

Elena Aguilar:

Hello, and welcome to the Bright Morning Podcast, I'm Elena Aguilar.

For the next five weeks on the podcast, I'm going to be giving you a series of short episodes that will immediately impact your coaching practice. I'm going to give you tips, and specific challenges to try out, and guidance for doing so in each episode. And all of these episodes are crafted around questions that we get in our workshops. And so if you've been in one of those workshops and asked a question, then you might find that answered here.

And even if you haven't asked that specific question in a workshop, I know that many people have these questions. Like for this episode, the topic is how to decide on what to focus your coaching conversation on when your client shows up with so many things that they want to talk about, how do you figure out where to focus, what to prioritize? That's what I'm talking about today on this episode.

But before I get into that, I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to our listener with the username AGFolly65 who on Apple Podcasts wrote, "University of Coaching. I've read all the books that Elena has written along with a coaching team. Recently, we finished reading Coaching for Equity. We completed deep dives after each chapter by answering the questions after each chapter via Padlet in order to learn from one another, support one another, and tend coach our cohorts of new teachers in the classroom, and grow as coaches. We also utilize the onward workbook with our coachees on a regular basis. The podcasts are authentic and practical just like her books. I also highly encourage attending one of her trainings. I've attended the Art of Coaching and it was wonderful."

Thank you so much to that listener for taking the time to rate and review the podcast. It really means a lot to me. I love the appreciation, I really do, and it's a super easy, free, quick way to support this show. So thank you, and I hope that might inspire some of you other listeners to hop over to Apple Podcasts, and rate and review the show. Thank you in advance. And now let's get into this first episode in this mini-series of transformational coaching tips.

Okay, so the topic for today is how to decide the focus of your time together, and it was a question from a participant in the Art of Coaching workshop that inspired this podcast episode. And the question was, "When teachers seem to have a lot of priorities or a lot that they say they need help with, how do you help them to prioritize needs?"

So, first of all, this is so common, this situation sitting down with a teacher and they kind of take this big sigh, and say, "There's just so much, so much I want to talk to you about. There's so much I need help with." This is really common, right? Every time I hear a client say that, I can relate because there's just always so many things that I am also grappling with, trying to figure out with. The first thing to acknowledge is that when a client says that to you, it's an indicator of their trust in you. It means that they see you as a resource, they see you as someone who can support them.

So, first, acknowledge that at least just for yourself, okay, so what do you do? I am going to tell you some of the things that you can do. I'm going to give you some very specific suggestions., I'm going to tell you some sentence stems you can do, but I want you to know why I'm giving you these suggestions. I'm giving you these suggestions because they are all behaviors, or beliefs, or ways of being of a transformational coach.

So everything I'm going to suggest comes from my model of transformational coaching. So I want you to see the framework. A transformational coach operates from a set of core beliefs. These are beliefs about themselves as a coach, beliefs about their client, and beliefs about coaching. And one of these beliefs is that the client can solve many of their own problems given the right conditions.

Now, the right conditions include having someone they trust to help them work through those problems, so you as the coach are part of the right conditions. To solve their own problems, clients also need for you to ask them some good questions. You need to know how to listen in a way that leads you to asking the good questions, and that means listening to what your clients say, paying attention to their body language, the way that they talk, all of that is part of listening that helps you figure out the question.

Now, part of the conditions includes who you are, and how you show up. That is referencing your way of being, your disposition for a client to be able to figure out their own problems, or as I often say, many of their own problems, many, many, many of them, you need to go into the conversation and show up in a way that is trusting the process and unattached to the outcome.

So let me tell you what used to happen to me. When I would sit down with a teacher who looked perhaps overwhelmed, they looked tired, they looked anxious. When I say, "Look." This is also what I'm hearing in their voice, what I'm perceiving sort of about their energy so I can feel all of this, I'm like, "Ooh, they're overwhelmed. They're really distressed." And then they say something like, "There's just so much. I don't even know where to start."

What used to happen to me was I would get anxious partly because I thought, "Oh my God, this is so much pressure. I've got to help them figure this out. I don't know if I know how to do this. Maybe I'm a bad coach. Maybe they're just going to end up feeling more anxious. Maybe I won't know what to say." Okay, so all that activation of my performance anxiety would create this sort of internal pressure in me, make me really attached to an outcome of, "We've got to get somewhere. We've got to solve this problem."

