

Ep #230: Re-envisioning Outdated Biases in the Coaching Industry

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With Your Host

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Welcome to *Joyful Marketing*! I'm Simone Seol, and I teach you how to get your life coaching practice fully booked without having to pay for ads, buy Instagram followers, or complicated sales funnels. It's not rocket science, and you can do it, too. Listen on to find out how.

Hey friends, we're starting off today talking about something heavy. On January 10, a young man in Memphis, Tennessee, called Tyre Nichols, was murdered, as a result of racialized violence at the hands of police officers. So many people in my community, including myself, felt just ravaged with grief, outrage, and fury against the crime.

And there were discussions, inside the coach training program that I'm co-teaching with Melissa Tiers, about how to use the tools that we are learning. How to use coaching tools in the context of a violently oppressive world. And how to use the tools that we have to work toward liberation and abolition.

I do not claim to have the whole answer. However, I did have some thoughts to share about some fundamental assumptions behind coaching, historically, that, in my opinion, direly, direly need to be critically examined and reimaged. Some unspoken biases, and implicit paradigms that have traditionally ruled the coaching world. Which, are now outdated and feel damn near irrelevant at a time when there's such a stark awareness among us, of large swaths of our society, who are literally not safe to exist as themselves.

We have to think about coaching in new ways. Otherwise, we risk being completely fucking irrelevant. Again, I don't have all the answers. But I have some questions. I have some suggestions. So I organized some thoughts, and sort of did a spontaneous live in the Facebook community that we have. These are words that I realized, I really wanted to share with the rest of the world, with you.

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So, I decided to take the audio clip of the live I did and publish it as a podcast this week because I really wanted to share these with you. I hope you find them useful to think about. And although you're going to hear me referencing our coaching program, and my co-teacher, Melissa Tiers, because that's the context in which I'm giving this talk. But please know that the following views are mine and mine alone. Alright, my friends, have a listen.

I want to share some thoughts on how to make coaching make sense. How to re-envision coaching, so that it is a relevant and helpful force in the world. I want to say 'in times like these' where fucked up things happen in the world, but actually, that's always. There is no "times;" it's always fucked up things happen in the world all the time. And how to be in the world as coaches, when the world is like this.

I use the word re-envision on purpose. I certainly can't speak for everybody, but I know that, at least for lots of us who are gathered here in BFCC, it's because we see the need to talk about coaching, define coaching, and practice coaching, in ways that are different from what has been normalized.

What has been explicitly and implicitly... what has been the default orientation, and the assumptions and the philosophical frameworks that undergird coaching. We see the need for change. We see the need for re-envisioning. And that's what we're here to do. We have to hold a different vision of it in our minds before we can go do different things.

A lot of BFCC, well actually, all of BFCC, was created on the basis of a lot of these discussions between me and Melissa. I want to talk about biases that coaching as a field has had, historically. Sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, actually, a lot more implicitly than explicitly. And how we can upturn some of those assumptions so that coaching is more relevant and actually helpful in times like this.

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I thought of five things, five historical assumptions, and prejudices that the field of coaching has had, that we need to re-envision. I want to talk about them one by one, and how each of these applies, so that we can make better decisions. We can make more responsible decisions so that we can use our tools to help at least avoid harm, which a lot of coaching has been causing harm.

So our goal is, at the very least, harm reduction. And if we're being ambitious, actually being part of undoing some of the fucked up things in the world.

The field of coaching has, historically, privileged improvement over witnessing. So, when we look at something, coaching has always asked, how do we improve it? How do we make it better? Which are perfectly good questions. But on the other side of trying to improve something is witnessing something as it is, as it unfolds. Explicitly without the attempt, without the force, to have to improve it.

I want to make sure to say, it's not that I'm against what coaching has traditionally privileged; improving is a great thing, except when it's not, right? And so, we have to use discernment. In this context that I'm talking about it, to me, the alternative to improvement is witnessing something. So, for example... I'm so sorry, I don't remember exactly who, but someone posted to say, in the group, "How do we use the tools we're learning for the sake of abolition? How do we respond to what's happening right now?"

And when we think about how to respond, a lot of our mind goes to, how do we make things better? How do we improve it? Right? But like I said, improvement helps except when it doesn't. A lot of times, the response that's called for, in terms of our humanity, is to witness what is happening.

