The Awe-struck Coach

(Guest blog by Jasen Booton)

After I responded to a post that Jasen Booton placed on LinkedIn, we connected for a zoom conversation around "curiosity and wonder" in coaching. I am delighted that he agreed to share his insights in this guest blog. Jasen currently serves as a consultant in the Kingdom of Tonga, using a coaching approach to co-construct the primary phase curriculum and support the growth and development of teachers and Ministry of Education personnel. He has a master's in learning and teaching from University of Oxford and is a member of the Oxford Education Deanery and an accredited EMCC coach.

The Awe-struck Coach!

"Curiosity and wonder! As a coach, I've been using these two words interchangeably."

This was my honest admission during a discussion with Jazz Rasool, a fellow EMCC accredited coach. Jazz prompted me to reflect further and put my thoughts on paper. The following extract is from my first attempt to make a distinction:

Curiosity has direction. It moves outward. It reaches, uncovers, explores. There's agency in it – a kind of intentional reaching toward what is not yet known. And we hear this in the language. "I'm curious to know…" "I'm curious to hear…" "I'm curious to learn…" Notice the grammar. Curiosity is always followed by a 'to' – there is a direction of travel; curiosity announces its own intention. It has a destination, even if it doesn't yet know the route. Curiosity is effortful – in essence it is an act of reaching. Wonder is different.

Wonder is received. And again, the grammar tells us something. "I'm wondering if…" "I'm wondering about…" There is no 'to'. No destination declared. 'If' holds open possibility without pursuing it. 'About' circles something rather than moving toward it. Where curiosity reaches towards a solution, wonder holds a question – not to resolve it, but to stay with it. Wondering is present tense and open-ended. It doesn't arrive anywhere.

Posting my ideas on LinkedIn certainly provoked thinking, but a fellow coach asked: "*what is it that makes wonder possible in the first place?*" What creates the conditions for that quality of receptive, open, unhurried presence? Where does it come from?

I think the answer is *awe*. And I think awe deserves attention in coaching practice.

As a linguist, here is what I notice about the grammar of awe: Curiosity moves forward – *I am curious to know*. Wonder opens us – *I am wondering if*, *I am wondering about*. But notice what happens when we use an expression natural to us in common

speech: *'I am in awe of you.'* The grammar points entirely toward the other person. The self steps aside: awe focuses on the coachee.

For a coach, I believe this focus of attention is significant. Awe is the threshold state. It is the moment you register that you are in the presence of someone whose complexity exceeds your existing frameworks. The weight of the story they are carrying. The particular courage it took for them to be here. The significance of this moment in their life. When that registers genuinely, you are *stopped* in your tracks.

The Old Norse root of *to awe* is *agi*: fright, terror. Rudolf Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy*, called it the *mysterium tremendum* – a trembling before something uncanny and overpowering. That is strong language for a coaching context. But I find myself making sense of it in my own practice. If I'm truthful, I would acknowledge a sense of fear in the initial coaching encounter. Not fear of the coachee, but the inner fear of my own uncertainty. What will the coachee bring today? Will I have the right questions? Will I be enough for what this moment needs? To sit with a coachee in genuine openness is to face the discomfort of not-knowing. The poet Keats named this capacity *negative capability* – the ability to remain in uncertainty and doubt without reaching after fact and reason. In coaching, I think negative capability begins with awe. It is awe that stops the reaching before it becomes a reflex.

In coaching to be stopped by awe, *awe-struck*, may be viewed as the honest acknowledgement that you do not know how the coaching encounter will go, but importantly, the not-knowing is not a deficit, it is an expression of honesty, respect and humility. For me, I see an alignment with a coach's beginner's mindset. A beginner's mind is not simply openness as a technique. It is the genuine experience of being stopped, uncertain – facing the person in front of you without the pretence that your frameworks will offer the way forward. I am

increasingly convinced that a sense of awe connects closely with a coaching way of being.

Looping back to the initial provocation: *"what is it that makes wonder possible in the first place?"* I believe that when a coach allows awe to stop them, then wonder becomes possible. The coach who has been genuinely stopped is now genuinely open – not yet reaching, not yet receiving, but present enough for receiving to begin. Wonder arrives in the wake of awe. It holds the space that awe has stilled.

