

Elena Aguilar:

Hello and welcome to the Bright Morning Podcast. I'm Elena Aguilar. Welcome back to our special transformational coaching mini series. This is a five-part series in which I am coaching Jessica, who is a relatively new coach who volunteered for these episodes and who is giving us this opportunity for me to demonstrate what transformational coaching really sounds like. If you haven't yet heard the last two episodes, I'd encourage you to go listen to those, those focused on phases one and two of the transformational coaching cycle or process, and in this conversation you will hear about how, in some ways I had to depart from that model to meet the client where she was at.

I will tell you more about this conversation and how I prepared for it. Then, you'll hear the conversation, and then afterwards I'll come back to say a little bit more about what I was thinking and how I managed that conversation or navigated it or drove it perhaps. I don't know. Before we get into today's episode, however, I do want to thank Angie H. from Utah, who is a podcast supporter. It is our podcast supporters who allow us to make this podcast and keep it ad free, so thank you to all who are podcast supporters. If you're interested in becoming a podcast supporter, you will find information about that in the show notes.

I also want to thank someone who left a review of the podcast on Apple Podcast, and this person's username was BeachTeachAnn, and this person wrote, "Always on point. Elena and her team provide critical skills for navigating the often tenuous workplace with grace, empathy, and curiosity. Every week I pick up a little nugget of information that helps me be not just a better coach, teacher, but a better person in general. I feel so much of what they provide helps you improve all the relationships in your life. They are so inspiring and insightful. Elena and team, thank you so much for putting this work out into the world for others." Well, thank you BeachTeachAnn for that beautiful review. Thank you to all who have left reviews on Apple Podcast, and if you haven't left a review yet, it'll really only take a minute or so and I'll be so grateful. All right, let's get into this episode. How are you today?

Jessica:

I am good, but I'm really tired. We had our big PD yesterday, full day, and it was really exhausting, but I was pretty amazed with the work that folks did and I just think we're headed in a good direction and they're buying into this idea of having an instructional coach and what an instructional coach can do for them. Half of them have been in other schools where they've had access to coaching and half of them haven't.

Elena Aguilar:

That's important to learn about that previous experience and the knowledge and assumptions that they're coming in with.

Jessica:

Now, I'm starting to get more questions about instruction and I've got two folks on my schedule that want to start meeting, so that's really cool because I felt like that first assignment that you gave me to think about starting with some of our newer teachers, there's two ELA teachers that I'm really excited to work with because they're 9-10 English. I've taught 9-10 English before, and they're both brand new, so it just seems like a really nice place to just try things. I also have to do my re-certification for National Boards this year, so they're going to let me use their rooms to do that, so it's just been nice marrying of mutual help.

Elena Aguilar:

It sounds like you're going to have the opportunity to coach in the conditions in which you can come out as your best, your most confident competent. I'm curious so far then in terms of these new teachers, what you've noticed about how you've been building trusting relationships?

Jessica:

The English department was meeting and I said, "Hey, invite me. I'd love to be there," so I was there alongside them and the 11-12 teachers had been there previously and so they had already thought through curriculum and so they just wanted to be of support. With the 9-10 teachers thinking it through, it was really interesting seeing 11-12 talking to 9-10 because it's very much in this giving them ideas, and at some point it just became, you could see it in their eyes, it just became a lot. I said, "Hey, do you all want to step over into this room and we can actually do some planning, scope and sequence?" and I felt in that moment, not in a paternalistic way, but I saw the overwhelmed look and so I said, "Hey, let's move over and do this," and tried to take care of them, the social emotional side.

Then, we did some real tactile work with sticky notes to help them physically plan out their unit and talking through it with them and deferring to them and what they know as to, they get to be the decision maker, where would this fit best with the text that they're interested in? I tried to really affirm and go with what they wanted, but I felt like the structure that I provided lowered their affect and then, just affirming the choices that they were making. To me honestly, that was that first moment I think I really felt in the groove and that felt really good.

Elena Aguilar:

That's so great. You said you were tired and now talking about that your face looks really energized and animated.

