



Our Agile Coaching & Sparring – The Why and the How

Ole Jepsen, December 2015

When we follow our trainings and workshops up with coaching and sparring, we can see that it amplifies the impact – and supports people on their journey, that for some is life changing, and for others are “just” about adjusting certain (leadership) behaviors. While each person and each session are different, there are some things that are universal. That is what I want to share in this post.

What do we mean with words *coaching* and *sparring*? Sometimes we use the two words interchangeably. However, in reality, we are trying to use the word *sparring* for one-on-one sessions, most often with leaders. And the word *coaching* as a more generic term for guiding people and teams about more specific (Agile) processes and techniques.

First, a little story. I have been getting help from Flemming, a *fantastic* coach. He has helped me understand myself better in many ways, but mainly how to handle stress and distinguish between business and busy-ness. At one of the sessions, I began by telling Flemming that this session would be different: I wanted to understand his secrets, his ways to get me to feel totally grounded and open – and ready to challenge and change my own ways. It was awesome! He just looked at me and paused for a while. Then he said, “I just listen... And then I try to understand... Then, I listen some more. And then, towards the end, I ask you questions that I think are useful for you.”

Actually, I think that the above story is conveying the most important thing we use in our sparring – listening. Other things we use are various techniques that are described below. But, first a little more about the context of our sparring.

The Context

Most often, our sparring follows – or is a part of – something else. It could be our Lead for Greatness training program. Or an Agile or organisational transformation. Or something completely different.

Usually, we plan 90-minute sparring sessions every two to three weeks. Why 1 ½ hours? Because one hour seems to be too short to really listen and get deep enough. And because two hours is too long – and also too exhausting, since these talks are usually really intense. Strangely enough, we do not really see a pattern for how many sessions people want. Some seem happy after just a couple of sparring sessions, while others feel they get value with

ongoing sparring over several years. We've experienced as little as one session – and as long as sparring for five years (and still counting).

Listening

Listening is the basic skill of connection, learning and collaboration. Listening provides the space for development of ideas, for co-creating. Sadly, we rarely listen with mindful attention. We have been programmed to listen in order to respond.

When, while you are listening, you are thinking about the other person and his story, THEN you're listening. However, most of us think about what to say next, what advice to give, how we can relate the other person's story to our own stories while we're listening, and then we're not really listening. So listening is not only about not talking. Listening is also about not thinking about anything other than the other person and what the other person is telling you.

And it's an entire new experience. Intense, almost therapeutic. For both you as the listener and for the other person being listened to.

As the listener, you obviously understand much better when you really listen. And it's almost a relief, a certain state of mind: you give yourself a break from your own thoughts and just let yourself become a part of the other person's story for a while. For the person being listened to, it's amazing – for once, having the full attention, the space for a conversation about you, and only about you. When you get questions from the listener, the questions are only to explore your story, and to create a better understanding of your story. This, funny enough, improves the understanding of both the listener and the person being listened to. What a starting point for leading, coaching, sparring and collaboration of any kind!

Early Techniques

The 4 Questions

This is our favorite! A quick way to get an overview of pretty much any situation. Usually done in 20-30 minutes. After agreeing on the context (e.g. "my leadership" – or "the org change"), we give the person an overview of the 4 Questions, and then we let him/her answer in any order (but they usually start with the first questions). The questions, in combination with the above points about listening, are a magic cocktail – and because the questions are completely general, they can be used in any situation. Here are the 4 Questions:

1. What works well (or what "rocks")?
2. Stop doing what?
3. Start doing what?
4. If you had one wish like in the fairytales, what would you wish for?

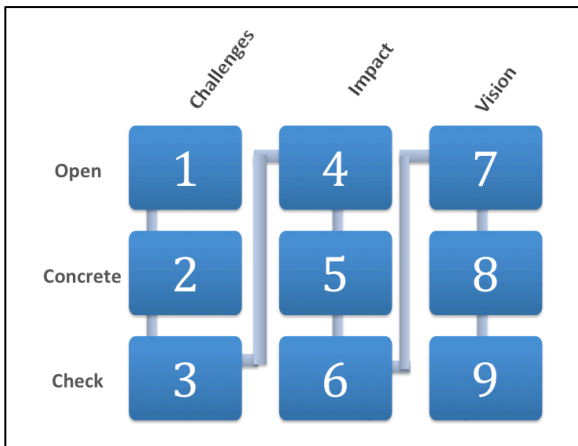
Or, in short:

1. Rocks
2. Stop
3. Start

4. One wish

The Nine Boxes

This technique, originating from Solution Selling® goes a little deeper – and takes longer than The 4 Questions. We're usually planning 60-90 minutes. The Nine Boxes is a very effective questioning/active listening technique. You ask the questions, and then be quiet and let the other person speak. The only talking you do, is to ask the questions. The questions by box number are:



1. What is your biggest challenge right now? What else concerns you about that issue/challenge? Tell me more...

2. Do you have some concrete examples? When does this tend to happen? How many people is it affecting? How much money/resources is it costing? How much time does it take now?

3. What I heard you say is... I just want to be sure I understood you correctly, you said....(Repeat the points from 1 and 2 – and then only go on to

4 if you have received a clear "yes, that is right" from the person you are interviewing.)

