

# Aural acuity

**Dr Brian Hemmings outlines five common barriers to listening effectively when coaching.**

**‘Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools talk because they have to say something’**

Having had the privilege of working with many England coaches over the past 15 years, I have noticed that the attributes of successful ones have huge similarities with effective psychologists. The quote, by Plato the Greek philosopher could easily describe one of the most important personal qualities needed by coaches, namely great communication skills and, in particular, the ability to listen effectively.

Coaches are like psychologists in that they rely on similar sources of information to assess a golfer’s needs. Although observation may provide the coach with extensive movement/technical information and analysis, both can gain much from what players say about themselves and their game. However, many coaches are unaware that listening effectively is a skill that can be developed.

I heard it said in my core training as a psychologist that we have two ears and one mouth for a reason; so we can listen at least 50 per cent more than we speak. Time constraints can make listening to players/clients more challenging but often self-awareness can start to considerably improve listening skills.

## Identifying

You take everything a player tells you and refer back to your own experience, and launch into your story before they have a chance to finish. Everything you hear reminds you of something you’ve done, felt, or achieved/not achieved. In being so busy with your own stories, there’s no time to really hear or get to know the player’s needs.

## Advising

Although coaching is about advice giving, we can all fall into ‘advice mode’ too quickly before gaining a full understanding of an issue. Here the coach can become the great problem-solver, ready with help and suggestions, and you only have to hear a few sentences to begin searching for the right advice. However, while you are searching, and then convincing the player to ‘try this’, you may be missing the most important information. You didn’t hear the feelings and didn’t acknowledge the person’s real concerns. You may go down a technical route instead of noticing it’s mainly a physical or mental issue.

## Mind Reading

Coaches are not mind readers, they rely on verbal, visual and statistical information. The mind reader coach doesn’t pay much attention to what people say – in fact, he or she often distrusts it and is busy trying to work out what is really happening. In

attempting to establish the truth, the mind reader pays more attention to non-verbal cues such as body language than to factual words. If you are a mind reader, you are also likely to make assumptions about people’s perceptions of you as a coach. These notions arise from intuition, hunches and vague misgivings but have little to do with what the person is actually saying to you.

## Rehearsing

You don’t have time to listen if you are rehearsing what to say yourself. Your whole attention is on the preparation of your next comment. You have to look interested but your mind is racing with your story or a point you are eager to make. Some people rehearse chains of responses “I’ll say that, then she or he will say ..., then I’ll say .....”

## Filtering

When you filter, you listen to some things and not to others. You pay just enough attention to see if someone is angry or unhappy, or if you are under fire. Once satisfied none of these things exist, you let your mind wander. Another form of filtering is to avoid hearing certain things – in particular, anything unpleasant, critical, threatening or negative. It’s as if the words were never said – you simply have no memory of them.

The power of good listening in effective player-coach relationships should not be underestimated and the importance of listening intently is also a Biblical saying that dates back 2000 years - ‘Be quick to listen, and slow to speak’ (1 James v.11). Have a think about the barriers I have outlined above and assess if they sometimes apply to you? Do you sometimes have difficulty listening to your players? If you do, it is likely that your coaching relationships could improve greatly through targeting this simple yet significant skill. Effective listening is part of the cornerstone of great assessment, which leads to the best intervention with players.



**Dr. Brian Hemmings was lead psychologist to England Golf during 1997 to 2013. During this time he helped develop the mental skills of the best emerging English golfers including the likes of Ross Fisher, Richard Finch, Danny Willett, Tom Lewis, Tommy Fleetwood and Chris Wood. He is author of the book ‘Mental Toughness for Golf: The Minds of Winners’ and is also a regular presenter on the PGA CPD programme and runs Masterclasses for sport psychologists and golf coaches ([www.golfmind.co.uk](http://www.golfmind.co.uk)).**

**In addition, he has released an online Golf Psychology Coaching Certificate course that is approved by The PGA of GB&I (100 CPD points) and PGAs of Europe, and has been completed with great reviews by more than 350 PGA pros and coaches worldwide. The course can be completed at home and full details are available at [www.golfpsychologycoaching.com](http://www.golfpsychologycoaching.com). For a price reduction of 25 per cent (from £295 to £219) type in the promotional code PGA.**