

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

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 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

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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.

The Spheres of Control

By Elena Aguilar on January 22, 2014, Published on EdWeek Teacher, "The Art of Coaching Teachers"

A couple months ago, I described the "Mind the Gap" framework that I use when thinking about a coaching situation. This is one of the tools that I use to process what I hear a coachee saying that allows me to gain deeper insight and understanding into a situation. Here's another simple framework that's very useful—I didn't develop the idea, (and I don't know who did—although some attribute it to Stephen Covey) I just created the graphic. It's called the Spheres of Control.

This concept posits that the things we're worried about or that we complain about fall into three domains: things we have control over, things we can influence, and things that are outside of our control and influence. When I hear a coachee talking about something that he is unhappy about, I listen through this framework and try to identify where this issue would fall.

How I Use This Framework

When I listen to a coachee talking about challenges she's facing, I use this framework to pay attention to where she's expending her energy. If I hear that she is focusing on the sphere outside of her control and I recognize the signs of mental and physical drain, I will ask her to do the exercise I describe at the end of this article, or I might just call her attention to this (especially if we've discussed this before).

Here's an example of what I say:

"I'm hearing you talk a lot about how frustrated you are by the district's adoption of the new math curriculum and the mandate that it replace what you've used for many years. I hear that you're really frustrated by this decision and you feel like you have no control over what you're asked to do in the classroom. You've been sharing your feelings about this with me for almost 15 minutes now. I'm wondering if you'd like to transition into talking about something that's within your sphere of influence or control, perhaps into how you'll make this new curriculum accessible to your English Learners? I'd like to suggest that our conversation shift in this way because if you put your energies into something you have more control over, you'll feel better."

I always carry around a copy of these spheres, printed in color (because that helps our brain remember things). I often pull it out and use it to help a client understand the concept and make decisions about where she wants to focus her energy.

When It's Time to Go

If I am working with someone and I regularly hear him complaining about issues that are outside of his control, and if he's unable or unwilling to explore shifting his energies, then sometimes we explore whether the issues are related to a clash with his core values. For example, I worked with a principal who felt that he was asked, year after year, to modify his school's approach to teaching and learning in a way that deeply undermined the school's vision and mission. The school had been founded by educators and parents who sought an alternative to the standard public school, and after some years, the principal felt that district leaders weren't in support of this alternative. He constantly complained about hiring policies, curriculum mandates, PD requirements for administrators and much more—all things he had no control over.

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every conversation counts

As we dug deeper and what emerged was that he felt that his core values and those of his school were being eroded, he recognized that he could do nothing about the changes at the district level and he resigned. Sometimes a coach can be instrumental in helping a person recognize that his energies are being drained in the “outside of my control” domain, and that what’s needed may not be a shift in perspective or a letting go and refocusing, but a change in position.

Things aren’t always cut and dry as far as what’s within or outside of our control. Sometimes there are things that are outside of our control that we really can have some influence over; the boundaries are murky. This is worth exploring with a client—as long as the focus is always on looking for opportunities to shift into a place of empowerment.

Use Your Energy Where It Counts

This framework is about taking responsibility for our feelings, our choices, and our lives. It helps us move away from blame and into our own power. The bottom line is this: we have a finite amount of energy. The things that we can’t change drain us, but we do have control over how we respond to them. Can we reduce the amount of energy that goes into our frustration about those things? Can we shift that energy into something we have more control over? The key is to use our energy where it counts. The more we focus on what’s in our control, the more effective we’ll feel. The happier we’ll be. The more we’ll be able to tackle what’s within our sphere of influence. And for those of working in schools and towards a vision of a transformed education system, if we focus on what’s within our control and influence, there’s a greater likelihood that we’ll positively impact children.

Try This Exercise

Think about your work life, your personal life, or both and list your complaints about this area—as many as you’d like. For example: I don’t exercise enough, my rent is high, I hate waking up at 5:30a.m., and so on. Then code each of these complaints as either, “Within my control,” “Within my influence,” or “Outside of my control and influence.”

Now, reflect on these questions:

1. Read the complaints that are outside of your control and influence and notice how your body feels. See if you can feel the emotional impact showing up on your body—perhaps your shoulders feel tighter, your breathing might shallow, and so on.
2. Which category did the majority of your complaints fall into?
3. Of the complaints outside of your control, are there any that you can look at differently so that you can have more influence over them? For example, if you were just told that as the head of the English department you needed to attend a twice a month evening meeting on the Common Core transition, you might feel like you have no control over this mandate. Perhaps you could talk to your principal about a rotating schedule where you’d attend some, but not all, of the meetings? Or perhaps you could request a stipend for attending? Sometimes we can find ways to influence what feels like something outside of our control, or at least to have a voice in it.
4. Of the complaints outside of your control, are there any that you’d like to let go of? Imagine putting them into a helium-filled balloon and then watching the balloon rise into the sky and disappear.
5. Look at the complaints that are within your sphere of influence and control. See if you can identify one concrete action you could do to address each one.