Jessica:

On the flip side, the 11-12 team, and I wouldn't even necessarily call it the flip side, when we all met together, it was just, we talked about silly things on the weekend. We talked about what they were passionate about or working on with their students, and then when we hit our PD day, there was a moment where they weren't super engaged and my heart was pounding and I was like, oh man, I have to have this redirection conversation, and I think because we had that groundwork where we saw each other as people and I was like, this is not a big deal. This is not from a frustration or anger place, but I'm just noticing we weren't totally prepared for this one section of the day, and I was so worried about how they were going to take that and there was this appreciation of open, honest communication. Then, I started thinking back to the words about authentic, being real, being genuine, being transparent, and having integrity, and I felt like I modeled that. I was compassionate and it was something that I could see in a different atmosphere going the wrong way and it went a nice way, I think because of the relationship that we started.

Elena Aguilar:

I feel like I can hear you identifying so many points where you can influence what happens and the relationships that you build and you're doing it subtly, you're doing it explicitly and directly, intentionally.

Jessica:

I think what I'm comparing in my head though, and I don't know how to totally make sense of it and maybe it's environment, last year there was a teacher that I worked with who was like, "All of this equity stuff that you're presenting is great. I need to know where my lesson plans for the first couple days are located in our online platform," and it felt weird. Now that I'm saying this out loud, I think what I'm realizing is, we had only interacted in the full group setting and then, the next day I came back and I was like, "Hey, I just want to have a conversation with you. I feel like if we're not doing equity on day one, we're not going to be doing it the rest of our time," and he totally shut down and he closed off his body, crossed his arms, crossed his legs, and did not talk to me for two months.

I went back to him and I apologized and he's like, "You made your decision about who I was and just completely iced me out." I think that, that's why I was so worried to have that conversation with those teachers, and I think I'm recognizing the dynamics were different for a couple reasons. The first reason is that we hadn't had a sit-down one on one where we just talked about mutual interests or whatever. I also think the dynamics of that school and the health of the school was different and I think that the intersectional identities in the space were different. He was a white male who was much older than I was, and these are white women that are my age or a bit younger, so I recognize the dynamics in the room are really different, too.

Elena Aguilar:

It's really powerful that you were able to hone in on that distinction between a different context and now. What I hear you saying is, you recognize even that some element of this question, what's my style of building trusting relationships? is in part at least, a reaction to maybe that incident last year, but also perhaps, last time you talked about wondering or worrying about whether you make people feel awkward. I think you mentioned something even back in college, so what I hear you saying and sort of challenging your own stories is how much of this concern that you have about your ability to build trusting relationships is, I would say, is real. Does it apply in any context or in certain contexts or how much old hurt is there that's coming into this question that makes perhaps some different questions open up but makes this question answerable pretty quickly?

Jessica:

Yeah, I think context matters. I think building a relationship with somebody before you ask something of them or challenge their thinking or challenge their actions. I see that I'm way more skilled than I was a year ago and adept to not being confrontational. I don't think I was confrontational, but I think I was trying to be truthful and I have more skill at how to craft those statements or sentences or challenges. It's not softer, maybe softer is a word. I don't know, but it's done in a way considering the social emotional impact of the other person where I don't know if I had that skill set before.

Elena Aguilar:

That's definitely important to reflect on. I'm sure that you've built some skills. You seem to be someone who's really committed to learning and growing, but I just want to clarify. With this teacher last year, do you think that if you had a one-on-one more personal conversation with him or some kind of exchange with him before that PD day, before that interaction, do you think that he would've treated you remarkably differently? I'm watching you on video and you're shaking your head. You're like-

Jessica:

Not at all. I think that really set it off for me last year at the beginning because later throughout the year, I found out that every other person of color or a lot of the women on staff also had struggles with this

person, and I don't know how to say it. I think, I don't know. Not that my interpretation really matters in this, because you don't know what you don't know, he seemed like a very insecure person that lived from a place of oppression or to bolster his security, he had to keep others at bay, but that's just my interpretation and we don't know.

Elena Aguilar:

Yeah, but what I hear you saying is, I recognize how I could not take it personally. It wasn't about me. You may have also built some skills. Yes, you can be more skilled, and you said he crossed his arms, crossed his legs, leaned back, didn't talk for to you for two months. The little that you described, the situation feels like okay, he's got a whole lot going on. There's something else going on. Maybe you did learn some skills in the last year and this context is really different.