And from wonder, when it is ready, curiosity emerges. Not deployed. Not selected from a mental inventory. But alive – a genuine reaching toward what the coachee has just made available.

So I offer the sequence, as I now perceive it: *Awe stops you. Wonder opens you. Curiosity moves you forward.*

Awe, wonder and curiosity. Which of the three are you least practised in?

For most of us trained as coaches, I suspect it is awe. Curiosity we have been taught to cultivate. Wonder, once named, feels recognisable. But awe, the willingness to be stopped, to allow the self to step aside and point entirely toward the person in front of you – that asks something of us that no framework quite prepares us for.

And yet I am increasingly convinced it is where everything else begins.

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Find Jasen on LinkedIn.

Podcast: A Coaching Model of Coachability

It's rather clear to most people that to be an effective coach one needs an appropriate mindset for investing in the growth of others and a set of listening and verbal skills for coaching conferencing. Less often considered are the mindsets and skills needed to gain from coaching input. We might label it as one's **coachability**. Robyn Vierra, the Teaching and Learning Coordinator at the American School in New Delhi, shares her experiences with being coached. Consider your coachability as you hear Robyn's story.

Email Robyn: rvierra@aes.ac.in

Find the Instructional Coaching Micro-Credential Program here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.100] – Steve [Intro]
Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:28.970] – Steve
A model of coachability. I'm excited to introduce listeners to today's podcast guest, Robyn Vierra. She is currently Teaching and Learning Coordinator at the American Embassy School in New Delhi, where she leads professional growth and facilitates effective teaching and learning across the high school. She was previously the Director of Global Education at Punahou School in Honolulu, Hawaii, where she designed and implemented school-wide initiatives for global learning. I connected with Robyn a few years back when she participated in my Micro Credential Instructional Coaching program, and she and I connected monthly on coaching calls. After the program, Robyn has continued with personalized coaching Zooms and has constantly presented what I would label as a true model of coachability. I often describe a coach's role as being a thinking partner with a coachee. I leave every coaching session with Robyn with issues to ponder myself.

[00:01:43.180] – Steve
And I frequently send her a note a day or two later as new insights occur for me. Consider your coachability as you hear Robyn's story. Robyn, thanks so much for joining me today.

[00:01:58.200] – Robyn
Thanks, Steve. I'm honored.

[00:02:00.240] – Steve
It's great to have you. I'm wondering if we could start with your participation in the online modules that we explored on

our initial Zoom calls. What are some of the insights about coaching that emerged for you during that time?

[00:02:18.660] – Robyn
Yeah, I think during that time when I was looking back at my notes from the very beginning of the courses and the most impactful thing that I realized was you sort of drew this continuum in my mind of evaluation and then cognitive coaching being on the very other side. And then with that continuum, you also have a continuum of ownership. So you talked about how evaluation, the evaluator's taking ownership of the learning, whereas on the other side of the continuum, the coachee is taking ownership of the learning. And that sort of blew my mind. I talk a lot about student ownership and a lot of how do we shift the cognitive load to students and having them own their learning? And it hadn't occurred to me how we can do the same for adult learners.

[00:03:12.060] – Steve
Well, in your role, you have some supervision responsibilities as well as some coaching responsibilities, or is responsibilities not desires? [laughter]

[00:03:26.760] – Robyn
[laughter] That's fair.

[00:03:29.570] – Steve
So that continuum kind of looks at playing out how you decide which of those roles you're stepping into and when you're stepping into it.

[00:03:43.690] – Robyn
Yeah, and I think you said this, but I'm going to say it myself now, is that the majority of our teachers don't need supervision. And though my role is supervisory, coaching is probably the best in to growing teachers. And we know that supervision and evaluation don't result in teacher growth primarily. And so the more I could lean towards the coaching

side and making it a reflective conversation, I think that would benefit the students in their classrooms.

[00:04:18.610] – Steve
So as you finish that microcredential coursework, what was your thinking that led you to put out a request for you and I to continue our ongoing partnership?