When I went into that state, it wasn't helpful. So this is why in transformational coaching we try to anchor in these core beliefs, and dispositions, or ways of being. One of those dispositions is to trust the process. And that can sound abstract, it can sound like, "What does that mean? Tell me." This is a challenging disposition to live into.

A suggestion I have for you for how to do that is try and see what happens. If you repeat that to yourself, like a mantra saying trust the process, be open to what happens, trust the other person, trust that together, you can find a way forward. It's kind of a relief. It's not all up to you. So I wanted to name this larger context of beliefs and dispositions in transformational coaching because I am going to get really specific, and give you some suggestions for what to do when your teacher, your client has all these priorities, and they're like, "What do I do?"

I'm going to get specific, but the answer is not just technical. It's not just about the sentence stems. It is about the core beliefs from which you are operating. Because every action we take emerges from a belief. And if you believe that a client can solve their own problems, you will be more facilitative and less directive. And if you are working from a way of being that includes trusting the process, being willing to be uncomfortable in the unknown, then that's going to allow you to be more open, more responsive to what your client says.

It's going to release you from trying to drive the conversation to a direction that you think will help, but you don't know what will help because you're only part of what's happening in a coaching conversation. You don't know everything that your client knows about who they are, what their situation is. You only know one part of it. So being open to the outcome, trusting the process allows you to be more of a partner in the conversation.

Okay, again, I want you to know that everything I'm suggesting comes from this big framework of transformational coaching. None of these things I'm suggesting are sort of random things that pop into

my head. Okay, here's what you can do. Here are four tips that I'm going to give you. Each tip includes some coaching sentence stems. You will find those repeated at the end.

Now, an important thing to know before I jump into them is that these tips are not necessarily sequential. What you're going to be doing is guiding a person in their decision-making process. You're really helping them to articulate a decision-making process. Some of these tips happen more towards the beginning, but they may not be in the order that I'm sharing them with you, and you'll understand once you hear them.

Okay, the first tip, when I meet with someone who begins with that big sigh and then says, "There's so much I want to talk about with you, I don't even know where to start." I respond saying, "All right, let's make a list. Tell me all the things that are on your mind that you want to help with." That's where I start.

Tip number two is to help your client get clear on the criteria that they want to use for prioritizing the items on that list. Now, their criteria might be different than what you would use for your own long list or even what you think your client should use. So here's what you can say. "What criteria do you want to use to determine where to start? Do you want to think about addressing the low-hanging fruit?" Those are the things that might be quicker for us to talk through, or sort through, or do you want to tackle the big things first? Or maybe do you want to talk about the things that are deliverables or they have a time-bound need?

Where do you think we should start? Where do you think we should start? You might really immediately have your own opinions. You might listen to their list and feel like, "Ooh, that's the one that we need to start with." You might see relationships between the items on the list. You might start sorting them and saying like, "Yep, this is actually part of this and this and this." But if you do all that work, you are taking away really important learning opportunities from your client. I'm going to come back to that in a minute. I'm going to expand on why that is, but this tip number two is to invite your client to determine the criteria.

So tip number three is one that you might actually need to use first, or later, or not at all. So this tip, if your client is emotionally activated, if they seem distressed or really overwhelmed, then you might need to invite them to acknowledge those emotions. You don't necessarily have to dig into them, but sometimes just recognizing them or acknowledging them can be incredibly powerful. Now, what does that sound like? You could say, "Do you want to unpack some of the emotions that are coming up around all these priorities you need to address? That could be helpful."

Or you could say, "I can see that you're feeling a lot right now. I can sense that, and these emotions are valid. They're actually just trying to give you information. "How would you describe what you're feeling right now?" So that's something you might just say in the very beginning, right? When your client is overwhelmed and they're like, "I have such a long list." This might be the first thing you say. "I see that there's a lot coming up for you right now. Do you want to unpack this? Or what is coming up for you? I can sense that you're feeling a lot of feelings. What are these?"

So again, you don't necessarily have to dig into them. Sometimes just naming them, or having your client name them relieves an incredible amount of pressure. Now, let me just tell you one more thing related to this. It is useful to know that when people say they are overwhelmed, overwhelmed describes a whole bunch of emotions. Usually overwhelm includes sadness, fear, sometimes frustration, and so that's what feels overwhelming.

