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Tackling Will Gaps: When a Coachee Doesn't Want to Change

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One of the key transformational coaching tools is the concept I've termed, "Mind the Gap." This idea (which I didn't create) suggests that in order to effectively do something, we need knowledge, skills, capacity, emotional intelligence, and will. ([You can read more about this idea and how we can use it in coaching here.](#)) Many coaches feel that the hardest gap to address is the will gap and so I want to offer you some strategies to do so. Before we talk strategy, let's make sure we're on the same page in defining a will gap.

What Are Will Gaps?

Within this concept, will is defined as motivation, commitment, passion, and engagement. True will gaps are rarer than you think. Most of the time, when I've perceived others as having big will gaps (meaning I thought they were resistant) what I discovered as a got to know them was that they had big *skill* and *knowledge* gaps. When we can't do something, we often mask that with appearing to be disengaged or resistant. This is why coaches need to be cautious about concluding that someone has a will gap.

Will gaps come in different sizes. Sometimes a skill gap leads to a will gap and they become so entwined with each other that we can't tease them apart--and a little will gap emerges. And sometimes if we close a little will gap, we can get at the skill or knowledge gaps in a more efficient and strategic way.

I've found that a coach's fear of someone else's will gap can make the will gap seem bigger than it is. We get anxious when we face push back, questions, or even resistance and that can lead us to perceive a larger gap than may really be there. And sometimes, we turn a question (that feels like push back) into a will gap.

Let's get to what you can do when you perceive a will gap.

1) Ready Yourself

You'll only really close a will gap if, as a coach, you approach it with compassion. When I suggest that you ready yourself, I'm suggesting that you remember that you too, at some point in the past, present or future, will have a will gap. At some point, you may feel hesitant to do something (perhaps you have a will gap to approach someone else's will gap).

Enter the will gap conversation with compassion, humility and curiosity. Whenever you notice that the person you're coaching might be struggling with will, (or engagement, motivation or passion) activate your compassion. Soften your heart, and let your eyes reflect that softening. Take a deep breath and know that will gaps can be closed, and that you know enough as a coach to do so. And then try the following strategies.

2) Activate Autonomy

Will gaps can be connected to feelings of disempowerment. When we feel disempowered, we start disengaging. So for coaches, our work is to put the learner back in the driver's seat. We need to remind our client (or "coachee") that he or she can make decisions and has autonomy.

You can find many moments in a conversation when you can re-ignite autonomy. This can sound like:

- What would you like to talk about today?
- Of those three things, what order would you like to talk about them in?
- How much time would you like to allocate to each of those things you want to talk about?
- What do you think we could talk about that would help you feel better?
- What's one thing you might be able to try that would help you address that challenge?

Any time you are inviting your client to determine the direction of the conversation, of the work together, or of his or her decisions in the classroom, you're lighting the fires of self-determination. Kindle that autonomy back into a raging fire and you'll close will gaps.

3) Connect to Core Values

There's a much greater likelihood that we'll feel a will to do something when we can see how the *why* of doing it connects to our core values or personal mission. This is the work, then, of a coach: To help our clients see the connections between the discrete pieces that we want to coach them on and their core values. Here's an example of what this could sound like:

- "I know you've been reluctant to introduce the think-pair-share structure to your kindergarteners. I also remember you sharing that you

really want your kids to be prepared for first grade. I'm wondering what connections you see between your kids using TPS and being ready for first grade? How could TPS help them be ready? Which specific skills could they develop by using this structure?"

- Or you can try this: "I know you feel frustrated that you need to write lesson plans. It might help if we can find some connections between what you're being asked to do (writing the plans) and your core values. Would you be willing to explore that?"

4) Connect to School Mission

Will gaps can also be diminished if we can see the connection between the thing that we're not engaged in or feeling resistant to, and the larger school or organizational mission. This, of course, implies that the school's mission and vision are clearly articulated and alive (not just written on some document). This can sound like this:

- "It seems like you're not onboard with our new advisory program this year. When I've been in your room during advisory, your kids have been doing study hall rather than the curriculum that we developed. I know you value our school's mission to develop young people who are empathetic and self-aware. Can we talk about how advisory might support our kids to reach this vision?"

5) Ask questions

These are the kinds of questions I ask when I'm sensing a will gap. I ask them with compassion, mindful of my body language and tone of voice, and I ask them with an intent to confront, or interrupt the fixed mindset.

- "What would it take for you to implement think-pair-share with your kindergarteners?"
- "What would need to happen for you to try this?"
- "Would you be willing to try it?"
- "On a scale of 1-10, how reluctant do you feel to try TPS with your kindergarteners?" If the response is higher than zero, then you say: "Great! If your willingness is at a 2, then let's go with that!"
- You can also ask, "I'm curious if you have any will at all to try this? You can be honest -and if you have none at all, then that's useful for me to know. But if you have any will, then I can figure out how we work with that."

6) The Art of Nudging

When I encounter will gaps, I decide that I won't be scared of the other person's resistance. And I won't give up. I often think that the art of coaching is the art of nudging--and when I find will gaps, I attempt to nudge and nudge until either it's clear that the other person doesn't want to change or until change happens.

If someone doesn't want to change, there may be implications. For example, if it's expected that the new advisory program be used, then it's now an administrator's responsibility to follow up. As a coach, my job isn't accountability, it's to cultivate growth. My job ends when someone doesn't want to grow.

I practice transformational coaching, and within this framework, *we can't make people do things*. Doing things out of fear or accountability or compliance isn't transformation. This doesn't mean that a teacher can opt out of a program or initiative that a school has adopted, it doesn't mean that a teacher can yell at kids or sit at her desk all day. If that's what a teacher is doing and refuses to change, it's not a coaching conversation. But will gaps, within a coaching context, can be closed. Go forth and close them!

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