



Coach Approach Ministries Podcast

Episode 145: Deeply Held Assumption

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- Brian Miller: Hey. This is Brian Miller, Executive Director of Coach Approach Ministries, CAM for short. And I'm joined here today by Angie Ward. Angie is an award-winning regular contributor to Christianity Today Leadership publications. She's a highly regarded teacher and collaborative teacher/leader with experience in church, parachurch and Christian higher education context. She holds a PhD in ministry leadership from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Welcome to the podcast, Angie. How are you doing?
- Angie Ward: I'm doing good. Great to be here. Thanks.
- Brian Miller: This is recorded right after North Carolina beat Duke after what I'm sure is some shoe tampering. How you feeling today?
- Angie Ward: That's right.
- Brian Miller: You are a North Carolina native.
- Angie Ward: I am not. I am a Tar Heel wed.
- Brian Miller: Ah.
- Angie Ward: My husband is alum. And then we lived there for 10.5 years. So we are Rams club members. And I'm happy for Carolina, and hope Zion is okay.
- Brian Miller: Well, we'll know by the time this comes out.
- Angie Ward: That's true.
- Brian Miller: Oh, now, gosh. He's going to be a tremendous ... I watched one college game this year, and the best player in college goes out in 40 seconds. I should be barred from watching any more college games. Maybe it was my fault. I don't know.

- Angie Ward: That's right. My husband and I watch from different rooms in our house because that we can't have that much angst in one room.
- Brian Miller: That would be a delight to see. We're going to talk about the power of assumptions today. What's the context for that, Angie?
- Angie Ward: Well, just in my work with leaders, individuals, and organizations, I'm just starting to see that so many things hinge on these underlying assumptions that people bring. A lot of times the presenting thing is, "Help me change this," or, "How do I do this?" or whatever. But you start digging down and you start finding there's these deeply held assumptions that really are the ... it's a route to change, and to growth, and to conflict. So yeah. I think they're just, they're very powerful, but we're not always aware of them.
- Brian Miller: No. Right. We see we have conflict and sometimes we just don't understand why there's conflict. We can't understand why somebody would have a different view of this. It strikes us in a very visceral way, somewhere deep. It's just like, "What just happened? I don't understand."
- Angie Ward: Yep. Yeah. I mean, this stemmed, originally, from some my dissertation work, which if you really want to, to go to- having trouble sleeping, you can read that. But working with churches on organizational culture, and I had discovered this guy named Edgar Schein who did organizational studies, research, and he suggests this model of an iceberg. And I think it's just very fitting. And so your picture kind of a big triangle with a big base at the bottom, and there's kind of three layers or levels. And at the top is what he calls artifacts. And then the middle are what he says are espoused values. And then the bottom, under the waterline are the underlying assumptions. So the top, the artifacts, are anything behaviors, like in a church or an organization, even like physical layout of a building. It's anything you can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, that gives clues to kind of what the values are of that person or that organization.
- Angie Ward: Like I'm sitting in my home office right now. And you could look at my home office and probably make some guesses as to what things I value and what my assumptions are. So there's that. And then the middle layer, there's these what he called espoused values. And those are the things that are what we say we're about. And so it's like a mission statement, for example, or the stuff that you, you know, when you're filling out a job application, you want to look good type thing. And so it's the espouse things. But the thing about those is they could be what's called aspirational. And so it's like, "I wish I were that," or we want to be that or working toward that, but may not be reality. And then, below that, you've got that- Again, below that waterline, you've got these underlying assumptions. And those are, like I said, they're assumptions. They're these beliefs that are so deeply rooted and so deeply held that to act in a way contrary to those, it just seems unthinkable to you.

