



Coach Approach Ministries Podcast

Episode 86: Learn Group Coaching from Pioneer Jane Creswell

Published: February 8, 2018

Brian Miller: Are you a certified coach that needs some mentor coaching to improve your skills, grow your business, or renew your credential? Coach Approach Ministries loves to help you grow. To sign up for 10 hours of group mentor coaching that improves your skills and fulfills your credential requirements, go to coachapproachministries.org/coachmentor, or to hire a mentor coach who will help you grow your coaching practice, go to coachapproachministries.org/coachmentor. This is the decision that propelled me into full-time coaching.

[Intro Music]

Brian: This is Brian Miller, strategic director for Coach Approach Ministries, CAM for short, and I'm joined here today by one of the original founders of Coach Approach Ministries, Jane Creswell. Jane, welcome to the podcast.

Jane Creswell: Hi there. I'm excited to be here.

Brian: Hey, this is your second or third podcast, depending on how we... The first one became a two-parter. It was that much good information, and I so enjoyed our last podcast. It really told the origin story of your going into coaching. You were a pioneer in coaching at the time, for sure. It talked about being a missionary. I'll put some links to those podcasts on the site so that people can check that out, but today, I want to talk to you about group coaching which is completely different than team coaching, and I just don't think we talk about group coaching enough. I think there's a real place for it. I think people could get a lot of use out of that, and I think they could learn a lot just from me talking to you for 20, 30 minutes.

Jane: Okay. Great. I love group coaching. It's one of my favorite things to do.

Brian: What's an experience you've had with group coaching? Where have you used it?

Jane: Well, it kind of became this middle ground, Brian, between individual coaching... I found when I was coaching at IBM that a lot of people, if they had the same job, in particular, if they're all in the same department, if they're all in marketing, or sales, or whatever, that I would coach them individually, and then I would notice the problems are all similar. Even the actions that they identified for themselves are all similar. It seems to me that maybe we could make more progress if I got them all in a room at the

same time. Then, that begged the question about whether to coach them as a team or as individuals who just happen to have similar challenges and similar actions. So, that's when I started thinking, "I think there's a distinction between team coaching and group coaching and started playing with that." Experimented, learned by mistakes.

Brian: How did you know the difference between whether it was a team or a group. You said everybody's in marketing made me initially think it's a team, but you described too they had similar issues. How do you know if it's a team or a group?

Jane: That was a conundrum for a while because I think I always thought of people as teams, and then I noticed actually, there are some people, and this is kind of the definition that I eventually landed on, I didn't come knowing it, but eventually by watching behaviors that if people require a certain number of people with different roles and responsibilities, and they actually can't get the job done by themselves. They are dependent on each other. If one person is not there, the job doesn't get done or doesn't get completely done. That would be a team. You coach a team very differently to get them all to row in the same direction and support each other's work. Then I discovered there was really a valid middle-play. There's team coaching. There's individual coaching. Those were becoming more and more clear, but there was a valid thing in the middle that was there are people who have similar roles and responsibilities.

They have some kind of affinity with each other, enough so that if they're all in the same room at the same time, and there's coaching going on, they can participate as an individual in their own mind. They might be voicing their ahas or answering the questions the coach is asking. They might be saying them out loud, but they still can get a lot of benefit, and you can coach a lot more people at once that way. Then they learn from each other in that process, but they're individual performers, so unlike in the teams. In the team setting, they have to have other. If somebody doesn't do their actions, they don't move forward. They don't get it all accomplished, but in a group setting, they're really still individual performers, and if somebody doesn't take action as a result of group coaching, it doesn't actually have any impact on any of the other people in the room.

Brian: There you go.

Jane: That is a very still not precise or scientific definition, but it's kind of the one that I landed on. If you can take action independent, and you not taking action doesn't affect anyone else, then that qualifies as group coaching.

Brian: That's a key distinction. I'm doing a lot with team coaching right now, and as I talk to... I do a lot of work with pastors, and the pastors who have staff seem to be unsure whether their staff is a team or a group. I find myself, and maybe they do too, thinking, "They ought to be a team," but they're not always a team. So, maybe this idea of a group is okay. Do you have any sense of that, whether it should be a group, or it should be a team, or just see what it is?

