



ONE FROM THE
HEART

Accessing the intelligence of our heart is one of three doorways into presence-based coaching. As we develop this skill, we might sense that we are nurturing ourselves and supporting our clients at a deeper level than before, says **Sally-Anne Airey**

As a relative latecomer to the world of coaching and mentoring and a former senior executive myself, I've enjoyed exploring many different approaches to coaching and their underpinning theories. I've discovered that my most effective coaching interactions are those in which I'm able to achieve and maintain a deep unspoken connection with my client. In this article I share with fellow coaches some of the critical understanding I've gained of how this happens.

In C Otto Scharmer's introduction to his book *Theory U*¹, he describes how our relationship with our environment depends on the quality of our attention, which depends on the inner place from which our attention originates.

From his 10 years of research, he found there are four inner places, each giving rise to a different quality of attention:

- **I-in-me** What I perceive based on my habitual ways of seeing and thinking
- **I-in-it** What I perceive with my senses and mind wide open
- **I-in-you** What I tune into and sense from within my heart wide open
- **I-in-now** What I understand from the source of my being: the view from within.

Scharmer links these places to four increasingly deeper levels of listening:

- **Downloading** By reconfirming habitual judgements
- **Object-focused or factual listening** By paying attention to facts or novel data
- **Empathic listening** By forgetting

In clinical terms, the heart is more than a simple pump. The work of Dr J Andrew Armour (1994)², one of the early pioneers in neurocardiology, found that the heart has an intrinsic brain and nervous system and that hormonal, chemical and pressure information is translated into neurological impulses and sent

“ In my coaching, what place does my attention originate from and which level of listening do I practise? ”

our own agenda and seeing the world through someone else's eyes

- **Generative listening** From the emerging field of the future.

Scharmer believes the third level of listening is a skill we can cultivate and develop, first by activating a different source of intelligence – that of the heart – while the fourth level requires us to access our open heart and open will and to connect to a deeper source “of who you really are and why you are here – a connection that links you with ... your emerging authentic Self”.

An interesting question for us all, as coaches, is: “In my coaching, what place does my attention originate from and which level of listening do I practise?”

In this context it might also be helpful to explore what we mean by the intelligence of the heart, how we experience and activate it.

from the heart to the brain through several ‘afferent’ (flowing to the brain) pathways. These continuous signals influence the function of higher brain centres involved in perception, cognition and emotional processing. The heart is thus a sensory organ and a sophisticated centre for receiving and processing information (Rozman et al, 1998³).

In the relational activity of coaching, Doug Silsbee (2008)⁴ holds that accessing the intelligence of our heart is one of three doorways into presence-based coaching, the other two being the mind and body. He considers the heart to be “the source of our compassion and relational being, of our human connection”.

Silsbee encourages us to cultivate a deep feeling of compassion for

ourselves and others, as a path to dissolving judgements, developing unconditional positive regard and allowing us to be more fully present in our coaching. However, this requires the felt experience of the heart, rather than compassion, as an idea or ethical imperative.

Experiencing or sensing our heart is quite different from observing it. The heart's intelligence, like somatic awareness, is not accessed through observation, but by feeling and sensing. While observation of self is an important aspect of Mindfulness and a key to presence through the mind, it removes us from our felt experience. Observation and experience are relevant to coaching practice, but they are quite different.

Research at the Institute of HeartMath (McCraty et al,

Case study: The client's perspective

I am a senior executive of a multinational organisation. I wanted to reduce the acute sense of overwhelm I felt in my life and improve the effectiveness of my chaotic meetings with my large executive team

In my first coaching session, I realised I was part of the problem – my feelings of vulnerability were stopping me engaging effectively with the people around me. Connecting to my heart's intelligence supported my strategies for coherent performance, by helping me feel more centred, calmer and better able to focus. It was as if my thinking became more lucid.

After four one-hour sessions I realised that being vulnerable could also be a strength if I shared it openly and sincerely. I surprised my team in our following meeting by explaining to them that I wanted us to allow time and space

for each contribution to be digested. I also told them that I wanted them to be clear about what they were bringing to the meeting and to explain why it was helpful. Our meetings were half as long as before – and twice as effective.

I felt more connected to people. They seemed to listen to me more. I realised that I was listening more to them. This was nowhere more evident than in my relationship with my wife, who surprised me one day by bursting into tears during one of our discussions. "What have I done?" I asked. "Nothing," she replied. "You're listening to me."

“There is no feeling in a human heart which exists in that heart alone – which is not, in some form or degree, in every heart”

George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, 1867

2004-5⁵) has demonstrated that brain rhythms naturally synchronise to the heart's rhythmic activity. The research also found that when we experience heartfelt emotions like love, caring, appreciation and compassion, our blood pressure, respiratory and autonomic nervous system rhythms also entrain to our heart's rhythm.

Thus, the heart's ever-present rhythmic field has a powerful influence on processes throughout the body. During periods of positive heartfelt emotions, the heart produces coherent or smooth rhythms that enhance communication between the heart and the brain and facilitate cognitive function. At these times

we may experience a sense of flow – of deeper awareness and insight. These harmonious heart rhythms also bring benefits in terms of our self-care, as they facilitate the body's natural regenerative processes and indicate cardiovascular efficiency, nervous system balance and enhanced immunity and hormonal balance.


The relational field

As coaches, developing effective relationships with our clients is the *sine qua non* of our profession. Erik de Haan (2008)⁶ advises that the “only thing the coach can actually influence, the only thing the coach can use to exert albeit an indirect influence on the outcome of coaching, is the relationship between coach and coachee”.

At a more fundamental level, Flaherty (2005)⁷ says that “our capacity for relating is a constitutive part of the kind of being that we are”.

