



## Coach Approach Ministries Podcast

### Episode 62: When the Coach IS the Leader

Published: August 24, 2017

#### [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. Our podcast today is sponsored by our certificate in Christian Leadership Coaching. This is a nine month, ICF-approved coach training program that will prepare you to coach those around you to set goals, take action, and reach new levels of success. We have a cohort forming in October, so if you're interested, go to our website at [www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow](http://www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow). I'm Brian Miller, strategic director for Coach Approach Ministries, CAM for short, and I'm joined here today by Reverend Dr. Joel Oliver. How you doing today, Joel?

**Joel Oliver:** I'm just doing terrific, Brian. Glad to be with you.

**Brian:** Joel is the founding and senior pastor of Trinity Assembly of God church in St. Louis, MO. He's the president of Insight Coaching, and he's also the executive director and dean of City Bible Institute. Joel, when do you sleep?

**Joel:** You know what, my wife gets up a lot earlier than I do, so not much. I do find some time to step back.

**Brian:** Well, I was excited and interested to interview Joel. He was just so gracious to come on the podcast because Joel leads, and he also coaches. Sometimes he just leads, and sometimes he just coaches, but many times, he leads and coaches at the same time, and I think they're just so many listeners interested in how do you lead and coach at the same time. So, Joel, what's the main focus of where you find yourself leading and coaching at the same time?

**Joel:** Well, certainly as the senior pastor, there's definitely a dimension of leading. You can't abdicate that responsibility. That's sort of a mandate to be able to have a healthy church, but the way you lead becomes the issue. I kind of started our ministry life with the guru mentality of leading where I was going to tell everybody what to do. It was my responsibility to have every idea. My identity became tied

up in doing that, and that can have good results, but it can also wear you out, and it can also limit building your church. So, you must lead, but how you lead becomes the issue, and certainly, if I look at Jesus, he certainly led his disciples, but he also coached his disciples. He was a tremendous coach. So, you see both of those, and when you have that in your mind, there are some questions that I think become relevant, and I've had to ask those. The first and primary one is, do I need to have everyone coming to me for permission, or did I really desire people to come to me for perspective?

It became clear to me that if I had the right mindset, I could draw out of people through coaching and empower them instead of empowering myself. If all I'm trying to do is give permission, that empowers me. A good team would be one that felt empowered, so if I could draw out of them rather than just pour into them, then they have self-discovery, the buy-in is so much greater. It's less efficient. I can tell people what to do pretty quickly. The buy-in is not as good, and the results aren't as good. We've been on three different levels of our leadership, using more of a coach approach to it. The buy-in is greater, it takes a little bit longer, but the results are measurably better. So, there's a time to lead. Part of that is casting some vision.

There is certainly time to lead when things may be getting off the rail and maybe getting away from our values, but you can handle a lot of that through coaching too. So, you don't have to just say demonstratively, "No. Stop. Do it this way." There's a better way to do it. I think we're, probably, in our leadership team, I would say 80% plus coaching, and 20% leading, and that's still a relevant thing to do. A lot more coaching than anything else, and as we continue to go, we've been doing team coaching for over three years, three and a half years, so we're fairly seasoned at it by now. I think 80/20, around there, is the ratio that we shoot for.

**Brian:** So, your context is staff at your church and also some leadership teams, not necessarily leadership teams, other teams, within the church?

**Joel:** Yeah. We actually have three levels. We have an executive board. Where we used to have executive board meetings, now we have executive coaching sessions, so on an executive level. Of course, that's dealing with more legal things and things of financial issue. Sometimes it has to be a little more directive, the agenda has to be a lot more tightened down. I may be more engaged in developing the agenda, or the **[inaudible 00:06:05]**. The executive board is outside of St. Louis. So, I would say that's a little bit like 50/50 of leadership, leading, and 50% coaching. Then we have what we call the joint committee, and that's our elders and our pastors that sit on that, the assistant pastors and up, and that's more frequent in a larger group, and I would say that's probably 70/30. You know, 70 of coaching, 30 of leadership. Then the third context would be our immediate staff. We might have other people in the room, other than the pastors but not have all of the elders. They would be the music and children pastors. That's about 80/20, but we meet weekly for that, and it's more highly developed.

