



Coach Approach Ministries Podcast

Episode 84: Five Keys to Cross Cultural Coaching

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[Intro Music]

Brian: This is Brian Miller, Strategic Director for Coach Approach Ministries, CAM for short, and I’m joined here today by Michael Marx. He is a coach. He has a website blazingnewtrailscoaching.com where he draws people into the adventure of life. That’s an exciting topic. This is his second time on the podcast. Welcome Michael.

Michael Marx: Thank you Brian, pleasure to be here. Looking forward to it.

Brian: You know, something came up as I was looking at your bio that just really struck me as interesting. It is that I don’t think we talk enough about cross-cultural coaching, and I know that you spent, I don’t even know but a significant, a significant time living overseas.

Michael: Indeed, Brian, I spent 23 years of my adult life in Germany, 6 in Berlin and 17 in Hanover.

Brian: So, Berlin, I think many of us would think that’s a pretty large city. Hanover, similar-sized city?

Michael: Considerably smaller. It’s only 150; 200,000; within the region around it. Pretty small.

Brian: Gotcha, okay. So, cross-cultural. I also noticed, and I don’t mean to step on any toes here, as we start talking about cross-cultural, you can easily find yourself start thinking, “Is this offensive,” but I also noticed that you moved from Germany to Louisiana, which many might consider a cross-cultural experience as well.

Michael: Yeah, and the place I’m most comfortable in, Colorado, and getting here and then behaving like a German in Colorado and offending people so there you go again.

Brian: No doubt, no doubt. I live very much in the Midwest and I find, definitely if I drive five, six hours west, the culture changes. Five, six hours east, the culture changes. I'm looking forward to talking to you about what some keys are to cross-cultural coaching, and maybe if we're successful here, we can come up with four or five keys to cross-cultural coaching. Michael, what would you say is number one?

Michael: Well, the first thing that comes to mind, Brian, is what a good friend of mine, Brian Petit, who was a missionary in Alaska, always says, is that, "All coaching is cross-cultural coaching," because even when you say five hours, it's five minutes. Somebody not very far away has a lot of different backgrounds; they have a lot of different experiences. They've been raised by a different set of parents, and they have a different way of looking at things. Indeed, all coaching has to be culturally sensitive because you never know what type of thing someone could be offended by, and it's really a matter of getting to know the person and where they're coming from. I like to say to my students of coaching, "Become a student of your client." Find out about them. That doesn't necessarily mean you use the coaching session to grill them with twenty questions, but find out about them, and what they're into, and what that means, and how that could shake down in the coaching session.

Brian: Yeah, we are in definitely an offense-sensitive culture in America today, and even as you say that... I was in a coaching conversation, I was just trying to break the ice the other day, and my client lives in a state where there was a recent, pretty hot election, and I thought about bringing that up, and I thought, "No." I brought up a holiday instead, and interestingly she immediately brought up the election. You're right, it's so easy to start your coaching off with offense. You don't want to do that.

Michael: Right. It's all about having this level of respect where people feel that you're not doing something out of your own interest, but you have their best interest at heart. When that really comes through, love covers a multitude of sins.

Brian: I love that, and I'm glad you said that. You're right, and as you say that, I think five, six hours I can easily see the cross-cultural six hours each direction, but you're right, five minutes I can see. In my situation, within thirty minutes we have Amish. We have some very rural counties. We have a Division I University where you're going to have professors. You're right. All over the place. A blue-collar section, the city I live in is a more blue-collar, which is different from an agricultural background. So much, and being aware, being a student of the client, and bringing that sense of respect for the client's views. Some people aren't so good at that.

Michael: Yeah, and I think it takes what we train coaches to be is curious. It's not curious for yourself, it's curious for the client, so as we get the client to dig down into their value systems more, we talk about life coaching, and I always say it's a coin where the face of the coin says life coaching but the other side of the coin is called values exploration. That's all about cultural sensitivity and getting them to understand what that means in their life and how it plays out because they might not be fully aware of it either.

Brian: They're not in fact, right? They're not fully aware of it. We don't know all the values that are lay a foundation for us until we come across something different.

Michael: Well if they were fully aware of it, they wouldn't need a coach.

Brian: Thank goodness they're not aware of it. That's good for us for sure. So, one issue is that all

coaching is cross cultural whether we're talking getting to Berlin or Hanover or Louisiana. It's maybe more obvious to us that there are differences, so let's take a look at some of the differences. What would you say is the second key to cross-cultural coaching?