[00:04:35.030] – Robyn
Yeah, I'd had some background in coaching. I used to supervise new teachers to the profession and oversee their credentialing. And so I felt like I was kind of good at it. And then I realized that I was just really great at giving good ideas for how they could improve their instructional practice. And the faculty I work with now are great teachers. They've been teaching and doing this for a really long time, and that's why they were hired. And that approach is not the best approach with them. And so I wanted to develop my skill set for how to work with expert adults and how to make sure that they feel supported and that they're growing and that they could own their development.

[00:05:24.140] – Steve
Well, when I describe your coachability, it jumps out at me because you enter each coaching session that you and I have had ready to report on experiences that you've had from the previous session. And you're ready with insights or questions to explore in the conversation that we're ready to have. Could you describe your process that you go through between our calls?

[00:05:57.760] – Robyn
Yeah, I think I've told you this before, but what I love about the courses and our monthly meetings is that it's never one and done. And something we know about professional development is its impact isn't that strong because it's one and done. And so this model of us meeting every month has allowed me to reflect and question and practice and then do some learning.

Reflect, practice and then do some more learning. And so just knowing that in a month we were gonna have another conversation was always really helpful to me. And I have a little Post-it by my desk that as things came up for me that I wanted to talk through, or I wasn't sure on my thinking about, I'd just jot them on the Post-it, and sort of, over the course of the month, sort of building the agenda for things that we could talk about. Or, I had a conversation that didn't land where I thought it was going to land, or where perhaps I was thinking it could land, and I needed a thought partner on those.

[00:07:09.130] – Steve
Yeah. The reflection part is a critical part of learning. And without coaching being present for a lot of teachers, very often, it's difficult to find the opportunity for that reflection. I mean, that reflection is really what coaching creates for the for the teacher.

[00:07:34.050] – Robyn
And again, we know this for students, right? Hattie talks about metacognition having some of the highest effect sizes. And sometimes we don't have the space in schools to do some of that important reflection with teachers. And that matters.

[00:07:53.110] – Steve
Would you share some of the insights that you've gained about coaching and your coaching skills and your approach to coaching over the time that we've been able to work together?

[00:08:06.620] – Robyn
One, it's a super important skill. I have a doctorate in educational leadership and never had a coaching class. And when you think about one of the leader's most important jobs being–

[00:08:19.240] – Steve
Wow.

[00:08:19.340] – Robyn
Helping the people they're with and they work for, it is sort of striking. I heard you say, "Wow." [laughter] It is sort of striking. You may believe that, but you don't necessarily have the skills to do that. And so developing those skills has been really, really important for me. And questions matter. The questions show intent and questions show just the way I've learned to design – the questions I ask has been incredibly helpful for me. And the last thing I want to do is direct a conversation in a way that a teacher feels defensive or disempowered, right? Those are the enemy of learning. And so having a little more tools in my tool belt to avoid some of those traps of supervision when it's not needed and lean into some of those tools that can really support students' learning. And I'll say that teachers have loved it. The feedback has been great. I am doing my end-of-the-year meetings right now, and it's been really sweet to have conversations. They're like, well, remember last year we talked about how we could have more consolidation for students? And this year, I'm seeing it, and I see it in my data, and I'm seeing student– like, my data's gone from a 3 to a 5 in this area.

[00:09:46.180] – Robyn
And so It's been really great to see that people crave it. And I mean, I obviously crave it too because I sign up to talk to you every month. So to having a space to reflect and improve practice is something that we all want, right? Autonomy, mastery, purpose. Building our own mastery is something that is motivating for adults.

[00:10:13.090] – Steve
I wanna come back to another piece there, but since you kind of touched on this, you had mentioned that your 360 feedback occurred at your school and you got some positive feedback on the use of your coaching skills. Share that with us?

[00:10:36.490] – Robyn

Yeah, it came out loud and clear that people appreciated the reflective conversations that supported students and supported them as professionals. And I think one quote was around like a mentor mindset, having – exuding really high expectations with high support. And to me, that was the ultimate compliment because that is what I seek to do, right? We all are shooting for this level of greatness and we need support to get there. And I clearly – I ask for your support every month in being even better than I can be.

[00:11:17.730] – Steve
So as I was listening to you, a word that was coming through my head considering your approach to your coachability and what you build into your coaching of your staff is the word vulnerability.