**Brian:** Intuitively, it almost seems like it should be upside down, and I'm curious to why, I know you've got good reason, I would think that at the highest level would be more conversation, 80% coaching, and at the lowest level would be more leading and direction. How is that playing out? Why is that reversed?

**Joel:** It's playing out well, again, because our executive board is more external, and there's a whole lot

more to explain and to answer. I'm answering a lot of questions. The agenda trickles its way up from the staff to our joint committee to the executive committee. Everything filters its way up to there, so by the time it gets up there, it's been recommended to the executive committee, so they have a lot of questions more than anything else, and there's a lot more time spent in trying to catch them back up to speed because we only meet two to three times a year with that group. The other group, we're meeting on a weekly basis, the first group, and I think that familiarity allows us to keep a rolling agenda going that we don't have to retrace all of that at every session.

**Brian:** Interesting. So, you said you've been doing this for about three and a half years. Think back to when you transitioned. I don't want you to think about today, how the environment is. What did you have to put in place when you decided to start coaching 80% of that third level, to set up expectations so they'd lean in, not feel caught... So sometimes a leader coaches, then they give their input, and then the coach turns more into a leader and says, "Nah. Let's do something else." What did you have to put into place to get people to lean in?

**Joel:** We tried to be very strategic about that, and the first part of the answer would be this, and then I'll give a second part of the answer, primarily looking at the staff team, the team that actually boots on the ground doing stuff all the time, the first thing we did, through our bible school, we offered coaching. It wasn't credential worthy, but they were part of that. Our students at City Bible Institute go through that, and I think everyone on our staff has been involved in some actual coach training. That was step number one. They needed to kind of hear a new language, and in that, they were able to coach each other in triads. The second thing is, there isn't anyone on my staff I haven't coached on a personal level. They've been involved in the actual kind of process of coaching. I did all that before we flipped the switch. We didn't just all of a sudden do that. So, there was some pre-work, and that actually was about a year's worth of work to get to the place where we said now this is no longer going to be a staff meeting, a team meeting. This is going to be a leadership coaching session.

So, they had the vocabulary, they had some concepts, they had some experience doing that. Then, the first things we did, Brian, and I think the most important thing is that we established a coaching agreement with all three of those teams, certainly a lot more defined with the staff team because they're so much more involved, but a coaching agreement that really brought us into agreement of what we were trying to do. Just like I would do with any client. The intake wasn't the same because we knew each other, but the coaching agreement was that, and we came up with some very, I think, clear guidelines of that. Things like everyone on this team is valuable, every input is worthy to be considered or heard, and they did decide that. We weren't going to put people down, or laugh at them, or mock them, or give looks of derision, or anything like that. It would be a safe place to make a comment. That proved to be one of our harder areas to work through in the beginning, to have enough self-regulation, including myself because I'd been more of a guru leader, and I want to go, "Ah! No. That's ridiculous." So, the first was a coaching agreement.

Part of that agreement was there was no gossip. There was no taking it out. It was confidential. The meetings were confidential. The same way, even though I'm the senior leader of the church, I had to change some things in our policy because I had the privilege of being able hire and fire people, and I

removed myself from that. I didn't want to learn something in the coaching and then turn around and have it be perceived as taking it against the person. I restructured some of that, so that it had to go through our eldership and not through me. So, I was just a voice and not the voice in that. That blew some real trust into the process.

**Brian:** Let me go back to establishing a coaching agreement just before you go on. How did you decide what went into the coaching agreement?