So, if a devastating tragedy happened, a lot of times what is helpful, what is good, is to be with the grief and sadness of those who have been affected.

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Being with, making space for, those emotions and those painful experiences, is not improving on them. In fact, trying to improve what they're feeling would actually be harmful and toxic.

For example, in the context of what's happening now, what do we do? What we do is to put down the urge to improve anything, at least for the time being, and be willing to witness. Be willing to bear witness to the grief, the rage, the powerlessness, the fury, the heartbreak, all of it. All I mean by witnessing is creating space where those things can exist, and take up as much space as they want. And resisting the urge to want to do something about it.

Coaching, as a field, has largely always privileged improving over witnessing, and that needs to be re-envisioned. Sometimes it's time to witness, and it's very uncomfortable for those of us who want to spring to action, and want to spring to improving things. Trust me, and I know I'm speaking as somebody who always has to work with that impulse. Sometimes the solution is to sit down and witness.

Now, the second assumption, that's traditional in coaching that I want to upturn is the emphasis on assertiveness over humility. Assertiveness, once again, is a great thing, except in context when it's not. Right? Assertiveness is, let me get out there. Let me take charge. Let me do this thing. That's great, except in some contexts, what is required is humility.

Humility means maybe it's not time for me to speak up right now. Maybe it is not time for me to take charge right now. I know, when you listen to me say that, when you consider these ideas, a lot of it just goes against what we think coaching is supposed to be. Because coaching is, historically, privileged assertiveness over humility.

I think, as an agent, I think this is also very cultural. The western world is a lot more into assertiveness than humility. And humility traditionally can be

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defined as sort of like putting others before themselves or thinking little of yourself. But that's not how I think of humility. Humility is acknowledging that your view of the world is not everyone's view of the world. It means your knowledge of the world is not complete, because you are just one person in a world of 8 billion people.

And so, humility means being able to discern in a context where, “Oh, maybe I don't know everything there is to know about this person's situation or about this context. And maybe the most powerful, useful thing I can do is to sit down. Resist the urge to take charge and be upfront and speak up. And maybe that's the most helpful thing I can do.”

Again, this is very unsaid in a lot of coaching contexts; it's actually discouraged. Because, again, in coaching, the implicit bias is always toward doing something. Get up there, do something, and use your voice. Once again, those can be great things, except when they're not. Where's the discernment?

The third thing is that coaching, historically, has privileged feeling powerful over allowing the feeling of powerlessness. And if you think about it, allowing the feeling of powerlessness feels like it goes against everything that we stand for and talk about in coaching. Except when you add a little nuance to it, I think it's the opposite.

A lot of our emotional lives are, in effect, a flight from the feeling of powerlessness. Feeling powerless is so scary that we do anything to avoid it. And the number one thing that I think most of us feel powerless against is death. We're all going to die. And mortality scares us so much that we buffer from it, by using alcohol, drugs, sex, shopping, achievement, work, anything, right?

All of it is to escape this uncomfortable feeling of powerlessness, of helplessness, over lots of things in the world that are too terrifying to face.

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And I think, because we love feeling powerful, and we privilege feeling powerful, and we act like the goal of coaching is to feel powerful, what that leads us to is the bypassing of a lot of instances where the correct response is to feel powerless.

We are powerless against death. We are powerless as individuals against a lot of fucked up shit happening. If you want to work with very large-scale, systemic fucked up things, the correct response is to feel powerless. Not forever, but for a moment, because we are up against large, entrenched, complex issues. And powerlessness isn't like an absolute truth. It's just an experience we have when we look at things that are big for us as single human beings, right?

And I think because people are so fucking averse to feeling powerless, I think we bypass a lot of social issues. Like, "oh, I can't do anything about it. So, why even think about it," right? That is the classic bypassing that happens because we're addicted to feeling powerful. And we don't know how to handle ourselves when we feel powerless, right?

I'm not advocating for feeling powerlessness, just so you can feel defeated and hopeless. That's not the point. But I think part of being human is wisely interacting with the sensation of powerlessness that we feel a lot in our lives. Imagine how annoying, at best, and actively harmful and toxic it is, at worst, when someone's always like, "Well, look at the look on the bright side. Everything happens for a reason." You know?