Jessica:

Yeah.

Elena Aguilar:

I'm curious from our conversation last week. It sounds like you've reflected a lot on it and you did maybe some journaling around authenticity. I'm curious if there's anything else that stuck with you from that conversation that you've been thinking about or exploring.

Jessica:

You asked me what is my value and I said, "What is my value?" I was like, this is a deeper life question, but in thinking of my work context, I started thinking about what was my value and I was really anxious going into this PD day because the first one was really about building relationships, and then the second one is we're doing yearlong scope and sequence. We're diving into first unit. It's skill heavy and this school has a lot of competent, independent spirited creative thinkers, so I was worried that if I brought something that was really heavy, instruction oriented, were they going to reject and rebel against it?

But they rolled with me and from that, I can see the value of the questions that I bring and how I can help connect people. We had a data coach from the district come out and she's like, "I love the way you took data and helped connect people's hearts, minds, and body to the work, [inaudible 00:14:53], and that's a beautiful compliment to have. What I'm realizing through this process that extrinsic affirmation is lovely and nice, but being able to find it within myself holds way more value than in somebody else and I think that's been a journey that I've been going on for a while, so that's been really resonating.

Elena Aguilar:

You talked about that last week a little bit also, in terms of talking about being able to acknowledge or appreciate yourself. You could think about the question of what is your value perhaps around, what is your unique contribution? You could think about the desire for self-realization or meaning. I'm curious about what kinds of practices you have around self-appreciation or seeing your own bright spots or self-compassion.

Jessica:

I think I get that by being in community with people. Our coaching group has a book study that we do once a month and I'm going... I don't know how to say it. It's not that I'm getting affirmation from them, but it's a safe place to really talk through the processing piece, and that's been incredibly helpful in

validating and I realize hearing what I'm going through compared to other people, not a comparison as competition, but a comparison as unity and we're going through this together. That's really important to me.

The job that I was in last year, I was a coach by myself in a building and this year I'm a coach that has two other coaches and two other buildings that we all work together to craft PD and we're going to meet up tomorrow and do some reflection about how our PD days, just being in community and being able to reflect in community is a huge piece for me. I think that's another thing that I realized about last year that made it so hard, is I didn't feel like I had that community, and it makes sense. I've always been on team sports. It's just part of, I think my ethos, to be in a team.

Elena Aguilar:

Well, human beings, we really like each other. We really do actually. We really need each other. It's not just a sports orientation or teaming, it's necessary. That's how we thrive and it's just so powerful that you're able to use your current experience to get more insight into why last year was hard. It's important. That's healing. It's going to build your confidence even more. I'm really tempted to give you a homework assignment to do with your coach colleagues if you want, just for a week, and you can do this independently, but if you have one or two others that you can do this with, it's even more powerful and it builds connection. The assignment is in the Onward workbook and it's called Three Good Things. Basically, at the end of every day you write down three good things that happened that day and what your role was in making those three things happen.

Even for example, let's say you got a flower delivery from an old student, something that you feel like I didn't do anything to make that happen, that just happened. You actually have to say, "No. 15 years ago I invested a lot time and energy in that relationship with that student and I followed up with him afterwards." You have to see your own agency in making any good thing happen. Three good things. You just jot that down at the end of the day or in the evening. The reason I'm encouraging you to do this with others is in your next meeting you get to share a few of those or if you want to do this intensive version, at the end of each day, the three of you on a text message or Slack or something, send each other your three good things. That builds accountability, that builds community, it builds connection. I'm hearing that that kind of reflection and self-knowledge is really empowering for you. How does that sound?

Jessica:

Yeah, that sounds great, and I think that they would be totally up for it. That's so funny that you said that. Last Thursday, I took my son and my daughter to their elementary school because she's going to be in preschool, he's going to be in first, so we met the teachers and we're walking down the street and all of a sudden, I hear somebody yelling my maiden name. I spin and I look and it's this grown woman that looks vaguely familiar and she's a former student that I had in class and she came over and just bear hugged me. I couldn't remember her name. She said that she's 24 years old, she recently got out of the Air Force, and just the visceral way that she hugged me. I don't know what I did for her, but it was just this, I don't know, it was this real wonderful connection.