- Angie Ward: Like you said, it's this visceral reaction. And it happens with, leaders in organizations, in relationships, in leadership context. Just, we have these underlying assumptions. And we're usually not aware of them ... because we have our espoused values. "Well, this is what I value." But then you go to the underlying assumptions and they ... you see them when ... When they get triggered, they provoke this very deep, emotional response. If you're watching, you go, "Well, where'd that come from?" But they're a clue to what might be there below the waterline.
- Brian Miller: You made me think. When you get married- We were talking about organizations. I want to continue to talk about leaders and such. But when you get married, you find there are these underlying assumptions that you were completely unaware of.
- Angie Ward: Indeed.
- Brian Miller: Such as, I mean, I've been married for almost 30 years, and it still bothers me today. My wife says we're not ... there's no meal on Sunday night. [crosstalk 00:05:22].
- Angie Ward: Right. Actually, I ... that they can't see you shaking your head.
- Brian Miller: There's no meal.
- Angie Ward: Right.
- Brian Miller: No, there's no meal.
- Angie Ward: Yeah. Yeah. We had-
- Brian Miller: Where did that come from? And I'm like, "Well, I eat three times a day no matter what day it is. I don't understand." But the underlying, I think, assumption as she grew up in a pastor's family that grew up in a pastor's family. And it was back even in the day when they would, after church, they would go to somebody's house, and they had a huge lunch. And I try to explain- this is interesting. You see, could be really helpful to my marriage, this whole conversation right here, because I could be able to help my wife shift from this idea of, "That doesn't happen anymore."
- Angie Ward: Right. Right.
- Brian Miller: There's no huge lunch. And so we need to go back to traditions, I think basic traditions of a meal [crosstalk 00:06:04]-
- Angie Ward: Right. Yeah. You bring up a good point, though, that's sometimes the artifacts- so the artifact would be we don't have a Sunday supper or dinner because we had a big late Sunday lunch, and probably even called it Sunday dinner after

church, so you don't have an evening meal on Sundays. But then the artifact remains, the no dinner on Sunday and the belief about that, even though the rationale or the reason for it appearing in the first place has gone away. But if you ... Then you mess with them, and I'm sure she's, has pushed back multiple times.

Brian Miller: Sure. Sure.

Angie Ward: [crosstalk 00:06:41]. So I've worked with and I was talking with a pastor in one of my classes, and he had gone to a church that was new for him and it was, I don't know if as a small, country church, but it had a red door on the outside of the building. And it was just getting worn, kind of weather beaten. So the decided to paint the door, and they painted it, I don't know, black or- it was just not red. And there was an uproar in the congregation because ... I mean, so this guy ... They had painted it red to represent the blood of Christ and so they were covering up Jesus.

Brian Miller: Yes.

Angie Ward: So that's an example of stuff for you, those artifacts. The thing about artifacts is that they're easy to see, but you don't always- We make our own assumptions, read our own assumptions into what they mean. So my beloved mother-in-law, may she rest in peace, but she was a very formal, southern lady. And we lived in Colorado, at the time, for seminary, and she would come visit. And she was very disturbed that at church on Sunday, people weren't all dressed up or that you might even see people in Birkenstocks or that type of thing. And so to her, the assumption was that these people were- I mean, she made character judgments about them. We moralize our own assumptions. And so she ... oh, she was just very put out. And it's like, "Well, that's just the culture." So we read in our own cultural values and stuff, as well, as a part of this interpretation process.

Brian Miller: So this makes me think from a coaching aspect. I mean, my client may just be frustrated. That may be to where they're starting. They want to make some changes at their organization, but they're frustrated. They're not getting the- They think this maybe is a great idea, but it's not being accepted. Well. So the thought is ... and I talk about this a lot with coaching. I actually use the iceberg. The first thing we do in coaching is we say, "What do want to talk about? And they say, "Here's the topic." And I try to tell our students, as well, "Don't bite. You don't know what ... That's the top of the iceberg. There's so much more going on underneath this." As you dig down into the espoused values, what are you hoping will be achieved? And then, what are the underlying assumptions for you and all those involved.

Brian Miller: I'm assuming we'll get to the point where ... the reason why you need to know this is because you can't make ... and help me know what else we can apply this to. You can't make a real shift unless you expose the underlying assumptions and help people get on the same page.