Michael: Yeah, Brian, the second one I would identify is language. Where I lived in Germany, most of my clients preferred to get their coaching in English, some of them in German, but either way, one of us was working in a second language. When we talk about things and someone says a word like "motivation." What does motivation mean to you? What does that word mean to you? In their original language they have the same word but it has different connotations, and when you're parsing out the language aspect, what words are people choosing here, not assuming any one definition, never assuming that you understand the word the same way you do because it becomes a key word to the coaching conversation.

So, let's drill down on that. Let's figure out what that means. My experience because of the dual-language situation was that clients were often more comfortable exploring themselves in a second language than they were in their original language because every word had to be contextualized, even if you're working in a native speaker environment. In other words, two U.S. Americans working together in English, then you have pretty much the same language base of course, you're still needing to make sure that every key definition is what the client means. When they say "motivation," what does that mean to you? Just taking a minute to stop and get the client to unpack what that actually means to them.

Brian: That's so helpful in that because I could imagine... Well, first of all, when you first said "language," my first thought is even language such as jargon, slang, even metaphors don't always hold up cross-culturally, so they're on that kind of communication level. The reminder that I may not fully understand what a German means by their English translation of the word "motivation," but the truth is, I may not know what my neighbor means. The word "motivation."

Michael: Well you mentioned metaphors, Brian, so I have to ask you, "What is a meadow for?"

Brian: You tell me.

Michael: To graze cows in. Sorry, I just, no. Never pass up a chance for a joke, but -

Brian: No, no, no, we love jokes on the podcast. At least, I say we, I do.

Michael: And idioms, that's two birds. Two birds are worth, in the hand, better than one in the bush. Does that translate? When you're coaching and you start using idiomatic and metaphors and other expressions, slang, it doesn't always work. What I found in my twenty-three years in Europe, was my language got really reduced to some basic English. I would not use the slang that I loved. I was a teenager in North Carolina, and they just have beautiful idiomatic expression in North Carolina. I lost all of that, and I'm trying to gain it back. It's actually kind of hard, but in the meantime, I've also discovered even in the United States one idiomatic expression doesn't really fit. Texans will use a different set than the ones in the Carolinas, so there you go again.

Brian: We have to be careful with our language, and even beyond that, I was thinking of sarcasm or irony. That that is so easily lost cross culturally.

Michael: Right, and even technical things like contractions, "can't," "couldn't." Those are actually simple

here, but they're harder ones to hear if you're talking on the phone. We'll talk about this in a moment, like "I'll" or "I'd," I'd, "I," apostrophe, "D," is "I should," "I would," which one is it? To the person that is coming from another language base, that's really hard stuff, so you speak slower, you speak in full sentences that don't repeat themselves, and I think that's another thing that beginning coaches do very often. I know I certainly didn't. I'd say something that didn't sound right, so I would say it again, that didn't sound right, so I would say it again until I got it right. Well, now the listeners got three sentences to think about. We think it's the third one, the last one, that was the one I really wanted to say, but that's not what the listener is hearing. They're hearing three things they have to answer.

Brian: Even to this point, even on this podcast right now, I'm trying to form sentences as I think, I didn't write it down and then I'm going to say the sentence, and so sometimes if I were to write the sentence down, it wouldn't make grammatical sense as these are transcribed. I sometimes feel awful for the transcriptionist because you know, like right now. Did they put all that little extra in there? What do they do? They have to figure that out, and that comes across when we're coaching not only cross culturally, but it's all cross cultural.

Michael: Indeed, and the thing that I like to tell my students is say one sentence and bite tongue. Stop. Even if it's bad, don't go on. What I've found, though, is that, especially with working with people learning how to coach, is that if they'll do that, the Holy Spirit shows up and makes it powerful. When you start second guessing the Holy Spirit and trying to change your verbiage to make it sound that you're more intelligent or that you're more savvy with nice, big words, it messes it up. Don't worry about the grammar. Some of the most powerful coaching questions I've seen have just been terrible.

Brian: They misunderstood me. They misunderstood my question, and it gave them the most awareness. Don't be afraid of that. That's sad but true. Number one was all coaching is cross cultural, number two was talking about language, and what's number three?

Michael: I'd label number three as traditions. In other words, what does the client bring with them in terms of practices that they honor and respect? I know in my life, if I do something three times, then it becomes tradition. If we have venison for Christmas three years in a row, then it's already a tradition. Not two, not one, but it doesn't take very much for it to become a tradition. It's not only those things that go back hundreds of years but it can be much more recent too because people return to homeostasis. They do what they like. They do what they know. They do what they're comfortable with, and if you've done it three times, and you like it, and you're comfortable with it, you'll keep doing that.