Jane: Well, I don't know. I usually ask them questions and coach them through whether they're a group or a team, and a lot of times the answers are, "It depends on what we're doing." So, let's say, I'll give a very simple example, advent. A lot of church staff are, right now, they've got to coordinate what they're doing for advent, what they're doing in small groups, or worship services, or ministries outside of the church, but they're trying to get it all coordinated in such a way that they don't step on each other's

toes, and it's one well-planned, well-organized thing for the season of advent across the church. In that regard, they're going to need to be a team, and if somebody doesn't hold up their end of the actions, they don't communicate well about what's going on, or they promise they would do something, and it doesn't happen, so now the whole church and all the ministries are impacted. I would coach that as a team. There are a lot of times that the worship team is doing one thing, and women's ministry is doing something else, kids ministry's doing something else, youth ministry doing something else, and they really aren't dependent on each other to get those ministries done. It's not a coordinated effort, like maybe advent or something, and in that regard, I could actually coach those staff members as a group instead. It's very situational, and I try not to assume or presume. You just ask and find out how do you need to coach today, as a group or a team?

Brian: So, you start to identify some topics that affect everybody. So, in your example, maybe it's getting volunteers. Maybe it's dealing with people that don't show up. There are different issues that tend to come up that are across the board that affect everyone, but the distinction that if one person in the group doesn't do their part, it doesn't affect everyone else. So, what's the first step? Once you've identified that it's a group, what's your first step in coaching that group?

Jane: I thought I might share with you this company that I worked with, and I did a lot of group coaching for this company, and I think I'll use them as an example. It was a technological firm, pharmaceuticals actually, and they had women in pharmaceuticals, kind of a club thing, a networking group that wanted to help these women in the pharmaceuticals industry move forward in their careers. They didn't all do the same job. I coached them as a group. First thing I did with that group of women is I talked to the leaders, and I said what are some topics that you constantly hear from these women in your company about the challenges that they're having, topics that they really like to talk about? So, they brainstormed, sent out emails to all the women who were part of this thing and came back, and they had a list of about 20 topics. There were a couple more emails. We narrowed it down to the top three. One of them that I can really remember was, a couple of them, one of them was how to do more with less because across the board, not only with their company, but in many companies right now, people are being asked to be innovative, creative, and you're not going to get any more resources, but you actually need to be more productive than you have been before. This was a hot topic.

Another topic was how to be better at virtual teaming. Some of their team would be based in Indiana. Some would be based in multiple other countries, and they would need to do a better job of being able to function as a team, but virtually. These were independent members who weren't all on the same virtual team. They just all had in common that they needed to operate better on their separate virtual teams. So, this was a popular topic. So, for the group session, before we ever even had it, we sent out an email and said, "Today's topic, if you want to come to Friday's group coaching session, the topic is going to be "How to do More with Less," so if that is something that seems like a challenge you are facing right now and would love some coaching on that, then you should show up, and we had about 40 women show up.

Brian: And you came to that topic through facilitation. You didn't just make it up, or somebody didn't say, "Here's what I want you to talk about." You brought some ownership from them by facilitating out of them a topic.

Jane: Right. Initially from the leadership, and then eventually through polling them. Are these topics that

you are interested in, and finally, we picked one, and then people showed up. We went, “Oh. Yeah. This must be a topic. It must be of interest.”

Brian: So, 40 women in a group. I’m assuming there’s a limit to the size you can coach.

Jane: You know, we keep pushing the limit. We do keep pushing limits. Forty is about the largest that I’ve done in a group setting, but my goodness, you spend an hour with 40 people versus 40 1-hour sessions, and that’s not even a fair comparison because the people learn from each other. One of the keys to group coaching being successful is there has to be a high enough level of affinity amongst the people who participate in the group coaching session for the group coaching to work. They have to have enough in common so that when one coach asks one coaching question to 40 women in the room, that all 40 women could have an answer to that question. So, if there’s not a big enough affinity, not a strong enough affinity, between the people who are participating, then I don’t know that the group coaching would be as successful. So, all of that work that we did up front, facilitating the topic and inviting people, “Don’t come unless this topic is important to you,” that type of thing, all of that was for ensuring we would have a strong level of affinity once people were in the room. By the way, I’ve done this via Zoom as well, so they don’t have to be actually in a physical room. They can be remote.