Elena Aguilar:

Wow.

Jessica:

Outside of my child's school.

Elena Aguilar:

Wow, that's beautiful. I think that, to me, connects with your question around what is your value or what is your contribution? What do you have to offer? There's something there.

Jessica:

A lot of things that we talked about last week have been stuck with me a ton. The calmness and what calmness feels like, oh my gosh, I feel like I've tapped into that so many times. Physically tapped into it before I emotionally or mentally was there, so that was super helpful. Thinking about what's true and what's not in the stories that I tell, just as a mental scroll through the repetitive thoughts or whatever that goes through my head. We talked about this at the end, but we kind of talked about using the word here loosely, the trauma that I have experienced when I was younger at this school and why that was so hard last year. Just talking about that and realizing that last year my response to where I was working was rehashing this feeling of not belonging and seeing things that I didn't want black and brown kids or kids with disabilities to experience, and that was so triggering for me. It's really taken the emotional wind out of that sail, just saying, oh, that was my response to seeing things that I disagree with. I was able to not compartmentalize it, but just put it some place of, oh, that's what that was, and it feels lighter for me.

Elena Aguilar:

Sometimes for some of these things, we just don't have the exact words and I can tell you're someone, you like metaphors. You're really able to describe your inner and outer world very well, and sometimes there's some things that we can't find the words for. I think you just talked about one of those things, which is, what is it? How is it that it's so powerful that you can just do something like name, oh, that's what was happening to me. I was being triggered. This was childhood trauma. This was all of that, and then when you say it, there's just something that happens, and like you said, you feel lighter now. I just wanted to highlight that because this coaching process can sometimes feel so mysterious. What is it that happens? And we try to analyze it and deconstruct it, and I try to put frameworks around things and give people directions. Sometimes there's just this element of mystery that you release into and there's something very powerful about just being able to recognize these things and say them to another person because there is an impact. It's different than just writing it in your journal. Say it to another person and there's a release.

Jessica:

Or seeing it in a way that you didn't see it before because last year, not that I was unprofessional or inappropriate or anything like that, but just that I felt like a little out of control last year, learning a new job and then being in a space where I was being triggered, so having somebody else be able to name that and see that, it's, oh, that is what I want.

Elena Aguilar:

When all that stuff just lives in our own heads and it swirls around and around, it gets bigger and bigger.

Jessica:

I think also, too, talking to someone else who is a person of color about that, I don't even know how to describe what I'm trying to say, but it was real, us talking about being a mixed race. It was real. It wasn't a stretch, it wasn't placating like, wow, that sounds really hard. It was real and that felt really accepting.

Elena Aguilar:

We deserve that kind of lived empathy. We can get empathy from others and we can cultivate empathy for people who have experiences that are really different, and we can find the connections and I can have empathy for people who have had experiences of marginalization because of mine, and there is also a real power in having conversations with folks who share some of the specific marginalization experiences. This is why we need affinity groups and we need to have those opportunities to listen to and connect with folks who just get it. I think last week, I said to you, "That's very common." Yeah, I was speaking and of course, inside of me I'm like, oh, yep. [inaudible 00:24:56].

That's one of those moments when as a coach, I'm actually really conscious of what's coming up for me and being mindful about, this is your time, so this is why I have to do my own work, my own learning, my own healing, so that I can show up and actually be with you in your situation. And also say, "Yeah, I hear that." Just say enough so that you're like, oh yeah, but people of color need other people of color, and you're also talking about, I just want to also emphasize again, being a new coach. That's hard enough as it is. It's like being a first year teacher again, but probably many first year teachers at least had some kind of teacher training, but most coaches get none, and then you are enmeshed in all these power dynamics and layering on your commitment to equity and your identity marker experiences and all of that. It's a lot.

