of you. You can even circle your favorite questions, which are great by the way., That's great for like, especially if you're feeling nervous or if you ever freeze in a coaching session or to just explore when to use them, when are good times to use each type of question. But just in general, when you're in your head trying to come up with the most genius question, you are not listening.

You're not listening carefully. You aren't listening for all that nuance, all the words that your clients are saying, the changes in tone, the changes in mood, right? Like all those things I listed of what you're listening for, you are fully out of that and out of curiosity the moment you go into your head and you start thinking, okay, what am I going to ask? What's the genius question?

So how to solve for that, first, you just let go of the idea that there's a genius question. Sometimes the best questions can be the most simple. Sometimes just asking, oh, why is that? Or, oh, let's explore that. Why do you think that comes up for you? Or sometimes your clients will be saying things and they'll ask a question or they'll say, "And so I just wonder like, why do I react that way every time?"

The simplest hack for that is just to turn that around. "Oh, that's a great question. Let's explore it. Why do you think you react like that? What creates that? What are you thinking in the moment? How are you feeling in the moment?" Like such simple, simple questions, but those questions come from great listening.

Also being in your head, thinking about your own life stuff, right? Getting distracted, like letting your mind wander. I think both of those, you kind of solve for them differently, but they're both just skills of redirecting yourself because we can't just take a vacuum and suck that out so that you just never do it again.

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But what you can do is just gently notice when you're doing it and just bring yourself back. I have even had to say before – Now at this point as a coach I can't remember the last time this happened to me. And being on a group coaching call where there are lots of people on the call, it tends to keep me on my toes a little more, I think. So this doesn't happen as much.

But when I was a one-on-one coach and I only had one-on-one clients and we were doing hour-long calls and some days I was more distracted than others, every once in a while my mind would start to wander to, you know, oh, what are we having for dinner or whatever. Like those things that just, if you're not paying attention, they'll just kind of sneak up on you. It's a human thing to happen.

There are a couple of solutions for this. One, you just redirect yourself. It's just a learning of like, okay, come back. Let me redirect myself. Two, it's a noticing of like, has your client been talking and talking and talking and kind of you're no longer interested in what they're saying? They're just like venting. Maybe they're repeating themselves. That could be a sign that that's happening.

Now, again, I'm going to talk about that in a different episode, kind of how to interrupt or how to redirect because that's also a skill that you need to have as a coach. You must have it. But so maybe that's happening. Just notice, is that what's happening? How can you redirect your client? How can you bring them back? How can you get your brain back online to what your client is saying?

And then another way to solve for that is like, oh, okay, bring myself back and don't be afraid to say, "I'm so sorry. Could you just say that last thing over again?" You don't have to give an explanation. You don't have to say I wasn't listening. You don't have to say – I have said before, "I'm so sorry. I got distracted for a second, can you just repeat that last thing?" If you just say it like that, usually it's like, oh yeah, no problem.

Or you just redirect yourself and then you just carry on with the listening, right? Sometimes you didn't actually miss that much, but it really is just a

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skill just to catch yourself, remind yourself you're human, and then redirect your attention to what your client is saying.

For some of you it might be useful to take notes. I don't love to take notes during my client sessions. And I definitely do not love it when my coach is taking notes and I can hear their computer typing. Now, if you love to take notes and if you type while you're taking notes, this is totally fine. I'm not saying don't do that. I know a lot of coaches do it, but I have worked with coaches where they have done that.

Now, if you're writing and that really does help you pay attention, then by all means do that. But just be aware, if you are typing, there is a chance that your clients are like, please don't do that. And they might not be able to say it. So just consider it. Maybe ask them, if that's something that you do. I actually had to ask a coach that I was working with at one point, if she could just not do that, just because it was so distracting to me. We both had a good laugh about it. This was a while ago.

Another reason, like another thing that gets in the way of you being a great listener, this is kind of connected to the last one, but when you are leading the client or thinking you already know what they're going to say.

So sometimes when you're in your head thinking of what am I going to say next, it can be because you're leading the client to get them to say a specific thing. You just want to notice when you do that, that's not usually a good coaching practice.

