

# Paraphrasing

Source: [Thinking Collaborative](#)

## Isolating Skills: Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is the most fundamental listening skill in the Cognitive Coaching<sup>SM</sup> repertoire. When paraphrasing we send a message that speaks to, “I am listening, I care about you, and I am trying to understand you.” Paraphrasing is respectful and requires full attention with both the mind and body. It requires setting aside autobiographical, solution, and inquisitive listening.

As you practice this week, remember to paraphrase before asking a question. This develops relationship and understanding before asking a question for rigor in thinking.

When paraphrasing, give yourself time to pause before paraphrasing in order to think about what you have heard. Offer a paraphrase that begins with “you,” not “I.” Make the paraphrase shorter than the speaker’s words with the intent to capture the essence of the message.

## Three Types of Paraphrases

Whether you are working on the identity of a mediator in Cognitive Coaching<sup>SM</sup> or that of a collaborator and inquirer for Adaptive Schools, paraphrasing is a critical skill to master. As you recall, Thinking Collaborative teaches three levels of paraphrasing – acknowledging, organizing, and abstracting.

We acknowledge non-verbally with head nods, eye contact, etc., when listening. The acknowledging paraphrase is verbal feedback given to let the person know you are trying to understand. It includes acknowledging feelings and touches on the affective domain of the speaker. In Bloom’s terms, it operates at the level of comprehension reflecting understanding, not just a rote recitation back. Using different words to capture essence is critical as the new word triggers the attention of the speaker and causes them to consider the meaning and accuracy of the paraphrase. Hence, connection that was not there before is created. Rapport is built.

The organizing paraphrase moves from basic rapport to the cognitive domain. As the parts of what was spoken are analyzed by the listener, they are organized for the speaker and mediation of thinking occurs. There is often categorization of ideas, e.g., “There are three issues here,” hence the metaphor of containers. Often the speaker will have a cognitive shift just from hearing his/her thoughts put into some order that hadn’t existed prior to the paraphrase.

Drawing on the work of Hayakawa’s Ladder of Inference, the abstracting paraphrase infers meaning below the surface of what is said. A variety of inferences include listening for values, beliefs, intentions, concepts, identity, and assumptions. This is the most sophisticated paraphrase as it likely causes a group or speaker to think in new ways, previously inaccessible to them.

## Paraphrasing - Acknowledging

In the 3rd edition Cognitive Coaching: Developing Self-directed Leaders and Learners, by Arthur L. Costa and Robert J. Garmston, paraphrasing is described this way: “Paraphrasing is one of the most valuable and least-used tools in human interaction. A well-crafted paraphrase communicates: “I am trying to understand you and therefore I value what you have to say” (p 48). The coach or facilitator must select one of three logical levels to begin paraphrasing.

Acknowledging paraphrases are one type. The non-linguistic representation of this type of paraphrase is the mirror. The coach or facilitator reflects the essence of content and emotion back to the speaker or captures “group think.” In group dialogue or coaching, the acknowledging paraphrase helps to refine and mediate thinking. If the paraphrase is not quite accurate, the speaker has the opportunity to further refine the language of the paraphrase. Examples of acknowledging paraphrases might be:

“So you are excited about this new class.”

“This team is concerned about the reading initiative.”

## The Power of Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a fundamental skill of mediation. The paraphrase develops relationship and understanding, enhancing the nonverbal skills of rapport. When a question is not preceded by a paraphrase, it can seem intrusive and pointed.

How can one become a better paraphraser? First, discipline yourself to turn off the noise in your head. Your own thoughts about what the person is saying can cause you to stop listening. The brain finds itself infinitely more interesting than what is going on in the outside world. Intentionally mirror the speaker and use rapport to tune in to the coachee and tune out the distractions that interfere with authentic listening. Listen with the intention to understand and not to speak. Consciously set aside autobiographical, solution, and inquisitive listening.

Listen first for emotion and content. Paraphrasing of both enhances understanding—we are both feeling and thinking beings. Listen, too, for identity, values, beliefs, and assumptions. These are at the core of our actions and often are communicated but are not conscious. The paraphrase brings the person’s inner self to the external and allows it to be consciously examined. Remember not to use the pronoun “I”. Costa and Garmston maintain that ‘the pronoun “I” signals that the speaker’s thoughts no longer matter and that the paraphraser is now going to insert his own ideas into the conversation” (p 48).

## Paraphrasing - Organizing

A second type is the Organizing paraphrase. The non-linguistic representation for this paraphrase is luggage. Ideas are literally put into containers and are “organized.” The thinker or the group may have so many ideas that are floating around that it is difficult for them to see patterns, themes, relationships, or categories. The skilled coach or facilitator can hear these multiple thoughts and can organize and relate them to each other for the coachee or for the group. Imagine standing with your nose to a white board filled with writing that captures the thoughts of the group or the coachee. It is hard to make sense of what is “written there.” An organizing paraphrase helps the thinkers take several steps back, gain perspective and distance on the jumbled thoughts, and allow them to see their ideas more cogently and coherently.

Examples of organizing paraphrases might include:

“There are three issues that you are dealing with as a team: budgets, time constraints, and adequate staff development.”

“First you hope to resolve the issue with budgets and then you can move forward with adequate staff development.”

4.1 Video: <https://www.thinkingcollaborative.com/as-videos-individual>

## Paraphrasing Abstracting

A third type of paraphrase is the abstracting paraphrase. These types of paraphrases “shift focus to a higher or lower logical level. Paraphrases move to a higher logical level when they name concepts, goals, values, beliefs, identity and assumptions... Paraphrases move to a lower logical level when abstractions and concepts require operational definitions...” (p 48).

The non-linguistic symbol of the abstracting paraphrase is the ladder, coming from S.I. Hayakawa’s ladder of abstraction (Language in Thought and Action, 1939). The ladder is used to show how language can move from the concrete to the abstract.

For example:

- Information
- Publications
- Books
- Non-fiction
- Coaching books
- Cognitive Coaching books
- Cognitive Coaching: Developing Self-directed Leaders and Learners
- My copy of Cognitive Coaching: Developing Self-directed Leaders and Learners, 3rd edition

The abstracting paraphrase takes the thinking to a whole different level of thought. It can help to deliver insight, open up solutions for the thinker(s), enable them see the bigger picture (or the needed details). When we offer abstracting paraphrases “we move beyond organizing thoughts around a specific moment or context, but broaden and open thinking beyond the current” (StJ).

Here are some abstracting up “categories” to consider:

- Values – It is important to you that...
- Beliefs – A belief you hold is...
- Concept Label – What you are hoping to achieve is rigor and joy in the classroom. The speaker has never used those exact words but has spoken concretely about more concrete evidence that he or she would see.
- Goal – So a major goal for this group is...

## Values and Belief Paraphrases

Like assumptions, we speak our values and beliefs often without consciousness. These types of abstracting paraphrases assist the speaker in accessing the internal structures that drive his/her thinking and behaviors. Stems can be as simple as, “You believe,” or “You value,” or “It’s important to you...”

They are critical to consciousness in decision-making and problem resolving for both groups and individuals. Often we jump to a first strategy or solution without exploration of the congruence or lack of it with more deeply held beliefs and values. These paraphrases ground us in what really matters in the long term.

Video: <https://www.thinkingcollaborative.com/video-3-3>