



Coach Approach Ministries Podcast

Episode 5: Client on the Wrong Path

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[Intro Music]

Brian Miller: Welcome to the *Coach Approach Ministries Podcast* where we help people find their way with God by training the best Christian coaches in the world. I'm Brian Miller, strategic director for Coach Approach Ministries, CAM, we call it, for short, and I'm joined here today by Chad Hall, president of Coach Approach Ministries and Bill Copper, the executive director of Coach Approach Ministries. We are the leadership team for Coach Approach. Welcome guys.

Chad Hall: Hey Brian.

Bill Copper: Hey Brian.

Brian: Hey, our topic today is what do you do when your client's going down the wrong path. I'll give you an example of what I'm talking about, and maybe I'll give you another one you can work with here in a minute, but you know, it's a clear truth in coaching that the client is the expert of their own life, and I appreciate that, and I respect that, and I think we need to lean into that, but what if you're listening and clearly, you're thinking, "No. You are not the expert. You are not an expert in this situation. You're going the wrong direction." What do you do at that point? Maybe they've already talked for 5 or 10 minutes to open the coaching conversation, and you're thinking, "How do we back this thing up? How do we get this thing on track?"

Chad: Yeah. Brian, I think that's a great question, and it's probably one that will help people listening to the podcast maybe take their coaching from sort of beginner, junior, level coaching to much more of a professional level, and you know, we all train a lot of coaches, and early on, coaches hear, "The client is the expert," and they either underdo that or they overdo it, and I know a lot who overdo it. The thing is, the client is the expert does not mean the client is omniscient. Every word out of their mouth is infallible. Every thought in their head is ex cathedra, the kind of thinking. What we've got to do as coaches is be discerning and really be a partner with our clients, and we have to go ahead and give ourselves permission to challenge, or push, or at least help the client question their own thinking because sometimes they can get kind of wrapped around themselves. Self-doubt, they can talk themselves out of things, they can have assumed constraints going on. Maybe they have a belief that needs to get shifted, and then they could act out of a new belief. We hear clients all the time who are going down the wrong path, and they've hired us to help challenge that and maybe redirect them.

Brian: And so the obvious thing, I think, is when I hear this, that comes into my head at least, as a coach, is, “Oh, they need to think more deeply about this, so I’m going to ask a different question to kind of, hopefully, stir up something different hear, and then it doesn’t. I think maybe it needs a little more immediate action right off the bat there. Correct me if I’m wrong. Bill, how would you address that?”

Bill: What I don’t do is pretend that I’m asking them questions to try to get them to see something. To me, we can get to where we’re manipulating, and if I get to a point where I feel like I need to tell the client something, I just tell them. Let’s be transparent. Let’s be direct and honest with people. Now, I’ll start out by saying, I don’t always feel that. I always want to check my motives when I make a determination that the client’s been down the wrong path. So I’m not hearing you say this topic goes for any time you don’t agree with the client’s direction. What I’m hearing you say is, gosh, when it’s clear that there’s a blind spot, and anybody would be able to see it, what do you do? And I think you just be direct. I don’t think you beat it around the bush. I don’t think you ask a nuanced question, or a leading question to try to get them to see it. If you want to get them to see something, get them to see it. Ask for the question, or give a direct statement and say, “You know, I got to tell you, it seems like you may be going down the wrong path. Let me ask you to consider this,” and again, I don’t often want to do that, but to me, that’s more honorable than trying to trick them with a question to try to get them to see what I see.

Brian: I totally agree. I coach a lot of leaders, and I think there’s a sense that as I’m coaching them, and using a coach approach, and asking good questions, I think there’s a tendency that maybe they think, “I should definitely use a coach approach in this current situation I have, and listen more, and ask good questions, and see what they think we ought to do about it.” When, certainly, in some cases in leadership, no, actually that’s not... You should be, certainly, very directive in this situation and not be the coach, but be a different model there. Maybe the father in this case, and say, “Hey, this is kind of how this works.” So just being really directive. Where would you go from there, Chad?

Chad: I think that we offer things clearly and then we always give permission to the client to try it on, to agree, to disagree, to knock it around. The more they do that, the more comes their own thinking. The other thing is, sometimes I think our clients just wish we would do this. They just wish that somebody would say, “Actually, it’s okay to be the boss right now.” Here’s an example. I remember about six months ago, I was coaching a guy who, long story, but he was connected with an organization that really wasn’t a fit for him. He’d been with them for five years. He had this kind of, maybe, undue sense of loyalty, and he never had anything positive, in terms of his experience with this organization. It’s almost like he’d been walking closer and closer to the edge of leaving this organization for five years. Every time we talked about it he would say, “But you know, they hired me. I feel a sense of loyalty,” and all this kind of stuff.