**Joel:** Well, I had taken a course a long while back on team coaching, so that kind of helped me have some initial understanding of what I wanted to do, and then I really just thought it through like I would do for a client. I really didn't change it much. I saw the team as the client and built into that was some logistics and things of that nature, and what they would be expecting from me, and what I would be expecting from them. We didn't have any fees or anything like that as part of it because that wasn't relevant, but the truth of the matter is, I thought it through like I was entering into a coaching agreement with you. What would we look for? I made sure they were understanding what we were doing, when we were going to meet, what they were going to bring to the meeting, confidentiality, things of that nature. I just followed, intuitively, along with that, there's a lot of discussion about that that wasn't in the actual agreement, but the foundation was those things. Honesty, trusting, the ability to have a safe place, the security of knowing I'm disconnected as a senior leader, so there would be no reprisal, being sensitive to each other.

**Brian:** Those are great. So, then you restructured hiring, firing, and then I interrupted you, so do you remember where you were going?

**Joel:** No. That was a very good thing. I don't think anyone was terribly afraid of getting fired.

**Brian:** No, that's good.

**Joel:** In the past, that only would have stood for our associate pastors, our senior pastors. We just broadened that out to all of them in that committee.

**Brian:** You told me this earlier, you haven't announced this. I hope it's okay to announce. You are in the process of thinking about transitioning out and bringing in a new leader. How will you transition this coaching environment to a new leader?

**Joel:** Thank you for asking that question. That's a good one. That's not quite as simple as I made it sound. Actually, it's a year and a half to bring in, maybe a year, year and a half, raising up the next senior pastor's already been, not approved, but that person is in that transitional process. I'll be there for a long time, but I'll transition out of the senior pastor. I won't be involved in daily operation. I'll be the executive pastor and the executive coach with the responsibility of coaching everyone in our leadership to success. Again, my goal is to, at that point, not have anyone coming to me for permission but everybody coming to me to help create perspective. That will be, hopefully, a very pure kind of thing unless we're so off the rails that it's illegal, immoral, unscriptural values, or there is such an egregious personnel problem that I'm asked by the senior pastor to be part of that.

**Brian:** I hear your role, but I haven't heard yet, or maybe I'm missing it, how are you going to ensure that the new senior leader doesn't become a guru leader?

**Joel:** Well, I can't assure that as well as any of us can assure that down the road. As long as I'm there, I'll be the executive pastor and the executive coach at about 20 hours per week. Now, what I see is me transitioning out completely, at some time, of that role because we're on track to plant, hopefully, within three to four years, as many as nine churches, and part of my role will be that executive role of pastor coach, and I won't be intimately involved in the operation of any one of them on a primary level. The plan would be, and is, they've all had some coaching. Every church plant that we do, they'll have coaching. Our bible school is starting back up offering coaching, but it'll be accredited coaching. Everybody will go through that. If I'm gone, I can't assure you they won't laugh behind my back, but no one can once they're totally gone.

**Brian:** For sure. What are some of the obstacles that you've run into with a coaching culture?

**Joel:** That's a good question. The one biggest obstacle, Brian, is that it actually takes longer to do team coaching, the way that we do it at least. It takes longer, and I was born in a hurry, and I've been in a hurry. I think I'm much better at this three and a half years later of saying this is going to take a little bit of time. We do it a little differently than maybe other people. If we are doing team coaching at another church, we'd use the same model. We create an agenda, and that agenda's a rolling agenda, and all of the team members have to contribute to that agenda. Some of the agenda items on there aren't my agendas, just as part of the team, and then when we have the meeting, we tend to that agenda. It's absolutely no way we can attend to everybody's agenda item in one meeting. So, what happens is we'll make a degree of progress in a particular area. If you were on the team, I would say, "Brian, what's your agenda.

Do you have any new agenda items, or which agenda item would you like to focus on today?" We wouldn't take our whole time just on your agenda unless it was critical, and yet, we believe that everybody on that team can speak into your agenda item and has something valuable that can be learned, not always, but most likely, everything's interrelated enough that you can't do the children's thing without the worship thing being somewhat connected to it. So, if you look at that model, it's kind of a loop model. We have to keep looping back. It's wonderful when we're able to cross something off of our agenda completely, and we do, and we get to the end of that. We're just getting ready to do a week-long tent crusade outside. It's a big event. It will take a lot of team coaching to do that, but it will also take a lot, on my part, of individual coaching because I'll have to get with individual parts of that because some of it isn't relevant to the whole group, it's more down in the grass kind of issues.