- Angie Ward: Yes, absolutely. Because otherwise you're just changing artifacts or espoused values. You're like, "Well, let's change the mission statement and that will ..." Like, you sit in corporate acquisitions, or church mergers, or you could even do in marriage. It's like, "This is what we're going to be." But, again, those assumptions are so deeply rooted. And so I think one of the first steps is just to be aware that we have them, and that the world, different people have different assumptions.
- Angie Ward: I'll give an example from contemporary culture, which is the national anthem, kneeling flag kind of thing. Where I live, it's been, I mean, again, visceral reactions to what some of these players are doing or not doing, and I was trying to ... We started to unpack that, but it gets so explosive so quickly. And it's like the flag is an artifact, and you have assumptions about what that represents. And they have different assumptions about what that represents. But it can shut down so quickly because, again, it's so deeply rooted, so deeply held, so gut level that you just can't even conceive that there might be another perspective there.
- Brian Miller: That's a great example. And another one would be, even, going from traditional worship to a contemporary worship. That can be an artifact level all over the place. Well, "It's this ... it's the music. It's this style of music." And then you start to ... you'll hear some, I think, some underlying assumptions of, "I can't imagine a church, I can't imagine worshiping without the hymns."
- Angie Ward: Right, right. Yep.
- Brian Miller: And I'll think, "That is that hymn is from 1850. And it was started with a bar tune for the same reason I'm trying to do contemporary music." I need to ... I really do need to understand the underlying assumption there for you because I don't know what it is.
- Angie Ward: Yeah. Well, we become so self-referential for ... because there are our assumptions. And so like the worship thing ... And we have that on our church too. And it's like, "We need to do more of these old hymns," kind of - or, "I can't imagine ..." And those are some of the clues when you hear phrases like that. Like, "I can't believe, I can't imagine," along with a very emotional response, or "You can't just ... just do that." So the assumption could be, "It was meaningful to me in a period of time in my spiritual life. How-" And other things like, "How could it not be for somebody else?"
- Brian Miller: Oh, that's exactly. "How could it not be? How could it not be?" So how do you ... are there some best practices for digging into this? Do you dig into the espoused values first or can you go right into the underlying assumptions? What are some best practices here?
- Angie Ward: Boy, that's a good question. I think - Well, one thing you can do with the espoused values is say, "Okay, does the actual match up with the espoused? We

say we're about this." You say you're about- But then what are the real behaviors and ... and first you can look at what are the artifacts really saying? And what's behind that? Just ... that's why coaching is so great because you're asking these kinds of probing questions and helping them discover and sit with the disequilibrium that's created by those questions. And yeah, so asking those questions, I think it depends on where a person's at emotionally when they come in.

Angie Ward: So even in my church, or when you're having these conversations, even in our church, we've got some people, when I'm talking about this flag, artifact thing, they're like, "Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I see that now." There are others who are just like, "No. Oh, no. No, no, no. You're not-" And that takes, I think, a lot more time and, just, kind of instead of starting with their assumptions, help them start seeing the concept of assumptions through other things out in the world or in other people. And then start to maybe identify what are your assumptions?

Brian Miller: I love the espoused values. Here's what it's making me think of is ... I like contemporary worship. My wife likes contemporary worship. And we think everybody ought to love contemporary worship. Then our espoused value would be, "Well, we're trying to reach people who don't know church. And so we're doing this contemporary music." But if- I like what you were saying. Let's do some alignment then. So do people who don't like church or are not in church like the kind of music that you're, the artifact that you're putting together? And the answer is when I look closely, it's like, "Well, no, actually. No. No, they don't."

Brian Miller: So we need to do some work. We need to at least have some awareness right there at the espoused values. Are we nailing it, or are we just making an excuse? Are we not- I mean- And that stuff, even, right there, so that people like traditional would- I don't know if they have an awareness of, "You're full of it Brian, because they don't love it." I don't know if they'd know that. But somewhere in them, they- That's a great question. I at least need to back up on my own assumption. I'm already backing up on my own assumption that people will love this ... because I do.