That's one thing here, the immediate traditions, and then the other ones that belong to the deeper, cultural things. I worked in Germany, like we said, and they would shake hands all the time. You shake hands when you arrive, and you shake hands when you leave. I've had Americans say, "Oh, you've worked with Germans. They shake hands a lot, don't they?" Well, yeah they do. Because we don't tend to shake hands when we leave, and not even always when we arrive, but if you miss one of those two in Germany, it's culturally offensive. They value that. When I would go to church in Germany, I would always show up first because that means everybody has to come shake my hand. If I showed up later, I'd have to shake everybody else's hand, I would miss somebody, and they would be offended. It was a lot easier for me to be there first.

Brian: Then leave last, that's what my daughter did for sure. Same experience in South America, except

it's a hug and a kiss, and you have to kiss everyone when you come into a room. Our daughter is not a touchy person. At least she wasn't before she went to South America for a year, so you have to put your feelings aside and meet their tradition as the coach for sure.

Michael: Right, and you know there are other things that have historical, medieval connotations that how can you know? I mean Christmas time here, Germans make wonderful knives, and I would tell my German friends, "Yeah, I bought a set of knives and sent it to my brother for Christmas," and they're like "You gave your brother a knife for Christmas!?" "Yeah, isn't that great?" "No, that's terrible, you never give somebody a gift that might injure them. That's just not done!" "Ok..." You know, he's very happy with his set of knives by the way.

Brian: So, the tradition. What is something, I don't if you've gotten in trouble with it or you've found it to be an obstacle, what's an example of a tradition or good manners that are easy to overlook?

Michael: Well the one I got into a lot of trouble with was, especially in the summertime, if somebody bought a round of drinks, the drinks would be served, and I would get my drink and start drinking it. Well, if somebody bought the drink for me, it's highly offensive to start drinking yours before he starts drinking his.

Brian: Oh, okay.

Michael: That just took me years to get my head around. I was thirsty. I wanted a drink, you know?

Brian: I don't know how often I've had to sit in front of food while it gets cold because we haven't prayed yet, or I don't know if we're going to pray, depending on the situation. You don't know. It's certainly better to know what the tradition is. How you refer to people. I know there are countries where married women are referred to as Mrs. "Husband's name," and that might be offensive to me. I don't want them to do that. I want them to be their own respectful person, but I really better be aware of what offends them more than what offends me.

Michael: Yeah, if you write a letter in the States, you say "Dear Frank and Sally," but that saying would be, in German, "Dear Sally and Frank." If you don't put the woman before the man, that's very offensive.

Brian: Really? I did not know that. Oh my goodness. If you're sending an email, oh goodness, okay. So, you have to be a student. Don't be afraid to ask questions, I assume, and learn. Be a learner. Put yourself in that role. Put yourself in that mode.

Michael: Be vulnerable. Laugh about it. Tell your cultural partner some of the things that you've experienced with your culture, and tell them how that affected you. Then they get the feeling, "Oh, Brian is open to me actually telling him some other things that he's done which is culturally sensitive."

Brian: Yes, please!

Michael: They'll start telling you, "Oh, Brian, in that last call you said x and y, and that really didn't work well with me, but I know you love me, and I know you respect me, so I just wanted you to know that that was one of the things that doesn't go well with me if you say it that way."

Brian: That's good. That's good. We're up to number four. What do you have for number four? Keys to cross cultural coaching.

Michael: I think also how and where and when you meet with people. Physically, are you in the same room? Telephone, nowadays video conferencing. Interesting thing with video conferencing. I find that my American, U.S. citizen clients, like telephone better for coaching, one-to-one coaching, than video calls, and my non-American prefer the video calls. Even if they live in the United States. Why is that? Not really sure, but there's that preference as well. When you're talking on the phone of course, there's a certain amount of song and dance that has to go on at the beginning. As much as I dislike talking about the weather because I think it's silly, the first thing we're going to talk about is the weather. Almost every Western culture.

Brian: Yeah, we're going to talk about the weather.

Michael: How are things in London? Well, I didn't ask about the weather, but that's what they're going to respond with, nine times out of ten. Often what I do is I'll just google the client's city. It'll pop up. You hit that in one form or the other, and you see what the weather is like there. "Oh, I see you've had a lot of rain in the last couple of days." By being a little bit prepared for local things, and, like you talked about, knowing that your client just had an election there, something local. It kind of ingratiates the place where they live. They feel respected that you're wanting to find out a little bit about where they are.

