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## Implications for coaching in developing leadership:

### *An Analysis of Silence, Shadow and Rest*

Simon Uttley

ICF Coach. Director, koin-ed.org

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### 1. Pause and Rest in Leadership Development

When my ICF Coach mentor suggested a reflect on possible implications to leadership development of my recent paper (*Silence, shadow and rest: The generative power of absence in coaching, visual art and music*) my starting point was the reconceptualisation of silence and stillness as active, purposeful instruments rather than signs of incompetence or passivity. This has substantial implications for how leaders are trained and how they understand their own practice.

The paper contends that “silence in coaching is not an absence to be filled but a presence to be inhabited” (Uttley, 2026, para. 2), and this reframing maps directly on to leadership. Leaders shaped by cultures that prize perpetual activity, constant decision-making, and the appearance of busyness are rarely trained to regard restraint as a form of strength. Yet the paper’s interdisciplinary argument — drawing on *chiaroscuro* in art and *rests* in musical notation — demonstrates structurally that withholding can be as generative as intervention.

The analogy with Beethoven is particularly instructive. The famous four-note motif of Symphony No. 5 is immediately followed by a brief silence before the motif is repeated a step lower. This rest, though only a fraction of a second in duration, is electrifying: it creates suspense, intensifies the listener’s attention, and imbues the repetition with a sense of inevitability and force (Uttley, 2026). For leadership development, the lesson is that the well-

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timed pause before a decision, a response, or a challenge can carry significantly more communicative and relational weight than an immediate, unreflective answer. Leaders who learn to pause create the equivalent of Beethoven's rest: space in which colleagues and those they lead can process, anticipate, and engage more fully.

The paper identifies generative silence as the deliberate creation of space after posing a significant question — the silence that follows questions such as 'What would you do if you knew you could not fail?' The coach holds the silence, resisting the temptation to rephrase, elaborate, or rescue the other person from discomfort (Uttley, 2026; Whitmore, 2017). In leadership terms, this translates directly into the practice of asking substantive questions and then genuinely waiting — not using silence as a rhetorical device, but as a form of respect for the other person's capacity to arrive at their own understanding. Leaders who cannot do this tend to answer their own questions, thereby foreclosing the reflective process they ostensibly wish to stimulate.

The paper's reference to Scharmer's (2009) *Theory U*, which argues that the deepest levels of listening require a quality of presencing that can only emerge in stillness (Uttley, 2026), connects pause to the broader tradition of reflective leadership. It suggests that leadership development programmes should build into their design not only tools and frameworks but structured opportunities for silence, contemplative pause, and what the paper calls, borrowing from Keats, "negative capability": the capacity to remain in uncertainty, mystery, and doubt without any irritable reaching after fact and reason (Uttley, 2026, para. 42). This is a quality that leadership development rarely names directly, yet it may be one of the most important capacities a leader can cultivate, particularly in contexts of complexity and ambiguity.

The coaching example of Sarah, described in the paper, makes the point with particular force. When a thirty-second silence is held by the coach, Sarah eventually says: 'I think... I think it might already be costing me more than I've been willing to admit.' As Uttley (2026) observes, the silence did not merely precede the insight; it was the medium through which it emerged. Leaders who occupy mentoring or coaching roles — and most senior leaders do, whether or not they recognise it as such — need this same capacity to resist the pull of premature resolution.

## **2. Authenticity and Inauthenticity**

The paper engages with authenticity primarily through Heidegger's phenomenological framework, and this provides a productive lens for leadership development.

Heidegger (1927/1962) distinguished between idle talk (*Gerede*) — the superficial chatter that fills everyday discourse — and authentic discourse (*Rede*), which is grounded in attentive

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listening and the willingness to dwell in what remains unsaid. For Heidegger, silence is not the failure of speech but its precondition: one must be silent in order truly to hear (cited in Uttley, 2026). The implications for leadership are considerable. Much leadership communication is, in Heidegger's terms, *Gerede*: the performance of confidence, the rehearsal of strategic narrative, the management of impression. Authentic leadership discourse requires instead the willingness to be genuinely present to what is actually happening in a conversation, including what is not being said.

The paper's distinction between types of silence is particularly instructive here. Confrontational silence, the paper notes, is a form in which the coach allows a silence to develop that gently exposes an inconsistency, evasion, or blind spot in the other person's narrative — analogous to what Gestalt therapists call the 'creative void': a productive discomfort that precedes new awareness (Perls et al., 1951, cited in Uttley, 2026). Leaders who can hold this kind of space — allowing an uncomfortable truth to become visible without rushing to manage or dissolve the discomfort — practise a form of authentic engagement that most leadership training does not cultivate explicitly. The temptation to smooth over tension, to fill the creative void with reassurance or reframing, is a form of inauthenticity masquerading as supportiveness.

The Rembrandt analogy adds a further dimension. In Rembrandt's late self-portraits, the background dissolves into warm, amber darkness from which the figure emerges gradually, as though being revealed by the very act of looking (Uttley, 2026). Authentic leadership involves creating this kind of relational space for others: a warm, containing presence in which people feel genuinely encountered rather than managed. This is precisely what is undermined when leaders treat every conversation as a performance opportunity, every silence as a gap to fill, every vulnerability as a problem to solve.