Unpacking overwhelm can actually feel like a relief when you can see the components. So when you meet with a teacher who says, "I have so many things I need help with." You can see in their body language, maybe their shoulders are hunched forward, maybe they're wringing their hands, maybe their speaking pace is fast, you might need to start with this exploration.

This is actually just brain science. This is about calming the system so that you can access the part of your brain that can figure out problems. That's your prefrontal cortex, that's where we can make lists, and identify criteria and talk about next steps. But sometimes we can't access that part of our cognitive capacities when our nervous system, our emotions are really activated. And so you may need to use some of these coaching emotions strategies so that you can get into the problem solving. That's why I said the four tips that I'm sharing with you are not necessarily sequential.

All right, let me give you tip number four, which is now to go back to that list of items, and perhaps the criteria that was determined for how to tackle each one of those, go back to that list, and talk through each item, and help your client determine their next steps. So a lot of times your client will know what to do even when they say, "I don't know what to do." So when they say, "I don't know," that can be really tempting for a coach to jump in, and get directive, and say, "Well, have you thought about doing this, or doing this, or trying this?"

So just see if you can hold off a little longer on being directive and probe. You could say, "Okay, I hear you don't know what to do. What are some of the things you could try?" Just see what happens if you say that. Or you could also say, "If your teaching friend was in this situation and they didn't know what to do, what would you suggest they do?" When you ask that question, you're still allowing the client to generate the answers.

So there might be times when you do need to offer suggestions. Maybe wait until your client says I don't know three or four times, and then maybe you can ask, "Would you like me to give you some suggestions?" And they say yes. Still offer a qualifier. Say, "Okay, I've got some ideas. Take it or leave it." That's the qualifier. So most coaches jump in with suggestions far too quickly.

I want to tell you why I am emphasizing holding off on being directive. I want to tell you, looping back to the second tip when I suggested you help them determine the criteria for prioritization, I want to tell you why I am suggesting this. We want our clients to remember to reconnect with their own power, their agency, their ability to solve their own problems.

When someone feels like, "Oh, I'm so overwhelmed, there's so much, help me," they have disconnected just a little bit perhaps from their own power. This is normal, we all go through this. You need to guide them back to their agency. And that could include at some point them saying to you, "I don't know what to do. Could you please give me some suggestions?" They can ask that from a place of deep empowerment, of agency of autonomy, and that's where you want them to ask it from.

So the thing is, in this situation, you are guiding your client to create a decision-making framework. And what you're doing in this is helping them develop a set of transferable decision-making skills so that the next time that they're overwhelmed, whether that is because they've got this long list of things to deal with, or because there's a child in their classroom who is in distress, whatever. We all teachers have so many challenges every day, so many decisions to make. What we need is a decision-making process that we can slip into easily even unconsciously that helps us deal with big things.

So if you are making all the decisions for them, you are in a sense undermining their power, but you also are not giving them the space they need to develop their own framework for decision-making that they can use again and again. Now, again, this doesn't mean that you don't make suggestions or you might even challenge an idea they have or a suggestion. So if a teacher comes to like, "Okay, the next time a child rolls her eyes in my classroom, I am going to send her directly to the principal's office." Your response is not, "Okay, great, you've got a next step." That might be a situation in which you are going to probe, and unpack, and really dig into that idea that the teacher has.

You're going to unpack the beliefs underneath that. You're going to unpack the ways of being that they would be embodying if they were to do that. It doesn't mean that you just like, "Okay, check." It means

however you allow a client to lead in this process to identify their thinking process, and then you might explore it.

All right, so those are the four tips for what to do when your client has so many priorities, maybe even competing priorities to guide them in the decision-making process. Now, here's your challenge for this week. When a client comes to you with a lot on their mind, or they seem to want support with a long list of things, hold off on getting directive. Anchor yourself in the belief that people can solve many of their own problems, trust the process, and guide your client to create their own decision-making process.

Okay, you're going to find the sentence stems that I use in this kind of a situation linked in our show notes so you can use those as a resource. And again, this is the first episode in a series of short episodes that are intended to immediately inform your coaching practice, and in each one I'm going to give you some of my favorite tips, and give you a challenge to try out that week, and some guidance to do so.

So I hope that this was helpful, and I want to ask you if you found this episode helpful, would you do me a favor, and share it with a colleague who might also find it helpful?

All right, friends, the Bright Morning Podcast is produced by LesLee Bickford and Stacy Goodman does the sound engineering. Take care and I'll see you next week.