After about 30 minutes of this, during one session, I just said, “You know, it might just be that your loyalty is getting in the way of God really doing something, and I could be wrong about this, but if I were in your shoes, I’d leave,” and he said, “Man, I’ve been waiting for someone to tell me that.” I thought, “Well crap. I could have told you that three or four sessions ago.” I should have, but again, I wanted to honor, give him space, all that kind of stuff, but the preface of, “I could be wrong about this, but let me communicate it directly anyway.” And then let turning it over to him. I think we probably do have clients who want someone to just say it clearly, and helpfully, and genuinely without trying to boss them around.

Brian: I think your preface is good. I also think that making it a statement of truth as opposed to a statement of what exactly they should do, and there's a difference there, and you said, "I think your loyalty may be getting in the way of what God wants you to do. That's a truth as opposed to, "You know what? You should quit. You should get out of there." So if you're making a statement... You think they're going the wrong direction, you make a statement, and there's really nothing to mull around. There's nothing to say, "Hmm. Let me consider that," and "How would that apply in this situation?" Then you have not coached well, but if there's something to say, "Huh. Let's think about it from that direction for a minute." That's really helpful.

Chad: I think the other thing is that often times when we do this at our best, it sounds like permission giving. It sounds like a gift. It doesn't sound like a slap in the face, or a kick in the pants, or a boy I'm smarter than you are. It sounds like a real gift that honors the person. Again, I would never say to a client, "Here's what you should do," but I will say, "If I were in your shoes, here's what I would do." Because to give them just enough wiggle room to know Chad doesn't know everything I know. He doesn't see everything I see. Things may be different for me versus Chad, but it gives them enough clarity, and direction, and specificity that they can at least try it on.

Brian: It's definitely a new set of lenses you can take a look through. I said the other day... A client was really trying to figure out what God wanted them to do very specifically, and they really wanted to honor God with doing exactly what God wanted them to do, and the more I listened to it, and you know, this is always subjective, right, that I thought I heard the Holy Spirit saying to me... I interjected, "God does not care what you do." Now, that sounds counterintuitive to what we think and believe, and I was a little nervous saying it. I thought, "That's almost a slap in the face," and the relief on this client's face was palpable. They just were clearly "Thank you for saying that. That just takes so much pressure off. Both things I wanted to do seemed like good things. I just was getting sick about either choice because what if it's the wrong choice." So I took a risk there. Bill, speak into this.

Bill: I want to say that our mindset really dictates every bit of this. So if I take and give somebody my perspective on if I were in your shoes or any of those things, with the right mindset, can be just really good coaching and really helpful. And with the wrong mindset, can be manipulative, can be leading, can be about our agenda. I think how you phrase it, or exactly what you do, ought to come out of what is my mindset? What am I believing here? If my mindset is, "Hey I know better than you what you what you need to do here," and if my mindset is, "Well I've seen this many times, and here's my perspective on it," that's not a great mindset out of which to speak into someone's life. If your mindset is one of curiosity, one of belief, one of wondering if this is a blind spot, and out of that, honest curiosity about what could be that we offer an insight and hold it lightly, as Chad said. I don't care if you listen to this or not. Then I think the mindset is what drives whether this is good coaching or not.

Brian: Yeah, and I'm honest when these things come up, and I've interjected these things. There's actually a tremendous discomfort in me thinking, "Gosh, am I meddling here? I don't want this to be about what I think. I don't want this to be about my expertise." I think that's a healthy... My brother-in-law, who's a carpenter said... I said, "Boy, I'm a little afraid to use that power saw," and he said, "You always should be a little afraid. As soon as you're not afraid, you're going to cut your finger off." So I think we should always be a little afraid of interjecting any expertise, but when it's just clear, and we can say it with a preface, like you said, let me just say this, and see if it clicks. I could wrong. With the idea

that it's a truth and not a solution, and with a mindset of curiosity and helpfulness, and not a mindset of, "This guy's a moron. I'm now responsible for his decisions as well as my own."

Bill: Right, and I would want to check myself to make sure that... I don't want, in my coaching to protect everyone from every pain they might encounter. Pain is a great teacher. I do want to help protect them from driving off a cliff. The trick is not to see everything as a cliff and not to believe you've got to protect people from every decision that they might make, or every "wrong path," I say that with air quotes around it. That all comes from checking your mindset.

Brian: Go ahead Chad.