Angie Ward: Yeah. One of the things, kind of switching it over to, like, if you're ... as a leader, and thinking through the importance of assumptions, I see a lot of leaders who, there are teachable moments to teach, "Okay, here are our assumptions." Part of them creating culture is to have kind of a shared way of doing things. And so realizing that whatever leadership context, you're, again, dealing with people with their own assumptions, and you have your own. And, again, you assume that other people share the same assumptions.

Angie Ward: So I'm on the worship team at my church. I play acoustic guitar. And I was talking with our worship pastor, and there was ... I wouldn't say conflict, like interpersonal, but people were feeling some internal tension. And we had a new staff person who wasn't ... He said, "I made some assumptions about when I use

these words, this is what they meant." And it turned out he was using the same words, but it meant very different things.

Angie Ward: So that's another piece. We defined- Again, we read our own assumptions and experiences into that. And then, as a worship pastor, he has an opportunity to help us understand what the assumptions are for because he's in charge of the ministry. So, really, at the end of the day, it's his assumptions, or as a staff team, about what style of worship, and how we do it, and all that type of stuff. But we need to be always teaching those values and those assumptions to others, and not assuming that they're going to come in with the same thing.

Angie Ward: So I think they talk about, in leadership literature, about teachable point of view. And so you always need to be teaching and reminding people. "This is why we have a guest worship leader regularly. This is why we do this type of instrumentation. This is why we- This is why, why, why," and explain the what, not just the, "Here's what we need to do," kind of thing. So I think a lot of leaders miss opportunities and then they get burned, in some ways, when the assumptions, this comes to conflict. And they go, "Well, how can you not know that?" It's like, "Well, you never told us."

Brian Miller: So a lot of education is one piece that would be good. So-

Angie Ward: Yes.

Brian Miller: So helping your leader client in this sense, or a staff person at your church, or your pastor, understand that they need to recognize what their underlying assumptions are. They need to be really clear on what they are.

Angie Ward: Yes.

Brian Miller: And then to begin to say, "You need to talk about those on a more regular basis."

Angie Ward: Right. And sometimes, again, we don't realize even what ours are until we experience some tension, even, maybe just even internal, not even interpersonal, but internal of when we come up to somebody who's not doing it the way we want it to be, we think it should be because that's our assumption. We haven't communicated. And so that's might be the first time we become aware that that was even one of our- It's like, "Why did this ... why does this kind of, er, just kind of nagging at me?"

Brian Miller: I think- So I started, I talked- I don't think we've talked about it on the recording here, but I started a worship service, and it had a contemporary band. So I met with them. The first thing we do when we have a practice is we sit down together. We put the instruments down. And I want to make sure- This is interesting. The underlying assumption, one, is this is for God. This isn't for us. This is for God. So let's make sure we got that straight. And we're not here to

impress anybody. This is for God. And second, this is for the people. That's not- We're not even to us yet. If they don't experience God in this way, then what are we doing? And third, we want to do well. We want it to be excellent.

Brian Miller: But let's start with some- So I think- And then it was. And, actually, this has been the best band experience I've ever had. But I think it's because I was really clear on a couple things, and I made it clear to them in the practice. That's interesting. And maybe that didn't happen before. Maybe that... I had some assumptions about things with other bands that they didn't have that assumption because I didn't tell them.

Angie Ward: Yeah. Or their experience at another church. I've been in churches or organizations where there's new leadership. And if people haven't experienced other leaders, they just kind of assume it's going to be like it always was. So you have, for example, in a church context, you've got every visitor that comes has some, they bring some assumptions of what church is going to be and look like. And so the more layers, and levels, and the size of, if you're in an organizational context, is recognizing that's a whole lot of assumptions that people are bringing and making value judgments on what you're doing. So you need to be very proactive about teaching. These are kind of the organizational assumptions or the driving assumptions.

Brian Miller: Yeah. And, also, I assume there's a big learning component there too. So-

Angie Ward: Yes. Oh, absolutely.

Brian Miller: So even with the- Boy, we're on dangerous ground talking about the kneeling thing, because it just is so visceral with people.