4: The challenge we're talking about, what are the consequences? How is it affecting you, the people around you, the work you are trying to do?

5: How big are the consequences, can you measure them in money, time, percentages? What are those numbers?

6: Same as 3

7: If tonight when you are asleep, a miracle happened and your problem was solved, how is it when you wake up? How do things look and feel for you? For the people around you? What is different? What are you noticing now?

8: Tell me something concrete about how it is now... How much does it mean for you, your team, your organization, your customers?... How much money are you saving? How much faster are you working?

9: Same as 3

And finally, it feels a little flat to end at the 9th question, so we've added a 10th, which is: 10."What will you do now?" OR "What are you thinking now?" (And then be sure to revisit the answer next time you get together.)

Goal Setting

After we're getting an overview of the situation with the above techniques (or just with good old *listening*), it's time to start talking about goals. Sometimes the goals come quick – and other times it takes quite a few sessions before the goals emerge and become clear. We often use one or more of the following techniques to help set the goals for the sparring.

Examples of goals that we've helped people get to are:

- I want to listen more and better
- Value my personal/coaching skills as much as my technical skills

Goal Setting with Pictures

We're taking our picture-kit (100-200 different pictures – e.g. VisualsSpeak) out, and ask the person to pick a picture that represents the *now* and another picture representing the desired *future*. Then we listen to the stories about the future. And how the future would be for the person and other people around him/her. And all the reasons why the person is not there yet. And, and, and...

Usually we're trying to get a sentence or two that expresses the very essence of the desired future. This way we have the goal expressed in two different ways: picture and words.

Goal Setting with SCARF

We like the SCARF model – (http://www.your-brain-at-work.com/files/NLJ_SCARFUS.pdf) and based on the latest science about our brains and what motivates us. It is an acronym for:

- Status
- Certainty
- Autonomy
- Relatedness
- Fairness

We've created cards with each SCARF element per card, and ask the person to rate the motivators on a scale of what means most to her/him. To spice it up and to fuel the sparring, we sometimes make our own rating of the person's motivators – based on what we now know about the person. This gives a deeper discussion and a deeper understanding for both us as sparring partners and for the person we're sparring with.

The SCARF rating by itself does usually not result in the goal, but it adds to the understanding and gives a better foundation for setting goals.

Goal Setting with Good to Great

We all have things we are good at. And we have things we're passionate about. Making the people we're sparring with aware that these are two different things, can sometimes be a big eye-opener.

Basically, we ask people to make index cards with things they are good at. And after that, we ask them to write things they really like, things that motivate them. Then we help them compare the good-at and passionate-about lists, and many discover that they are mainly doing things they are good at, but not necessarily things they really like doing. Often this lead to setting goals that move them toward their passion, including whatever personal development and training is needed.

Later Techniques

At this point, after the first few (usually 3-5) sparring sessions, things have developed and goals have become fairly specific for each person. It's very different from one person to another, and therefore it's even more difficult to say what we're "usually doing," because it's very different from person to person. Fairly often, we see less need for specific techniques and more need for pure *listening*, making observations and asking questions. However, there are some techniques, that we find ourselves using over and over again as the sparring relationship matures.

Ladder of Leadership

After showing/reminding about the Ladder of Leadership and Intend Based Leadership (www.davidmarquet.com), we ask about an interaction with an employee, that the leader wished had been different. Then, we have a dialog about where the leader was, and where the employee was on the Ladder. Usually we realize that they were at different steps on the ladder, and that this is what caused the problem.

After some more discussion, we ask the leader to take a stab at rewriting his part of the interaction to either match the employee's position on the Ladder – and/or to gently help the employee up the Ladder of Leadership, to take more responsibility and hence feel more empowered.

Sometimes we roleplay the interaction in both versions: both how it actually happened, and also the re-written (wished for) version.



Listening Lab

Often leaders (like most other people) do not really listen enough. In the Listening Lab, we're setting up a 10 minute talk between our person (the leader) and a direct report. Then we observe them having the conversation while we're making a timeline that shows who's talking when and how long.

This often shows that the leader is doing the most of the talking. We then have a discussion about this, and sometimes we ask the leader to have the same conversation with the same direct report again, but this time different – based on the discussion and the feedback.

Using Metaphors

When you're *leading* at your best, your a what?

This is a great question, since it make people think about themselves from a different perspective, driven by the metaphor. We're replacing the word *leading* with other words depending on the context.

In the following dialog, we're using Clean Language, which is taking listening to an extreme, where you're strictly using the person's own words to help them explore the metaphor. And when you're choosing which questions to ask, you're carefully choosing questions based on what you think is most important to the other person (rather than based on what you find most interesting or important). Recently, I had a seasoned leader who wanted to move more in a coaching direction – and he instantly had his metaphor after I asked him the above question: "I'm an Eagle," he said – and then he talked for 30 minutes about his coaching and how the eagle metaphor really helped him see his own coaching effort in a different light.

End notes

We have experienced dramatic changes in our personal and professional lives by having really talented coaches and sparring partners *listen* to us, making observations and gently offering their perspective and advice.

We're proud and happy to pass this on to others – and hope that this post might inspire you to experiment and try new things in your coaching and sparring.