Chad: That's a huge point. I loved the way you said that Bill. We need to make sure we don't see everything as a cliff. Otherwise we're going to take the steering wheel right away from them and think we have to drive this thing for them. I say that as someone with a teenage daughter who just got her driver's permit. I really would like to take the steering wheel the entire time even though we don't live near any cliffs. I think we need to be careful that if we take every wrong path, or wrong direction away from our clients, we might prevent them from a lot of learning, and the growth that comes from learning, the growth that comes from a mistake, a less than best path, a different way. I think we want to be discerning and certainly be prayerful about when to offer an insight, offer some feedback, offer a different perspective versus let's facilitate where they're going and see what happens.

Brian: Yeah, I think if there's anything that I'm learning here that I might do wrong is to talk about it too much, to feel that obligation and I want this to be your stuff and then kind of an apology. That's again, just saying I am taking over your stuff and just get the truth out there, and let them negotiate it, and if they didn't hear it the first time you said it, they're probably not going to hear it the second time you say it.

Chad: They're definitely not.

Brian: Let them go ahead and make this choice. Let me give you another scenario that comes up sometimes is that you're coaching a client, and you're listening to the topic, and it's funny because you're thinking, "Oh. I bet we want to see how we can build some action steps toward this, or here's a caveat. They're building on something we've already talked about," but then you start to get clearer that the issue that they're thinking about is they're completely second guessing moving forward in this decision, and maybe that, again, is if you make a tough decision, you honestly, the best this you do is stick with it whether you think it's right or not, but then you think, "Gosh. I don't know." So this idea of really second guessing, how do you coach that? What do you think Chad?

Chad: I was pointing to Bill, actually, on the screen.

Brian: Bill, What do you think about that?

Bill: Sorry, I've been muted. Ask that again, lead into that again, and I'll...

Brian: Sure. Absolutely. So you've got a client who is really second guessing the decisions they've already made, and let's assume, they're bold decisions, and you can understand this. Gosh, they've made a decision to put resources and time in a certain direction. It was a struggle to make that choice, but they made that choice, but now you're coaching them the second, third, fourth time, and they're still talking about that decision, so second guessing it, wanting reassurance. So again, they're wanting

something from the coach. The first example I gave, they're wanting our expertise, but in the second example, they want my reassurance.

Bill: I try not to bite on that, to provide the reassurance. I try to take and make it a process question. I tend, in a case like, that to ask a client, "What would you need to know in order to have more certainty about this? How do you generally get certainty before you're ready to move? How do things work for you in terms of your level of certainty?" Because my experience is that if they're second guessing this, that's not the first time they've second guessed a decision.

Brian: No, not at all. It's almost a habit.

Bill: What I do, is I try to take step back from this situation and try to ask them to look at themselves in this situation and evaluate their behavior and their responses rather than try to get in the weeds of this particular issue and whether it's right or wrong.

Brian: Well because they've already made the decision. That's my point in this distinction. They've already made the decision. They're looking for reassurance. I made the observation... I've coached this one client I'm thinking of long enough that I made the observation, after a big decision, we often come back to this point, don't we? It didn't sound great when I said it even there. That's why I guess I'm asking the question. I mean I think there's a direct statement that could be made there of... And the other thing is, talking about not biting, sometimes, especially when it's about reassurance, when you're listening to the client, I'm not even sure what the problem is. It sounds vague because it is vague because they've already made the decision.

Bill: And that's not to say that there aren't circumstances that change that cause us to revisit a decision that we've made, or to tweak. So we're not talking about that, but we're talking about is there a pattern where I repeatedly question decisions I make, or my clients do. There again, I want to take a step back from the issue and coach the person about... Now we're going to coach around that issue of whether there's a pattern of second guessing rather than second guessing this particular issue itself.

Chad: I think, too, we would want to be careful. So a client brings up, "Oh, I made that decision, and now I'm wondering if it was the right one." Okay. Gosh, there could be ten reasons they're doing that. It could be they need reassurance. You know, it was a big gulp, I'm not sure about it, and now I just need that certainty, reassurance, great. It could also be circumstances have changed, and now there's a reason to revisit it. It could be a habit. It could be a lot of different things. I think what we would want to do as coaches is really be careful that we don't assume why they're bringing it up because if we assume the wrong thing then we're going to provide the wrong thing. So they may not need reassurance from us. They may not need us to hold their hand. They may just need to go back through the data and remind themselves, "Oh yeah, that's right. That's right."