Now, there are times when you might ask a question kind of knowing what the answer is. But really when you're in curiosity and you're just exploring and you're helping the client create awareness, you probably don't want to assume you know where they're going with what they're saying, right?

Even if you've been in that situation, especially if you've been in that situation, you want to catch yourself if you find yourself thinking, oh, I know what they're going to say next, or I already know how to solve this or whatever. Because that can take you right out of listening and you might miss a point. You might miss something really important that they're saying.

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You might miss nuances that you only catch when you're listening really closely. And listening closely does take some energy. This might take a training of your brain to be in listening versus telling or interrupting or making assumptions.

Another thing that will take you just right out of great listening is being in a huge hurry for your client to create results, right? So having thoughts like, this isn't going fast enough. She thinks we should be moving faster. I coach on this also a lot in The Coach Lab. Usually it comes from thoughts about like my client thinks this should be moving faster. Even though, even when you have no proof of that, which really means you're the one thinking this should be moving faster. Why isn't this moving faster?

And a lot of times that will take you straight into, let me just tell my client what to do. Thinking like I need to have a solution for every single thing that they say. That will take you straight into teaching or telling instead of being curious.

And, again, I want to be very clear. There is a time for teaching. There's a time for explaining. There is a time for all of that. I'm not saying never do that. Just be sure that when you are doing it, that it's very purposeful, right? That's what you're intending to do.

But when you're exploring with your client, when you're helping them create awareness around what is happening for them, why it's coming up for them, how they're creating the current results that they have, how they might create the future results that they want, all of those things. Like when you're really thinking through, when you're doing the part of our job as a coach that is helping the client understand themselves better, listening is the skill you must have in order to do that.

Because the minute you come out of that and you just go straight to teaching, telling, whatever, that is going to make your coaching less effective. I'll say that again. When you're not listening, when you're making assumptions, when you are predicting, like you already just know what the client is going to say, that is making your coaching less effective.

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I know sometimes you think it's making you move faster or it's taking away your discomfort of just sitting and listening, or it's scratching that itch of like, oh, I just need to say this, we could just solve this right now. Anytime you're making assumptions and then kind of telling your client what to do from your assumptions, just know you could always be wrong. For sure, you and your client will have differences. That is certain. I'm certain about this, right?

So, now if you're teaching and it's like this is part of your coaching, this is what you do and you're teaching a thing, that's one thing.

But when you're helping your client create awareness of what's happening in their body, the thoughts that they're having, the feelings that they're having in their body, that's when you have to make sure that you're listening to what they say, the way they say it, the tone that they're using, the specific words that they're using, the details that they're telling you, the commonalities between all the things, right, when they contradict themselves, like all of those things.

To me, this is like a line that really helps determine someone getting off of a session with you and thinking, "Whoa, that was so deep. That just really shifted something for me. That really, like I have a better understanding of who I am as a human because of that session."

Okay, hopefully this was super useful. I am having a lot of fun thinking about this. Hopefully this was helpful for you. Let me know if you loved this topic. And as I am, like I said, I'm creating new content for The Coach Lab. As I'm doing that, I'm going to be covering some new topics that I've never talked about before on the podcast.

If there's something that is coaching skill related or coaching practice related that you will love to hear me talk about, the easiest way probably to get it to me is either email me or find me on Instagram. I think you have to follow me so it doesn't go to my junk. You can always unfollow later if you like, but send me a DM. Just tell me, I would love to hear you talk about this topic on the podcast.

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I am open to any and all suggestions. I have so many ideas and I have this new found excitement around – Probably because I'm doing this work in The Coach Lab, but around really thinking through all these little nuanced things like listening, all of these things that make us excellent coaches. And I would love to hear your thoughts.

So find me on Instagram. We'll link my Instagram in the show notes. It's also just my name, @LindsayDotzlaf. So find me, send me a DM, tell me what you would love to hear me talk about.

All right, thank you for being here today. I will see you again next week. Goodbye.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Mastering Coaching Skills*. If you want to learn more about my work, come visit me at lindsaydotzlafcoaching.com. That's Lindsay with an A, D-O-T-Z-L-A-F.com. See you next week.