Down the road, I won't be doing the down in the grass issues. I'll be coaching your pastor, and he'll be spending that amount of additional time. That's the biggest thing. It takes longer. The second thing is when you ask people to give their opinion, or what they might have to add, there are some things that are said that are not very smart. I can't say they're not really smart, but they're really bringing us off of the track into the weeds. That's been the single biggest problem, ongoing, that if I'm talking to the children's ministry, somebody else will pipe in with a comment or a question that's we're not there yet.

We can't answer that question. We haven't set up the bigger construct. We just don't have the concept firm enough, so to be moving forward is often, not a challenge, but to be able to say, "That's a great question, but we're not there yet." We're much better at that now than we were three and a half years ago. Then they just become patient. They have an idea. They want to jump into it, and we just can't answer the question. It's not formed enough. That's the single biggest problem. I guess the third obstacle or problem is simply trying to keep that form for that team. I have to know when it should be there, when it shouldn't be there, when it should be between me and an individual, or me and two individuals, or when the whole group should be involved, and I have to discern that and then disconnect that if it's part of the team coaching until it's ready for that or vice versa.

**Brian:** What I hear you saying is a lot of coaching the process. So, not just the content but saying, "You're getting to far ahead of us. You're getting too far afield. Let's remember what we're talking about and where we're at in the process."

**Joel:** And a good example would be that our financial CFO is in the room, so she wants to jump right into the dollars and cents, but we don't even have the concept yet. We're really not there yet. We can't really get to that. It's a waste of time until we're a little further down the road.

**Brian:** I love that. I'm thinking about if anybody knows the hourglass model, which we love to teach at coach approach, the top half is discovery, so we're not going to ask questions like how much does it cost in the first half, but we will ask that, and that's the trust part, we will ask that before we get to the end.

**Joel:** Absolutely, and keeping that flowing and not making it feel like you've shut the person down is so critically important in team coaching that you don't shut people down. You shut them down inappropriately, they're not going to speak up the next... They'll not be as honest or forthcoming. They just won't want to take the risk of looking foolish, and to honor them, in a way, but to keep them on track, sometimes you just have to keep on team coaching with them so they intuitively understand that as opposed to feeling pushed back.

**Brian:** Yeah. I love the way you... You made me think, that's a great question. It's not being asked at the right point, and I need you to ask that question again before we're done. I need you to ask that again. Just that encouragement to stay in the process. Really good stuff, Joel. Our time has just went way too quickly here. If people want to get ahold of you, because I know you do some coaching, some team coaching, some leadership coaching, how can people get ahold of you?

**Joel:** Probably the easiest way is [insightcoachingstl.com](http://insightcoachingstl.com). That would be the easiest way because then they could look at my website and see... That might help form their approach to the calling. You know, really anything from executive coaching to team coaching. I do a whole lot of marriage coaching with a model I created, a whole lot of pre-marriage coaching, conflict coaching. Coaching changes everything, man, and that's what we've done. We've changed the culture in our church. I don't know if we have any time left at all, but I mentioned our children's pastors. I coached them, gave them some coach training. We're rebranding the children's ministry. Now I'm working with them. They're working with the whole leadership team, and they're coaching each other, and they're coaching the children.

**Brian:** I love it. Hey Joel, thanks so much for joining me today. We want to thank our listeners for joining us too. If you don't want to miss any of our podcasts, I invite you to subscribe to our podcast at iTunes or at Google Play. This podcast was sponsored by our certificate in Christian Leadership Coaching. This is a nine month, ICF-approved coach training program that will prepare you to coach those around you to set goals, take action, and reach new levels of success. We have a cohort forming in October, so if you're interested, go to our website at [www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow](http://www.coachapproachministries.org/coachnow). We'll see you next week.

**[Outro Music]**