The paper also draws on the Taoist concept of *wu wei* — effortless action, or the action of non-action — noting that the most effective intervention is often the one that creates space rather than filling it (Lao Tzu, trans. 1963, cited in Uttley, 2026). In leadership development, this challenges the deeply ingrained assumption that authority is demonstrated through activity and speech. The leader who exercises influence through restraint — who creates the conditions for others to discover rather than directing them towards predetermined conclusions — is exhibiting a form of authentic leadership that is both philosophically coherent and practically effective.

Taken together, these arguments suggest that authenticity in leadership is not simply a matter of being honest or transparent, important as those qualities are. It is a disciplined practice of attending to what is actually present in a conversation, including its silences, its evasions, and its unspoken content — and then choosing not to cover them over with the noise of purposeful speech.

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### 3. The Strength of Clear Language Against Language That Is Too ‘Thick’

This is perhaps the dimension on which the paper speaks most indirectly, yet also most powerfully, to leadership development. The paper does not address linguistic register explicitly, yet its entire argument is an implicit critique of language that is over-burdened, over-qualified, and over-present.

The paper argues that a coaching conversation saturated with the coach’s observations, interpretations, and suggestions is like a painting flooded with undifferentiated light: everything is visible, but nothing stands out; nothing has depth or dramatic force (Uttley, 2026). The application to leadership communication is direct. Leaders whose communications — written or spoken — are dense with qualification, hedging, jargon, and elaboration produce precisely this effect: a flood of information in which nothing particularly stands out and no single thought is given the space it needs to land. The analogy with chiaroscuro suggests that clarity and impact in leadership communication depend not on the quantity of what is said but on the quality of contrast between what is said and what is left unsaid.

The paper’s treatment of Caravaggio is itself a model of the principle it articulates. Consider the economy of the claim: ‘The darkness does not obscure; it reveals’ (Uttley, 2026, para. 20). This is a sentence with the force of a Beethoven rest: short, clear, and followed — implicitly — by silence. It does not reach for qualification or elaboration; it trusts its own clarity. For leaders developing their capacity for written and spoken communication, this is a discipline worth attending to carefully. The temptation in leadership contexts — particularly in organisations that have absorbed the language of corporate strategy, performance management, and educational quality assurance — is to reach for the kind of thick, multi-syllabic, passive-voiced prose that conveys seriousness whilst actually diffusing it.

Merleau-Ponty’s argument that meaning arises not from isolated words but from the interplay between what is spoken and the silent background against which speech becomes intelligible (cited in Uttley, 2026) has direct implications for leadership communication. Meaning is not simply a function of the words used; it is a function of the relationship between those words and the silence around them. A leader who speaks rarely but clearly will be heard more attentively than one who speaks constantly and at length. The rarity and precision of the utterance gives it the structural function of the musical rest: it shapes the field of attention around it, making the listener lean in rather than disengage.

The jazz analogy is particularly relevant here. Miles Davis’s sparse, lyrical trumpet style was defined as much by the notes he did not play as by those he did, and Berliner (1994) documented how experienced musicians use silence to create rhythmic tension, to invite the listener’s imagination to complete a phrase (cited in Uttley, 2026). Leadership communication

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that leaves the listener something to complete — a thought that is opened rather than closed, a question posed rather than answered — demonstrates both trust in the audience and confidence in the communicator. It is the reverse of the over-explained, over-qualified, over-evidenced prose that dominates much institutional communication and leadership documentation.

Uttley (2026) borrows from Heidegger the description of idle talk as the ‘superficial chatter that fills everyday discourse.’ This phrase names precisely what thick language produces in leadership contexts: the appearance of engagement without its substance, the performance of meaning without its reality. Leadership development that takes language seriously must help leaders distinguish between speech that creates meaning and speech that merely performs authority, expertise, or competence. The paper’s interdisciplinary framework — in which every domain rewards restraint and penalises excess — suggests that this distinction is not merely stylistic but structural: it goes to the heart of what it means to lead well.

#### **4. Concluding Observations**

Uttley’s (2026) paper makes an argument that is, at its core, about the difference between presence as performance and presence as attentiveness. Coaching presence, the paper contends, is not a constant emission of warmth, empathy, and skilful intervention; it is a dynamic interplay between action and restraint, speech and silence, giving and withholding (Uttley, 2026). This is a definition of leadership presence with which any serious practitioner of educational or organisational leadership would do well to engage.

The leaders who most powerfully shape others are rarely those who say the most; they are those who have learnt, in the paper’s terms, to inhabit the darkness, to hold the rest, and to trust that the silence is not empty. Caravaggio’s shadows do not obscure his figures; they reveal them. Beethoven’s rests do not interrupt his music; they articulate it. And the leader’s silence does not impede the conversation; it deepens it.

For those engaged in leadership development, the implication is clear. Programmes must attend not only to the acquisition of active skills — questioning techniques, feedback models, performance frameworks — but to the cultivation of what Keats called negative capability: the disciplined capacity to remain in uncertainty without forcing resolution, to speak precisely rather than at length, and to understand that authentic engagement with another person begins, as often as not, in silence.

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