[00:11:39.660] – Robyn
Mm-hmm.

[00:11:40.660] – Steve
Could you respond to that a little?

[00:11:43.060] – Robyn
Yeah, when you're with a coach, you have to be vulnerable, right? When you're defensive, that's because it doesn't feel safe to be vulnerable. And so I work really hard to create a space for teachers to feel vulnerable and possibly by being vulnerable myself and knowing that I don't have all the answers and that we're sort of in this sort of exploration together about how we can best serve students. Because if that was simple, whoo, like, but it's not. It's complex. And it takes teamwork to sort through the complexities of student learning. And so it is a vulnerable process for me as a leader, as well as for a teacher, I would say.

[00:12:37.660] – Steve
I'm seeing that that's an important piece for you to model in your coaching of teachers, is your vulnerability, being able

to lay out, I'm not expected to have the answers here. I'm looking to work this out with you. I would share with teachers sometimes in my coaching, I don't know if the idea we're talking about here will work or not, but I'll make you one promise. If it doesn't, I won't leave you. So this doesn't have to work. It's something we can try. And then we can be back to the drawing board to figure out what did we learn from the experiment. I'm just now reading a piece from Harvard Business Review on super teams. And the first thing it identified is something that super teams do, is they experiment more than other teams do. So they're quick to form a hypothesis, come up with an experiment, and run it and learn from the experimentation process, rather than looking that I'm spending the time trying to make sure that I got the right decision or the right answer before I implement it. And I think that that's the mindset. I think the reason you need vulnerability is because growth requires risk.

[00:14:17.870] – Steve
So if I've got a setting where the coach is taking some risk and the teacher's taking some risk in what we're gonna move forward with, we probably got a relationship that's clicking.

[00:14:29.550] – Robyn
Yeah. And I guess the enemy of that is certainty. Right? We need to be hypothesis testing and exploring and being curious. And if we pretend that we are certain about what an answer is, then that closes the conversation and the collaboration and both.

[00:14:50.460] – Steve
And it doesn't take long for the teacher to realize that what worked really well second period didn't work third period. So it can't be what the lesson plan was. And similarly, when when I'm in the coaching role, what worked with the previous teacher that I coached in my response isn't working here, and I need to be able to take that as feedback and figure out what's next.

[00:15:18.480] – Robyn
Yeah, and that's what makes this work as being an educator so dynamic, right? Because if every lesson was the same and played out the same, then that would be awfully boring. But it is incredibly complex work to navigate that every day as the orchestrator of different learning in different ways all the time. And teachers need support to do that and to think through it.

[00:15:48.250] – Steve
Yeah, it's the line I took from Dylan William that the neat thing about working in education is you don't have to worry about hitting mastery prior to retirement.

[00:16:02.540] – Steve
[laughter] Exactly.

[00:16:03.290] – Steve
There's always that new piece to learn, which really makes why I use the statement, "every educator deserves a coach." It's not that you need one, you deserve to have that support because of the challenging role you're taking on.

[00:16:19.070] – Robyn
And that's why I felt like I needed to deserve to coach as well. It's not easy leading faculty learning and having that space to sort of test some of my thinking and be vulnerable, especially, it's outside my school and so it doesn't jeopardize any of my relationships, felt incredibly supportive. And so I sort of get what teachers were saying about this idea of feeling like high expectations and high support because that's how I experience it as well.

[00:16:55.000] – Steve
Cool, cool. Before we close, I'm wondering if you have thoughts that you could share with listeners about how to get the greatest return. So I used the word results, but how do you get the greatest return from – you're investing your time

and your energy in being coached. So what is it that a person does that causes them to get the most out of that?

[00:17:21.590] – Robyn
Yeah, I mean, I'll talk about my process that is sort of funny. So we're talking and I take these like wild notes over 3 pages of paper and it's a total mess. And then the next day I come back to it and I rewrite all my notes into a notebook really nicely and I organize it. And then before I have a coaching meeting with a teacher, I go back and I refresh on all my notes and think through – I have kind of a bank of different ways to approach different conversations, and I think through what would be the best approach, and I plan the conversation, and it never goes the way I think it's gonna go, but at least I've done some pre-thinking on it. And then if I have questions about it, I bring that to our next meeting. And so, the way to get the greatest return out of it is engaging with it regularly and often. And it's what we know about learning, right? It's all the retrieval and the practice and the application and then the relearning. And gosh, it is a master – like to be a really great coach is an impressive skill.