Angie Ward: Yeah.

Brian Miller: So when my brother-in-law, who's a veteran, said, "The flag, that's all about the veterans." And I thought, "I didn't know that."

Angie Ward: Yeah.

Brian Miller: And I'm not sure that's all- I'm sure it's not all it is, but I didn't- That was not in my awareness. I'm not a veteran. I didn't, I mean, that was- I learned. So I need to ask more questions there. What? Where does that come from for you?

Angie Ward: Yeah. And I think just-

Brian Miller: Where did you learn that.

Angie Ward: ... being aware of the, again, the concept of like, especially the relation between artifacts and assumptions and looking around and saying, "Okay, why do we do

this way?" You know? And, again, "Why don't we have dinner on Sunday nights?" You know?

Brian Miller: Oh, yeah.

Angie Ward: Yeah.

Brian Miller: Why don't we? I think it's a good idea. That's a good idea, Angie. I'm going to write that one down.

Angie Ward: Yeah. That's right. That's right. Exactly. Sure. Blame me. That's great. My husband does pastoral counseling, marriage counseling.

Brian Miller: Oh, [crosstalk 00:21:02].

Angie Ward: So you can call him if I mess it up.

Brian Miller: That'd be great.

Angie Ward: Yeah. Yeah. So yeah. Again, just recognize the importance of the concept of assumptions, trying to recognize your own, and kind of taking, trying to step out and take an objective perspective, and going, "Where are these -" If there's conflict or you sense a difference in opinion, say, "Okay, where is this coming from?" And then, instead of a kind of demonizing the person with the other assumptions, it's like the different assumptions becomes not necessarily the bad guy, but that's what the issue is. It's not that the person is a bad person. And so, again, with the flag thing, you hear that and, like, about whoever, whatever side you take, "So and so is a bad person." Like, maybe they just have different assumptions.

Brian Miller: They do have different- yeah. And so I'm making an assumption here. I'm making an assumption. You used the word objective. "Be more objective." I have an assumption that being more objective is better than not being more objective ... because I tend to be very objective, I think, to some extent. I've told my- My kids will say- And we're in a very polarized situation, right? People, I don't think they're very objective. They're very subjective. And my kids will- I'll tell him, "Your problem is you're very objective. You can see both sides, and we don't live in a world that's very good with both sides right now."

Angie Ward: Right.

Brian Miller: So am I right that you're leaning towards that, that how do we shift people towards being more objective, the education, the listening?

Angie Ward: Yeah. Boy, that's tough. I mean, I can tell you how not to do it. Shouting on Facebook's not the way to do it. Shouting on social media. It happens in relationship and in proximity where you get to actually know people. So we've

got a guy in our church, or he grew up in our church, went off to the Air Force. And he just came back after basic training and said, "First of all, I realize there's a whole other, whole big world out there. There's a lot of people not like me, and they're good people," because he was in proximity to these, instead of just kind of this, we other-ise that.

Angie Ward: But I would agree absolutely that an assumption, that it's necessary to be objective. If it's subjective, then, again, you're getting, you get bent out of shape easily. You can be viewed as just emotional and not- There's something very compelling and attractive about a person, I think, who is what I call centered and doesn't have their identity tied up in their person, some of their opinions about these kinds of things, or whether or not you have a different assumption. You can just be what Friedman calls a non-anxious presence in relationships and in leadership context.

Brian Miller: Yeah. But I like that. So I got off Facebook. I got off Facebook because I realized that I wasn't maturing in a sense that I'd see stuff, I would judge stuff, and that was about the end of it. There was no conversation, not an ability of a conversation there. Yeah. So I didn't like what place it was putting me in just to think. "Yeah. Okay. Okay. [crosstalk 00:24:28]"

Angie Ward: Yeah. Well, there's some people who assume that shouting, per se, on Facebook, is it?

Brian Miller: It doesn't change anybody. I want to shift people's thinking-

Angie Ward: Well, that's your assumption.