Brian: That was my next question. You read my mind.

Jane: I don’t think so. Anyway, it’s harder to do it. With the same group of women, we did one online, same company, I should say, not exactly the same exact women showed up every time. The one’s who showed up were the ones with the greatest amount of affinity with whatever the topic of the day was, but it was with that same company that we did one online. We didn’t do it online for the very first group coaching session because there’s a little bit of learning the drill to make it be successful. There’s a little bit of getting comfortable, just like there is with anybody new to being coached as an individual. It’s going to take two or three sessions before they really go, “Oh. I’m supposed to work. I’m supposed to bring my brain to this coaching conversation. Oh. You’re going to make me answer this.” There’s that and a little bit more to group coaching, so we did the teaching in the room, in person, on the first year or two that we did these sessions. It wasn’t until, I think, year three that we started introducing the virtual coaching sessions. By that time, they were trained. They knew what to expect and how to work during the coaching session to get the most out of the coaching session for themselves.

Brian: Setting up that expectation of what they should be doing is a huge piece. Building trust, establishing the process, and educating them on how that’s going to work in this setting in particular. So, where did you go from there?

Jane: There are 40 people in the room. They have a strong enough affinity. Somehow, you’ve got to get started. In this particular case, at this company, and this is the case at several places I’ve done this, people who show up don’t know each other. So, even though they all know they got the same email and that they were invited to participate in group coaching, they don’t necessarily know the person that’s sitting next to them, so there’s a little work to do there. What I came up with, to deal with that a little bit, is to talk about what are the successes that you’ve already experienced on this very topic. So, it’s the topic that you have affinity around. That’s why you’re in the room, and I’m going to make the assumption that you’ve already had some successes. So, on the case of doing more with less, I asked the group of women, “What are some successes that you have had on this topic of doing more with less? I’d

like to hear three or four of them.” People would take a minute to think about it, raise their hand, and then I would call on them. Then, I would be at the flowchart writing them down, and I would title the top of the flowchart *Successes*, or sometimes I say *Wins*. Then, I’ll write them down. Whatever it is that they say, I’ll log it, and I won’t go any longer than the flipchart paper is long. We’re not going to do this forever. What I am communicating to the whole group is, “Look how much you have in common. You have already been working on this.” We do have an assumption as a coach that our clients are very capable. They are capable of problem solving on their own behalf, and we have that assumption. Now, I have a full flipchart paper full of successes that proves it. What happens during that process is it sends a message, “Oh yes. You have done some problem solving on this topic before. Maybe not all of you, but each one of you, in your own way, has successes here,” but the other thing that’s kind of an ancillary benefit that happens is that people are taking notes.

They’ll say, “Here’s my success, but there’s 10 others on this list that I never thought to try,” so we’re only five minutes into the coaching session, and they already have some ideas for what they can do going forward because the affinity was strong enough between each other. So, I did that for five or 10 minutes, not very long. Then, it shifts into challenges, and I ask the same questions around challenges. On the same topic. Keep the topic, do more with less. What are the challenges that you have with doing more with less? Again, I limit it to one flipchart paper full. This is not going to end up being a whining. While they are listing these challenges, I am listening for resonance among the rest of the group.

So, this would be analogous in an individual coaching session where, I think most CAM people have heard of the hourglass model, where you try to narrow the topic from this really broad thing that it could be, when the sand is all in the top of the hourglass, to what is the narrowest part of the topic where the heart of the matter is. In a group coaching setting, I am listening and looking for resonance in the list of challenges. It’ll happen. It always does, but people start listing what their challenges are with the topic, and then all of a sudden, the room explodes into, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Me too. I was going to say what she said.” I’m thinking of this group of 40 women again, and once I hear that, I’ve got the topic. This is the skinniest part of the hourglass.

Brian: So, it’s not what resonates with you. It’s what you hear resonate.