Brian: You know what I've found lately, Chad and Bill? That coaching can give the guys almost the hallucination that there is one great choice out there, and if we just coach enough around, we're going to uncover this spectacular choice, and I was just listening to a commentator talking about the Middle East and the next president's choices in the Middle East. The thing that really just, I don't know why it just struck me when he said, he said the choices that the next president will have, in say, Syria, or it doesn't matter, there're just going to be a bunch of poor choices they can make, and they're just going to have to choose one. They're going to have to choose a poor choice, and so I wonder that even as

coaches if we don't accidentally bring that presence to the conversation of... And especially as Christian coaches. There is probably one great path out there if only we can discover it.

Chad: Well sometimes there's one right choice. Most of the time, there's not, and depending on the circumstance of our client, especially if they're in really challenging circumstances, or they're a long way from their goal, or whatever. It reminds me of what I told a guy in a counseling situation years ago. He had just blown up his marriage, and everything's going down the toilet, and I said, "Listen, right now you're in the middle of the zip code of hell. No matter which direction you walk, you're still in hell, but you've got to start walking to get out of it." I think what we could mistakenly do as coaches is say, "You're just one right decision away from nirvana." No you're not. You're one good decision away from things being better than they were when we started, but the truth is, if you have a really substantial goal in your life, there are a lot of pathways toward it, and there are a lot of twists, and turns, and bends, and ups, and downs, and all that kind of stuff. That's why we really want to reinforce the idea that coaching's a relationship, not this sort of one off conversation where we're going to help you make the one best decision that turned everything around. That may happen, but it's rare that that's what coaching brings about.

Brian: And you said there're a lot of reasons they could be bringing this up, but one reason is self-worth, and so once they've made this big decision to move ahead, to put resources into this, to a lot of things rely on their ability, the investment in themselves. Are they willing to take as much responsibility as they said they would? Then there's this self-worth issue of can I really do this? Can I really pick this up? How do you coach that? I mean that could really easily fall into a counseling issue. How do you keep that in a coaching issue where your action step is "I want to feel more capable at the end of this conversation?"

Bill: I like to put it in terms of what information do you need that would make you feel more capable? What else do you need to know in order to... Sometimes we get... We make assumptions out of things if this is an emotional issue for someone or it has to do with my self-doubt or that those are always emotional issues, and I try to shift it into, what do you think about this? What other piece of information would you need to know? And then how could you know that? How could you find that out? And that can take in out of the realm of the doubt and the heart and into the realm of the head and what I need to do.

Chad: I sometimes take a little different. I go with the emotion. I go sort of the practice route of, "Well of course you don't feel like you can do this yet. I kind of normalize whatever they're feeling and say, "Of course you don't feel like you can do it yet. You never did it before. Of course you doubt yourself, you've never actually done this. You're entering into new territory. That's perfectly normal. So let's act as if you can do this and find out. If you act as if you can't do it, we're guaranteed how that's going to turn out." I think what we've got to sort of embrace as coaches is we help people develop. We don't just help them get from point A to point B. We help them develop. They develop maturity. They develop new competencies, new skills, new senses of value, and new perspective on themselves. We really are in the human development business, and gosh, if you didn't have some doubt, you probably wouldn't be going anywhere. You'd be stuck doing what you've been doing. Just to normalize that for them, and say that's to be expected, so don't let it scare you.

Brian: The discovery question I thought of when you were asking that, and this is discovery, if you were to fake it 'til you made it, some people like to say it that way, what kind of things would you be doing? Just to imagine themselves in that setting.

[crosstalk]

Chad: One thing you're on here Brian.

Brian: Yeah, go ahead.

Chad: I think this would be helpful for us and for everybody listening to the podcast is, gosh, I'm just going to pick the number, not quite out of thin air, I think this is true, but if I were to estimate, I'd say 75% of my coaching, both when I am the coach and when I am the client, is about motivation.

Brian: 77%, probably.

Chad: It's probably 77.2%, if we want to get precise, and by the way, for those who don't know us very well, we're BS-ing with each other. It's about motivation, and again, that's normal. Of course we find it hard to stay motivated. We find it hard to stay headed in the right direction, to follow through on our commitments, to have assurance that this is the right thing to do, and the energy to do it. That's normal human behavior. That's why we would work with a coach. So to not think, "Oh gosh. Something's wrong with a person that lost their motivation." No, that's actually why we would get coaching is that our motivation is sagging, or flagging, or waning.

Brian: Hey guys, thanks for hanging out with me this afternoon and talking about this great subject. We love to talk about coaching. Let me turn to the listener and say thank you so much for joining us. You can find out more about us by going to coachapproachministries.org, and we have a download. Our free eBook, *The Beginners Guide to Christian Coaching: How to Have Powerful Conversations that Really Make a Difference*. We'd love to give you that gift today. We'll see you next week.