Those are things that come into play very easily when you're working, like I do, in front of a computer talking to people. Then there's the question of face-to-face. We mentioned shake hands. There's the question of when someone offers you a drink, of course you take it. There's a list of things in every culture that you do in the meet and greet environment, and I would encourage you to investigate those. There's some really good books out there. One is *Kiss, Bow, and Shake Hands*. Let me see if I can give you the author of it... Terri Morrison and Wayne Conaway. They go through that through practically all the different cultures. There's some other things like that out there. The internet is of course full of resources on how you can not make cultural mistakes, but I've read everything that I could get my hands on in the business environment between Americans and Germans. Just send it to me because that's where I move and have my being. Earn my money. It's very important that I become a student of that interaction.

Brian: Have you seen any differences because sometimes we talk about the comfort level between male/female coach/client? I think in America we're certainly trying to move away from any uncomfot there, but even cross culturally, and in modality, the sense of if it's on the phone does that make it more acceptable or even less acceptable in some way?

Michael: That's an interesting question. More acceptable or less acceptable. Certainly, if you're in the same room and male is working with female, there's more boundaries to be sensitive to. I think last time we talked, I gave you the example of a pastor that reached across the table to put his hand on the client's shoulder to pray for her, and she sent his name to the ICF Independent Review Board. She was highly offended by that. That type of thing is obviously easier on the phone, but you can still miss a lot of things on the phone or in video conferencing because of the lack of information. You're not smelling, and you're not seeing what's going on around. You can't see their fingers fidgeting and things like that.

Brian: I think you could see barriers more obviously in person in some ways when it comes to that discomfort. Whereas on the phone, you might not see that discomfort. You might hear it, you might not,

but that just occurred to me as I was talking to you about that. Let's get to number five, and that would be what?

Michael: Trust. It comes back to where we started, that love covers a multitude of sins, and I posit that the competency trust is very non-examined. We all know that it's important, and it's easy to see in a coaching relationship when the trust is not there. It's harder to peg when it is there. What happens in trust is that the more trust you build, the more the other person trusts you, and actually your oxytocin and serotonin levels increase so theirs increase, which increases yours, which increases theirs, which increases yours, and it seesaws up.

If you have a high level of trust, you can practically get away with anything, but if you have a low level of trust, the ability to offend someone is much greater. You're always trying to work on that, and never assume that anything you're doing is going to be accepted. That's kind of where my German-bulldozer personality hasn't gone very well as I've returned back to the United States because I just put it on the table and get the job done. Whoops, offended someone again because I didn't have the right prelude of respect to build the trust to get away with slapping things on the table and saying, "Let's get it done."

Brian: I know that feeling, me too, and I may even overdo it now. I spend 5 to 10 minutes just what I call chit chat because that's not what I'm mentally thinking. I'm thinking, "Let's go," but you've got to spend a little time up front. Are there any cultures you know of, and I know that you have a limited amount of cultural experience here, but you have a lot in some areas, where light humor would not create trust?

Michael: Humor's tough because it is culturally defined. What's funny in one place is not funny in another, and I can tell you because I've worked with a lot of people in Berlin. I lived there for six years. The Berlin sense of humor does not go over well in most places. It's very sarcastic. I think maybe Manhattan may be able to handle the Berlin type of humor but not many other places in the world.

Brian: Maybe I should really focus my coaching in Berlin.

Michael: Yeah, it's really sarcastic, it's kind of dark, and you don't even know it's coming at you because it's not underlined with a smile or those typical, I'm-making-a-joke type of gestures.

Brian: I love these five keys. All coaching is cross cultural, good reminder, and even as we go into the next four, the reminder that these aren't just keys for cross cultural coaching but keys for coaching, language issues, traditions, good manners, modalities, how you meet, and trust. Michael, thanks so much for spending some time with us on the podcast today.

Michael: Yeah, I just wanted to give one closing recommendation for a recent book published by Tina Stoltzfus Horst called *Dancing Between Cultures*, and the subtitle is, "Culturally Intelligent Coaching for Missions and Ministry." *Dancing Between Cultures*, by Tina Horst. Wonderful book, probably the most definitive books on the topic that I've ever read.

Brian: Fantastic, what a great piece. If you want to know more about Michael, you can go to his website blazingnewtrailsc coaching.com, and he has an email address at michael@blazingnewtrailsc coaching.com which you can reach out to him. Thanks for joining us today. Don't miss any of our podcasts. Subscribe to us at iTunes, Overcast, Stitcher, or Google Play by searching for Coach Approach Ministries Podcast. We'll see you next week.

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