Jane: Yes.

Brian: You’re observing and listening.

Jane: Resonating with the whole group. The group is voting on what the narrowest part of the hourglass is.

Brian: Now, do you have them affirm that in any way, or do you felt it, and that’s it?

Jane: Well, I started with what I feel, and then I said, “If we focus on this one challenge of the 15 that are listed on the flowchart, if we focus on this one, would that be helpful to everybody in the room?” If I’ve heard them well, they’re all going to go, “Oh yes. Absolutely.” So, now we’re at the skinniest part of the hourglass, and this is where it gets a little... It changes up a little bit. Notice, we don’t do voting. We don’t come to a consensus. That could take forever. So, I bring my listening skill as a coach into the experience. I can hear resonance. You could see resonance. That may take some time to affirm. One more time, “If we picked this as a topic, would this be helpful to us,” and most everybody in the room...

Once I've gotten that agreement, then I move into I'm now going coach. It's going to look more like an individual coaching session, and I need a human being to answer my questions out loud. You can't just kind of coach air.

Brian: And you can't coach 40 people either.

Jane: No, and you can't ask one question and get 40 answers. That's not going to work. What I ended up figuring out that I could do is, I call it, I'm looking for the person who's willing to be the voice for the rest of the people in the room. I actually named it that long before the music show came on TV. When *the Voice* came out, I was like wait a minute. That's what I use for my group coaching thing. Anyway, I'm looking for a volunteer who will be the person to verbalize answers to the coaching questions that I'm going to ask, and I'll start with the person who nominated that challenge to go onto the flowchart. I was asking for challenges, and I'm writing them on the flipchart. There's usually 10 or 15 of them, whatever will fit on the page. I heard the most resonance at number seven, let's say, so I'll stay back and affirm this is the topic that has the most resonance for everybody in the room. I'll go back to the person in the room who voiced it, who said number seven, and I'll ask them, "Will you be willing to be the voice to represent the rest of the people in the room?"

Now, the very first time you do a group coaching session with people, they're, "I don't know about this." So, I might have to talk them into it, or ask for another volunteer, or whatever, but once people get the drill, people are like, "I'd like to be the voice." They'll volunteer because they know they're going to get more individualized attention in this process. Everybody in the room's going to benefit, but the person who is the voice, gets the most benefit out of the experience. So, I'm looking for somebody who will answer my questions, but I set it up and say, let's say it's Sally volunteers, Brian, I am literally seeing the room where I was with these 40 women. It helps seeing where Sally was sitting. Her name wasn't Sally, but anyway. She agreed, and I say to Sally, "Hold on while I give instructions to the rest of the people in the room." I say to the rest of the people in the room, "Even though I'm not expecting you to say anything else out loud right now, I want you to answer every single question that I ask of Sally. I want you to answer it in your head. If you need to take notes, take notes, but act as if I'm asking it of you, but I'm not going to actually ask you to say anything out loud. I'm just going to ask Sally to say things out loud for me, and if my question is so specific to Sally that it doesn't apply to you, change the question. Make the question apply to you, and then answer that."

At first, this seems really strange to people. After they've done it two or three times, they're like, "Okay, I can do that." Then, I proceed to coach Sally in front of the rest of the room. As a coach, this is some of the toughest coaching you'll ever do. It maybe why I think it's fun, it's challenging for me. Your questions have to be clean. They have to be succinct. If they're leading in any form or fashion, it's not going to be relevant to the other 39 people in the room. So, it hones your question asking skills because you're aware that you're asking of Sally, and she's going to voice an answer in a minute, but you're also aware, this question needs to work for a majority of the people who are in this room right now. The only caveat, before I start coaching Sally, I tell everyone in the room, once it gets to action, I will ask each and every one of you what your action is that you're going to take.

Brian: You tell them ahead so they know it's coming.

Jane: They know it's coming. Before we even start, they know it's coming, that I will ask them. That,

again, takes some getting used to. This is what dictates how long a group coaching session will be. If there are 40 people, there's got to be time for 40 people to list what their actions are. So, with a group of 40 people, I haven't been able to do it in less than an hour and a half because it's going to take 30 minutes for everybody to voice what their actions are.

