

# Mind the Gap: A Coaching Tool for Thinking

From EdWeek Teacher Blogs, By Elena Aguilar, October 21, 2013 [http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/coaching\\_teachers](http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/coaching_teachers)

Albert Einstein once said that if he had an hour to save the world he would spend fifty-five minutes defining the problem and five minutes finding the solution. This suggestion gets to the heart of coaching in proposing a ratio of thinking to acting in response to what we perceive as a problem. It's a reminder to slow down and deeply analyze a situation before offering a way to remedy it.

I often feel that 90% of coaching is invisible and inaudible to an observer; the art of coaching is the thought process that takes place in the mind in of a coach. The more complex those thought processes are, the more likely it is that what the coach says and does will be transformational.

As my coaching has developed, I've learned to watch and listen to my own thinking while I'm working with a client. What I've observed is that my mind uses a series of analytical frameworks through which I explore what I'm hearing. These analytical frameworks give me insight and perspective that I might not otherwise see if I was just looking through my default frameworks (we all have these). Therefore, they direct me to respond in a way that might open up solutions.

## Mind the Gap

One of the frameworks that I rely on is what I call the "Mind the Gap" Framework. This rests on the assumption that in order to successfully accomplish a task, we need five things:

1. The skills to do it—the technical skills of teaching
2. The knowledge about content, pedagogy, child development and so on
3. The will—the desire, passion, motivation
4. The capacity—the mental, emotional, or physical ability to do something—includes the time to do something, and,
5. The emotional intelligence—the ability to be aware of, manage and express one's emotions and to be aware of and manage other people's emotions.

So when I hear a teacher describing something he's struggling with, I think, *Is there a skill gap here? A knowledge gap? A will gap? Where is the gap?* Usually, if not always, there's a gap somewhere. This framework reminds me to "mind"—to pay attention to, surface, and identify the gap.

Often there are multiple gaps—a skill gap can create a will gap: it's hard to want to do something that you don't know how to do. There might also be a fragment of a knowledge gap tangled up, and my job as a coach is to pull apart this complex puzzle and figure out exactly what those gaps are, and how big they are, and then how to help the client close the gaps.

## Exercise Gap-Diagnosis Caution

One thing I've learned when using this framework is that sometimes what I perceive as a *will gap* is really a *skill gap*. I find this more common in working with teachers or administrators who have been in their field for some time and may have some embarrassment about the fact that they haven't acquired some new skill (say, creating Excel spreadsheets) and so it manifests as what sounds like a will gap: "I don't want to do that; we can share this data in the way we always have."

Or what I think is a *skill gap* is actually a gap in emotional intelligence. I might hear requests for help in developing a particular kind of lesson (for example, group work or cooperative learning) and the teacher might ask for endless kinds of

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support (“I’ve never done that, can you model it? I will need to get piles of supplies for that, I think I need to observe someone else teaching that first...”). When I dig around, what I find is that underneath what might look like skill gaps there are feelings of anxiety about losing control of the class. If I don’t also coach to close those gaps, then I might not get anywhere just coaching the skill gaps.

I’ve learned to be cautious about jumping to gap-diagnosis and to think through an inquiry lens: could this be a capacity gap? What *is* the capacity needed to successfully fulfill this task? How can I assess this teacher’s capacity? What else might I need to ask or know before I determine that this is a capacity gap? Asking myself all of these questions leads me into a place from which I can act and speak that often gets to the heart of the matter faster.

### Using this Framework

I also share this framework with clients. This can sound like, “I think what I’m hearing is that you have some skill gaps, which is great, because skill gaps are easy to close—they’re just skills. With my coaching support, you can acquire new skills, right?” People are often relieved when you can contain their struggles into a domain from which there are next steps. You can also say something like, “I hear that you have some knowledge gaps. Does that sound accurate? Let’s get around to closing those, ok?”

Here’s a glance at what happens after an accurate diagnosis: at this point in the conversation, the next step is to list out what we both see as those knowledge or skill gaps. We identify the task the teacher is trying to accomplish (cooperative learning, for example) and then list out the skills she’ll need to master in order to effectively do this. This is just the beginning of what the coaching will look like—but these actions emerge from a deep analysis of what’s going on for the client.

By the way, I’ve found that knowledge and skill gaps are the easiest to close, where as capacity and emotional intelligence are harder, and will gaps are very hard to close—but *true* will gaps are fairly rare. Remember that these gaps are all intertwined and making movement in closing one will affect the others.

I always carry around copies of this framework, printed out in these pretty colors (the colors help our brains remember this information) and I offer these sheets to people I’m coaching. This helps them understand what they may be experiencing as overwhelming (*How will I ever gain control of my class!*) and see their dilemmas in a manageable way.

Finally, I use this framework when I’m coaching myself (which I do quite often). When I recognize that I’m struggling with something or someone, I ask myself, *Elena, do you have a skill gap in working with this client? Or is it a will gap? Where’s the gap?* There’s always a gap—perhaps I don’t know enough yet about the client or his context or I don’t know enough about the decision he needs to make. Maybe I don’t know how he learns best or what style of coaching will be most effective with him or maybe I’m feeling some mixed emotions about coaching her. Perhaps I’m emotionally triggered by something she says, or I’m stretched too thin and just don’t have the capacity to coach this person. When I can accurately identify the gap, I can figure out how to take effective action.

The concept that we have skill, will, knowledge, capacity and emotional intelligence gaps is just one analytical tool for figuring out what’s going on with someone. I didn’t develop it—and I don’t know who did (it’s referenced in a number of books and used in many workshops I’ve attended) but it’s a very useful one. However, it’s not the only one I use. There are several additional frameworks for analysis that my brain runs through when I’m coaching. I’ll describe these in upcoming posts.

For now, let me leave you with an appreciation of how complicated coaching is! This is, however, why I love this field—it’s so complex and exciting.

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