Jessica:

Yeah, it was a lot, and I'm so glad to be on this side of it because my only mental model is to think about first year teaching and how tired I was. But it was a whole other level, the power dynamics, the hierarchical dynamics, and just realizing how many things are at play in any given conversation. We have a coach of coaches last year. She brought a map that map of how to have a discussion, a planning discussion, and I was like, what, you can map out a discussion? There can be a beginning, middle, and just from the base level of how do you communicate with people, I feel like I learned how to communicate with people in a totally different way from coaching and just, that's even a skill set, walking in the door this year, I feel so much more prepared.

Elena Aguilar:

Yeah, I think part of it is that new coaches don't expect that it's going to be as hard as it is and the other thing I remember very vividly was that, I loved teaching kids. They were fun. I taught middle school mostly and I loved middle school, loved them.

Jessica:

Me too.

Elena Aguilar:

Teaching adults was not fun. Wait, why am I doing this? Why don't I just go back to the classroom? This is not fun. There's so many aspects that are hard.

Jessica:

Yeah, there was a mourning process of not being with people with optimism. Kids have optimism and have, I don't even know, potential. Potential growth and they know they have potential, so it's like the sky is the limit, and I wrote in my journal. I was like, things that I don't appreciate because I also realized that component, I think, of my question and I don't know where it fits in yet, is also working with adults and things that I don't like working with adults. It's like grumpy faces or playing nice and doing the thing, but not really buying into the thing, not doing the activity, being dismissive or silly when we're trying to move through something as a group. Where does that come into then building relationships because I can't be a coach that only gives and gives. That doesn't feel good to me and I don't want to be in a place where I become paternalistic because I want it to be a back and forth relationship, and if I'm giving too much, it feels maternal or paternal.

Elena Aguilar:

What you're describing, just to frame this is, and I'm going to say it really simplistically, the hardest thing about coaching is dealing with adult emotions because that's what you're describing. The challenges of people who play nice, but don't really do it or they're passive aggressive or they're not optimistic, and the people may complain about dealing with kids and their emotions, but it's actually a lot easier in some ways. Whereas adults have just become more entrenched in our ways and it can be very emotionally activating for us and it's a skillset. That's a skillset that's also one that is not taught to coaches. One of the workshops that I teach that I love doing is the art of coaching emotions, and it's basically, how do we deal with all the emotions that adults have when half the time we can feel like that's not my job. Do I really have to deal with that? I'm here to help them think about their equity practices or refine the curriculum and I'm stuck with all these adult emotion social stuff.

Jessica:

As I think back, now that you're saying that, is another thing that was really triggering for me last year, and I think the only bucket, because in my original journal entry that I did, I wrote unhealthy adults, and really it's talking about dealing with adult emotions, and I could only put it in the context of mental health. I felt like I was dealing with some adults who were mentally unhealthy, so that was really triggering, and I think that's what made last year really challenging for me, and I felt with a couple teachers, we were having transformative moments, but I didn't feel like I was a transformative coach because I struggled with dealing with adult emotions.

Elena Aguilar:

Yeah, it's a big and critical skill set. The top question I get from coaches is how do you deal with resistance? If you're facing resistance, it is a reflection that you don't have a robust skill set for dealing with the emotions that adults have. It's the critical skillset to learn, and yet again, it's usually not something we learn neither as adults or in coaching.

Jessica:

Oh, I've been telling everybody, I feel like in the last year of becoming a coach, I've become a better mom, I've become a better wife, I've become a better coworker. I was really bogged down by the word integrity last year and I think I struggled with integrity because I had a low skill set where it's now starting to develop.

Elena Aguilar:

That's powerful. I'm just taking that in. I use this framework called mind the gap. You want to be able to do something and you're not able to, so there's a gap. Is it skill, knowledge, will, capacity or emotional intelligence or cultural competence? And what you just said is critical, that you had a low skill set and you internalize that or it manifested as a sense around integrity. I just think that's really critical to make that connection, and you've learned some skills and now things are really feeling different.

Jessica:

They're feeling different, and then I think, too, having a team to go to where everybody... The two other coaches that I work with directly and then there's a coaching cohort, it's a place that I can stumble through and process through and it's not going to affect anybody in our school directly, and that is incredibly helpful because the things that I'm like, hey, I'm noticing this thing, it's making me frustrated or that I can get input or insight and I need that because it wasn't so much... There were small breaches in confidence last year, but I think now I realize is I didn't know how to deal with this situation, so I was looking for help with how to deal with things I was seeing in the classroom, so I would go to my principal and I recognize now, I was trying to figure it out, but it may not have always sounded that way.