Brian: But you still are doing it in an hour and a half rather than 40 hours.

Jane: Exactly, and this is why companies love this. "What do you charge an hour for individual coaching? What do you charge an hour and a half for group coaching? Okay. We'll do the group coaching." They can do the math, and you can charge more. It's a lot more work. It requires a lot more of you, so you're not going to charge your same rate. It's not going to be your same hourly rate as you do for coaching because there's all that up-front work that you did with facilitators to choose the topic so there would be a strong affinity, all of that. So, you're going to get to charge more, but it's still going to end up being cheaper for the company in the end.

Brian: That's great. So, everybody gives you an action step there at the end. Anything after that? How does it wrap up?

Jane: It comes to kind of a natural conclusion with Sally, the voice, and Sally is the first one to say what her action item is. Then, I'll just go around the room. Usually, I'll ask two things. What was the key insight you got, and what is the action you commit to taking? Be very specific. Say what you're going to do, by when, with whom if it involves another person, so be very specific, and if you aren't specific, I'll ask you to be more specific. So, we go around and do that. We go around the room, and invariably, somebody waits to go last, and they're going to say, "I didn't really have an action." The very first time that that happened, I say, "No, that's not how this works. You can't sit through a coaching session and not have an action."

So, we'll stay there, and I will then coach that person in front of the room, if that's what it takes for them to get to the point of getting to where they can move forward and have an action, but what's so funny, Brian, is after I'd done this two or three times at the same company, and it's not always the same group of women every time, but there's a core of people who loved it and showed up every time. Anytime maybe a new person would come and say, "I didn't really think of an action," I didn't have to say a word." The rest of the people in the room would say, "Oh, no. You're not getting out of this room without a specific action, so you might as well come up with something." Invariably, there would be 10 or 15 minutes left at the end. I would say, "Now, what did you learn from your peers in this room that maybe didn't come out of when you were listening to me coach the voice? It came out of listening to what other people put as their actions. What did you learn from that?"

We'd have a little bit of a debrief, and always, always, always people will say, "I got as much from other people's actions as I did from coming up with my own action. So, they were learning at the beginning about successes that other people had, before we even started the coaching. They learned that they're not in this alone because other people have the same challenges that they have. They learned while I was coaching the voice that they could internalize the questions that were asked and make it apply to this specifically, and basically have their own individual coaching session but privately, without saying anything out loud because they've got the action, and then they learn from their peers when we're talking about the actions and got ideas about even additional actions they could take, and from that, I

think I helped this company for four years. Once a quarter, we would do a group coaching session on a variety of different topics. In the third year, I was asked by the company, “This is so powerful, but we want to start a coaching culture in our company. Could you teach us how to run group coaching sessions?” At the end of year three, I did coach training with eight people who were going to be on their internal coaching staff. We started on the topic of individual coaching, and our objective was to eventually get to group coaching, and then in year four, I was co-leading the group coaching sessions with one of those eight people each time we did it. We would divide up who would facilitate the successes, who would facilitate the challenges. We would switch off. It works really well to co-lead a group coaching session with another coach. After a year of doing that with their eight coaches, then I don’t get to go anymore, but they still do it. I hear from them every now and then.

Brian: Jane, that’s a brilliant model, and I just want to say thank you for pioneering so many pieces of coaching, and Christian coaching, and setting up Coach Approach for success. We appreciate all that you brought to it and all that you continue to bring.

Jane: Well thank you. I’m having fun. I like inventing things.

Brian: It comes across too. It comes across as fun, and innovative, and sharp.

Jane: I don’t want to give you the impression that it all works the first time I try it either. This is more of a you don’t have to make all the mistakes. I’ll go first and make all the mistakes.

Brian: Sure, we appreciate it. Thanks so much for everybody else joining us. Don’t miss any of our podcasts. Subscribe to our podcast at iTunes, Overcast, Stitcher, or Google Play by searching for Coach Approach Ministries Podcast. If you want to hear more from Jane, you can email her at jcreswell@ca-ministries.com. I’ll put that on our site. We’ll see you next week.

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[Outro Music]