Brian Miller: ... and shouting doesn't shift people.

Angie Ward: Probably not. But some people would have different assumptions about that.

Brian Miller: Well, they're wrong.

Angie Ward: There you go.

Brian Miller: I mean, look at what's happening. I don't know anybody that's shifted from one side to the other because of the shouting.

Angie Ward: Right, right. Exactly. In our church context, when there's folks who are like that, I just kind of try to gently, instead of exactly ... instead of pushing back in direct opposition, it's like I kind of try to ask a side question, not just like, "Stop that." But it's like, I saw a Facebook dialogue with- It was like railing against- It was and support of a wall and it was a very, "All immigrants are bad," kind of thing. "They all have an agenda." So instead of saying, "No, you're wrong, here's the statistics why," I just said, "What would Jesus say?" And she deleted her post. I

don't know if she didn't want to engage. But it's just, like you kind of come in from a side question.

Brian Miller: Yes.

Angie Ward: And questioning, "Where did that come from?" Not, "Is that the right assumption?" but like, "Where'd that come from?" So more exploratory questions than challenging. Not that- Exploratory questions are challenging, but you know what I'm saying? They're not trying to directly challenge the belief.

Brian Miller: No.

Angie Ward: At first you're going- Almost like doctor Phil. "How's that working for you?"

Brian Miller: You made me think, and I- Again, we're on dangerous ground. But with the flag, with ... Say you had somebody that's for kneeling and somebody who's just, can't stand it. The question I would want to ask, and both of them, to hear, is, "What's your first experience with the flag? When did you really first notice it?"

Angie Ward: Right.

Brian Miller: I want to hear that story. And not for any- Not so that I'll take your side. I want to hear more. And coaching certainly has that aspect to it for us to think, "Where's that coming from?" A term that I just became familiar with is embedded theology. It's a similar- It's an assumption, theological assumption.

Angie Ward: Right.

Brian Miller: And when you have that visceral response, the first thing you should be thinking is, "Okay, let me- Where did that come from?"

Angie Ward: Yeah.

Brian Miller: "What is that?"

Angie Ward: And I think, I mean, the best place to have those conversations is, I mean, in the context of a relationship of trust. So, I mean, in coaching-

Brian Miller: Exactly.

Angie Ward: ... generally, you come to somebody and you trust the coach, to some degree, to help you. So if you're trying to do that without any type of relational context and just with somebody you don't know, I mean, the best way to gently question and challenge and explore assumptions, again, is in that context of relationships.

Brian Miller: That same point is trust.

- Angie Ward: There's people on Facebook who will post stuff about immigrants from the flag or whatever the hot things are today. And I don't have any relationship with them, so I'm not going to engage them. But there might be somebody who posts something that I see on Sunday and say, "Hey, I saw you posted," and we've got like years of relationship. And then I can just gently say, "Can I ask you a question?" So there's definitely a permission giving and a trust factor that needs to be there. Otherwise you just, the walls go up and the assumption then becomes, well, just, you're an enemy.
- Brian Miller: Love it. Love it.
- Angie Ward: Or an adversary.
- Brian Miller: Angie, this has been really insightful. I appreciate you spending time with us. If people want to know more, to hear more from you, where can they find you? I know there's a couple places.
- Angie Ward: There are a couple of places. Yep. So I'm on Twitter @indyaward. Then email is Angie@proregnum.com. So P-R-O-R-E-G-N-U-M. That's for the kingdom, actually, in Latin. And then, I actually blog and have a podcast myself. So the blog is churchmatters.com, my website. And then, the podcast is Church Chat. The links to those episodes are also on churchmatters.com. So, kind of, Church Matters is probably the one stop place to go and then connect various other ways.
- Brian Miller: Awe, thank you. We appreciate it. And we also thank those who listened today. Coach Approach Ministries is a nonprofit coach training school with over 15 years of experience, training more than 2000 coaches. Let us know how we can help you start or further your coaching career by visiting us at coachapproachministries.org or email me at bmiller@ca-ministries.com. We'll see you next week.