Silsbee states that any relationship exists within a





relational field, which is shaped by the individuals' concerns and commitments and which, in turn, shapes their interactions.

He states that fields are palpable. As coaches, we have probably experienced a greater sense of chemistry with some clients than others or sensed an atmosphere when coaching teams. One reason this might seem palpable is that our heart has the capacity to generate the largest rhythmic electromagnetic field of all the body's organs, one that is approximately 60 times greater in amplitude and 5,000 times stronger than that produced by the brain.

Institute of HeartMath research (McCraty, 2004⁸) has found that an individual's coherent or smooth heart rhythms cause the heart to radiate a more coherent electromagnetic signal into the environment, one that can be detected several feet from the body, in all directions, and sensed by nearby animals or the nervous systems of other people.

Our ability to tune into our heart's intelligence and consciously regulate the coherence or smoothness of our heart's rhythm can thus influence the quality of the field between our client and us.

The practice

We can activate heart feelings by activating the intelligence of our heart. This starts, quite simply, with bringing our attention or awareness to the area around our heart. Initially, we close our eyes and place our hand gently on our chest. As we become more practised, we can keep our eyes open. It can be done the middle of a

Case study: The coach's perspective

I am a coach and licensed HeartMath one-to-one provider

Practising heart connection exercises before a coaching session helps dissolve any anxiety I might be experiencing for whatever reason and allows me to be more fully present.

During the conversation, if I notice any judgement or irritation arising within me, I'm able to quietly take my awareness to my heart, feel myself soften and extend unconditional positive regard into the field. With regular practice I can now access my heart's intelligence quite quickly, as the pattern has formed in my neural pathways and become a habit.

In a recent coaching session with the head of a children's charity, my client was very angry with a couple of key members of her staff. She's strong-willed and very committed to her organisation's success. It had recently fared badly in an audit

and one of her major donors had withdrawn funding. She'd accused these staff members of incompetence. I knew they were loyal team members who'd supported her for years.

I started to feel a tightening in my chest and noticed my mounting disquiet at her unfair accusations. I connected with my heart, breathed and inwardly smiled. As I felt myself soften, I saw her pain. I felt compassion and realised that her anger was rooted in fear. I quietly said, "You're really frightened about this, aren't you?"

She paused, and when she spoke her voice was gentler, "Yes, I suppose I am."

The conversation shifted. We explored how fear can cause alienating behaviour and how she might work with her staff to review organisational practices, starting with what worked well.



conversation, anywhere. As we keep our awareness in that area, we might notice that our breathing slows down.

We might also become aware of a warm feeling. If we do, we can let it expand; if we don't, we can smile, accept this and try again later, perhaps with someone we love or in a place we find inspiring or fun.

Silsbee recommends a number of heart connection practice exercises, including in the HeartMath system.

Supporting coaching

Many of us believe that our job as coaches is to hold the field or space between our client and us, so that our client feels safe and listened to without judgement. We can hold the relational field by activating the intelligence of our heart (and mind and body), focusing our awareness on the quality of our attention and extending our presence to our client. This can happen in either face-to-face or telephone contact.

Scharmer believes that opening our heart means accessing and activating the deeper levels of our

“Perhaps our most powerful questions emanate from our inner place of I-in-you or I-in-now”

emotional perception, which is often connected to a moment of deep silence and/or a question that comes “straight from the heart”.

In our coaching practice we aspire to ask powerful questions – perhaps our most powerful emanate from our inner place of I-in-you or I-in-now. This may be when we are most likely to sense a question that seems ‘perfect’ for the client, the context and the moment. In this place we become the tool of coaching: we

offer the whole of ourselves to give our learners time and space to stop and reflect. We give them help and support, responsibility and ownership.

Three questions

Now that you’ve read this, I invite you to reflect on a recent coaching session and to ask yourself:

- How present was I?
- What was the quality of my attention?
- How did I sense I was connecting with my client? ■

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● In a future issue *Coaching at Work* will roadtest HeartMath tools and techniques from the HeartMath 1-to-1 Provider programme offered through licensed provider Ei World www.eiworld.org/heart 01525-840090

For further information, visit www.heartmath.org (the not-for-profit Institute of HeartMath) and www.heartmath.com (its commercial arm).

References and further info

<p>1 C Otto Scharmer, <i>Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges</i>, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009</p> <p>2 J Armour and J Ardell (Eds), <i>Neurocardiology</i>, Oxford University Press, 1994</p> <p>3 D Rozman, R McCraty and J Goelitz, <i>The Role of the Heart in Learning and Intelligence</i>, IHM Research Publication, 1998</p> <p>4 D Silsbee, <i>Presence-Based Coaching: Cultivating Self-Generative Leaders Through Mind, Body, and Heart</i>, Wiley, 2008</p> <p>5 R McCraty, R Bradley and D Tomasino, ‘The Resonant Heart’, <i>Shift</i>, 5, pp15-19, Dec 2004-Feb 2005</p> <p>6 E de Haan, <i>Relational Coaching: Journeys Towards Mastering One-to-One</i></p>	<p><i>Learning</i>, John Wiley & Sons, 2008</p> <p>7 J Flaherty, <i>Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others</i>, Butterworth Heinemann, 1999</p> <p>8 R McCraty, ‘The energetic heart: Bioelectromagnetic communication within and between people’, in P Rosch and M Markov (Eds), <i>Bioelectromagnetic Medicine</i>, pp541-562, Marcel Dekker, 1994</p> <p>● D Childre & B Cryer, <i>From Chaos to Coherence (the power to change performance)</i>, HeartMath LLC, 2008</p> <p>● D Childre & H Martin, <i>The HeartMath Solution</i>, HarperCollins, 1999</p> <p>● P Gilbert, <i>The Compassionate Mind</i>, Constable, 2009</p>
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