"Well, it wasn't that bad." It's like, no, it was that bad. And yes, we all were powerless, we are powerless, against a lot of it. Can we just sit with that for a moment? That is important. That is sacred. There needs to be space for us to feel powerless. And actually, allowing the feeling of powerlessness is just the other side of the coin of having power.

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I want to repeat myself; there are times when allowing the feeling of powerlessness, and allowing someone else to have that experience, allowing them to experience, as part of being human, is the correct thing to do. And trying to be powerful in those instances is bypassing.

Now, the next one is the historical bias that coaching has traditionally had on individual empowerment versus collective empowerment. And once again, hey, I am all about individual empowerment. I love individual empowerment, but it's only part of the equation. We are all part of a collective, and something that happens to you could happen to me.

And a system that allows certain things to happen to you is a system that allows the same thing to happen to me. And therefore, individual empowerment cannot be complete without collective empowerment. So, coaching asks a lot. If you've been in the world of coaching for any length of time, it's all about, who do you want to be? What do you want to achieve? What are your dreams that you want to make true? How do you want to change?

Again, all beautiful questions, but they are incomplete if we're not also asking, what change do you want to make in the world? How do we want to be? How do I take responsibility for what happens to us? And when those conversations are missing, it's incomplete. It's not a fully responsible paradigm of individual empowerment and for leaving out the collective.

The last thing I want to talk about is the coaching world's historical bias towards coming out on top versus lifting up those who've been pushed to the bottom. We love the top in the coaching world. We love being number one. We love winning. We love growing.

Look at all these images, all these concepts, that are about going up, going to the top, climbing the tree, that ladder, the pyramid, right? Once again, that's a beautiful thing. But when that is at the cost of ignoring everyone

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else in your community who is being held down... They're not just randomly down; they are held down against their will, as a result of systemic forces.

If you want to go up, you have a responsibility to remove the blocks that keep other human beings down. If there are two people, one always coming out on top and the other, this is an extreme example. But let's say one person is 100% always coming out on top. And the other person, always, 100% of the time, lifting up those who've been pushed to the bottom. Who do you think the coaching world has historically celebrated and highlighted and held up as an example?

Of course, the person coming out on top. The one who's achieved the successes and the fame and the riches and the influence and the power, right? Because they came out on top. Once again, coming out on top is a great thing; I love it. And that needs to be balanced with our attention to who's being kept at the bottom.

Coaching needs to change emphasis, change focus, reorient itself, and reinvent itself so that we are equally paying attention to those who have a much further, much more arduous, if not impossible, climb to the top. Because of systemic forces that we are all participating in upholding and perpetuating.

One of the reasons I've always been such a rabid fan of Melissa's work is because she makes no bones about this kind of shit. If you talk to her for three minutes, you know. And she is just so virulently allergic to any kind of rainbows and daisies, bypassing bullshit. A lot of that is so natural to her. It was really important for me to think about it in a way where I can break it down and articulate it for all of us, and for the rest of the coaching industry.

A lot of times when people talk about things we want to change in the coaching industry, it's like the industry is over there and all those people over there, and you're just one powerless person. And it's like me with

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different ideas against them. But hey, if you're listening to this, you are the coaching industry; you are it, you're part of it. We are all the coaching industry. We are all the coaching world.

I hope you take that as a responsibility as well as a privilege. I hope you take that with a due sense of power that you can use to create something different for everyone else, for the community. As well as something different that we can leave to the next generation that wrestles with how to deal with these things in the context of coaching.

A lot of times, coaching is thought of as just a collection of tools. And the tools are wonderful. But tools can become weapons; like, you can use a hammer to kill someone. Any useful tool you can wound or maim or kill with the same tools. Tools are only half of coaching, maybe even less than half. The rest is your discernment about how to use it as a human being who is in relationship with other beings on planet Earth.

And how you discern that, is your decisions, your power. The way you shape what all this means to you, that's going to ripple out to the clients that you serve. Okay, that's all I have prepared. I'll talk to you next time.

Hey, if you want a shot of fresh inspiration and actionable tips to improve your marketing every single week in your inbox, you better get on my email list. Sign up to receive my free e-book called *20 Unsolicited Copy Tips*. It's been known to get people to come out of the woodwork and ask to work with you. So, get on that link in the show notes, and I'll see you in your inbox next time.