Elena Aguilar:

I feel like I'm hearing you're having a lot of insights about last year in your development as a coach, so I want to move us towards closing and just ask what feels like it's been useful or important in this conversation?

Jessica:

I feel like, the Three Good Things, and making myself think through what I had to put in place to be a part of that good thing because really that's thinking about the skills that you're using, and I'm recognizing that I need to be able to identify the skills that I'm using in any given situation so that I can practice using them and get better at them, or even just think about it as an asset of that's a skill that I have and use that asset more often. Honestly, I feel like this is last week's conversation enclosure because I felt like I was left with a lot of frayed edges last week of thinking, and now it feels sewn together.

Elena Aguilar:

I love that analogy. That's beautiful. Sometimes that is what we need. You needed a week to think about those things, to let them swirl around when you were doing things like building relationships and facilitating PD. Again, this is the potential in coaching is that you come back and you look at how these things connect or tie together, and if we were to continue working together, it could be that in three or four months something comes up and you're like, oh, now I can connect that back to that conversation, or I, as the coach might. I might be able to say, "Hey, I remember you talking about and take it back and make those connections tighter and stronger." I'm glad that this conversation felt like it gave you some more space to dig more deeply into what came up last week.

Jessica:

But there's still more. That other thing I'm realizing, too, is just that with preparing for the PD, but I have a resource that I want to use with love languages at work with my staff, but we were just overly packed for that day. Now, I've got a mission to go and talk to everybody once in the next week and just ask them if they like to receive appreciation. That's my entry into conversation with them. I was worried coming in here, oh, I didn't complete that task, but no, it's just moved and it's happening this week.

Elena Aguilar:

Yeah, that sounds great. I look forward to hearing how that goes as well as how the Three Good Things go. Jessica, thank you again so much for being willing to do this and just for your vulnerability and letting me and so many other folks into your learning journey.

Jessica:

It's been super helpful.

Elena Aguilar:

All right, friends. I hope you found that useful or interesting. That's what a real transformational coaching conversation sounds like. As you heard, Jessica had a lot to share about her reflections from last time. I was glad I asked that question. Also, early on in the conversation, she said something along the lines of, "Now that I'm saying it out loud," and when she said that, I remembered again, that's right. There is so much power in a coaching conversation because it is simply an opportunity for someone to share all the stuff that's been in their mind that's been swirling around, the thoughts and the feelings, and to have that presenced by someone else and accepted, and in that acceptance is the message of normalization, of empathy, of this is just what it is and you're on a learning journey, so when she said that, it was sort of like, right, right, right. Trust the coaching process. Just having space to process without a tight agenda or where we have to get to or without me driving the conversation in a particular direction is so powerful.

As you heard at the end, she needed another opportunity to go back to what we had talked about last time, and as she so beautifully shared, to tie together some of the insights and the ideas. We can have coaching cycles and processes and tools and we need to know how to use those and be agile and be responsive and be able to drop those when we need to and just be with the person wherever they're at. I enjoyed that conversation. It just felt, again, it felt really real to me. When I'm coaching people, sometimes there's conversations where I think, I wonder what this led to. I wonder how this fits in, and then maybe one or two conversations later, things kind of come together and I can see, oh, those threads are really pulling through here right now or we're going back to something and you've got to trust the coaching process, and sometimes it does take experience until you can really sink into that, and it takes success in coaching. It takes skill building.

That was another thing Jessica said that I just so appreciated. Her recognition of how much her coaching has improved simply because she's acquired so many skills and how some of the areas in which she really struggled, like around coaching emotions had again to do with a skill gap. Okay, friends. That's it for this episode. I want to remind you that if you don't already get my Weekly Wisdom Newsletter sign up for it. That's how you'll be able to find out about new offerings and free webinars and other resources that we offer and the podcast series' that we're doing. Sign up. The link is in the show notes. I also want to thank Leslee Bickford, who is the podcast producer, and Stacey Goodman who does the Sound engineering. Take care, folks.