[00:18:39.860] – Robyn
And I hope one day I can get there, but it really is a skill that needs to be developed and a lot of people don't have it. And in some ways I think that's a shame because I think a lot of people could learn in the process.

[00:18:57.310] – Steve
Well, Robyn, I wanted to reach out and ask you to join me and I'm just so glad that I did. How might one of the listeners, if they've got a question or something they wanna exchange a thought with you, is there a way they could touch base with you?

[00:19:15.330] – Robyn
Of course. I'm rvierra@aes.ac.in at the American Embassy

School in New Delhi, India.

[00:19:24.810] – Steve
I'll stick that email into the podcast lead-in and make it easy for folks to find.

[00:19:30.930] – Robyn
Awesome.

[00:19:32.250] – Robyn
Thanks so much, Steve.

[00:19:33.570] – Steve
Take care.

[00:19:34.770] – Robyn
All right. Bye.

[00:19:35.950] – Steve
Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn @SteveBarkley or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.

In Coaching, Haste Could Make Waste – or Worse

How often has this happened to you? You're listening to a teacher describe her frustration with a group of students. Halfway through, you recognize the situation. You've seen it before. You solved it when you were teaching. You know what will help. Even if you don't interrupt, you're no longer fully

listening – you're thinking about what you will say. Without realizing it, you've stopped being curious.

Haste in coaching rarely looks rude. It often looks helpful.

Whether you're supporting a teacher, facilitating a professional learning team, or working with a school leader, listening is foundational. When we think we already understand, we predict solutions early and easily slip into haste. We nod instead of reflect. We respond instead of inquire. We react instead of understand.

One listening danger is responding too quickly. That's haste. When people sense that the listener rushed to a conclusion, they often feel unimportant – even if the response is positive. Coaches can easily fall into the haste trap because they recognize patterns quickly and solutions form early. With a solution in mind, coaches can miss crucial signals, undermine trust, and interpret teachers' questions as pushback.

Coaches work too hard to build a coaching culture to have it eroded by haste.

Coaches collaborating with a PLC can fall into haste when they are asked the triggering question, *"What do you suggest we do?"* The question sounds like an invitation, but it can be a trap. While you know you should lead with questions to gather their observations and thinking, the opportunity to be helpful calls out to you. If you respond too quickly, it can feel disempowering.

A coach's haste might sound like this:

"What if you tried _____?"

"We don't have time to worry about that now."

"I think what's really going on here is _____."

"Let's talk about what to do."

Even great suggestions offered too soon can short-circuit the deeper exploration that leads to teacher growth and ownership. When Christine Miles, author of, "**What's It Costing You to Not Listen?**", joined me on a podcast, she pointed out that most of us have little training in listening.

"I hear leaders doing listening tours and things like that, but they're really talking more than they're actually listening. It's a problem that most people don't know exists because we've been told to listen and very rarely taught how. So I think listening is very misunderstood."

Miles suggests that the moment we think, "I've seen this before," we stop being curious. Yet every classroom situation has nuances – like a snowflake. Chances are we are missing something critical. Miles calls this a closeness bias: the more we know something, the less curious we become.

Coaches need to get the full picture and ensure the coachee knows they are understood. Our first job is to understand the message and the intent of the speaker – and respond only after that job is done.

When a coach moves too quickly to a solution, the teacher doesn't experience support – they experience evaluation. In that moment, teacher reflection stops. The lesson may improve, but the teacher's decision-making does not. Even when the coach is kind and the idea is promising, the teacher may conclude, "The coach already knows what I should do." That interpretation interferes with the coaching relationship and culture you want to build.

Consider recording an upcoming coaching conference and checking your listening. Are there any spots where haste crept in?

Coaching often doesn't break down because the coach said the wrong thing. It breaks down because the coach said the right thing too soon.

Is Coaching “Helping”? Maybe Not in the Way We Think

Several years ago, I explored a question that still surfaces frequently in conversations with instructional coaches:

Should coaches describe their role as **helping** teachers? Does the phrase, “How can I help you?” fit in coaching conversations? At first glance, the answer feels obvious. Of course, coaches help. Supporting teachers is central to the work. But the language we choose can shape how coaching relationships form and function.

Over time, I’ve become even more convinced that the word help deserves close examination. Not because helping is wrong—but because of how the word *helping* may be interpreted.

When a coach says, “I’m here to help you,” teachers may hear:

- I have expertise you don’t.
- I know what you should do next.

- I’m responsible for improving your practice.

None of those messages reflect what strong coaching relationships are meant to be. In fact, they can quietly shift coaching away from partnership and toward supervision. That distinction is more important now than ever, as we look for coaching to evolve from a support service into a culture-building professional learning structure.

Over the last decade, the instructional coaching field has clarified something powerful:

Coaching works best when teachers and coaches operate as learning partners.

Jim Knight describes this as the partnership way of being, grounded in principles like equality, voice, dialogue, reflection, choice, praxis, and reciprocity, and identifies partnership as the first pillar of effective peer instructional coaching. Elena Aguilar similarly emphasizes that coaching is about developing educators’ capacity to reflect and make intentional decisions—not creating reliance on the coach’s expertise.

In my own work, I describe the coach as a thinking partner who engages with the teacher in shared inquiry—listening, questioning, and examining evidence together—so that the teacher’s decision-making is strengthened. In that space, coaching is no longer about providing answers but about expanding possibilities for both teaching and learning.

Coaching isn’t something we do for teachers. It’s something we do with teachers.

Organizational psychologist Edgar Schein, in **Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help**, reminds us that “helping is a cooperative process” and suggests that “all help is ultimately self-help.” He also explains that when someone asks for help, they are temporarily placed in what he calls a one-down

position, while the helper is placed one-up. In schools, where trust and professional identity matter deeply, that shift in status can influence how coaching is experienced. Instructional coaching works best when teachers do not feel positioned below the coach but instead experience the relationship as collaborative and reciprocal. Positioning ourselves as thinking partners helps maintain that balance.

When coaching is framed as helping, it can unintentionally suggest that teachers are incomplete or lacking. Coaching as a thinking partner, instead, recognizes that teachers are already engaged in complex professional decision-making every day. A thinking-partner stance supports teachers in:

- analyzing student learning
- adjusting instruction continuously
- testing ideas
- reflecting on results
- persisting through uncertainty

The coach's role is not to take over that thinking—but to strengthen it.

Coaches can communicate a partnership stance through language, with phrases like:

- "I'm here to learn with you."
- "I'm interested in what you're noticing."
- "What would you like students doing differently?"
- "What experiments might be worth trying?"

When coaches communicate that the teachers are designers of learning for their students, teachers are more likely to experience the coach as a thinking partner – one who:

- listens before suggesting
- asks before advising
- explores before recommending
- co-plans instead of directing

- models when invited
- examines evidence together

When coaches are positioned primarily as helpers, teachers and administrators may begin to expect coaches to:

- fix problems,
- support struggling teachers
- implement initiatives
- carry responsibility for change

In every hallway conversation, coaching session, PLC meeting, or email, our words carry the potential to empower—or to unintentionally discourage. When we speak with intention—choosing language that communicates capability, fosters ownership, frames growth, and connects to purpose—we don't just support our colleagues; we strengthen the culture of our schools. Teachers, like students, thrive when they feel seen, believed in and connected to meaningful work. As leaders and coaches, we can build that sense of connection through the everyday language we use.

When teachers describe their experience working with coaches, do they say:

“My coach helped me”

or

“My coach expanded my thinking and guided me to explore new possibilities.”

That difference may define the culture schools are working to build. When coaches are experienced as thinking partners, teachers retain ownership of their practice, collaboration deepens, and improvement becomes shared work rather than assigned work. And that shift can begin with something as small—and powerful—as the words we choose.

Podcast: Coaching Conversations that Promote Coachability

“Coachability is a crucial mindset that builds individual and teacher efficacy and thus student success. Coaching conversations should have a human connectedness built on hope, trust, gratitude, strength, and purpose.” (Jennifer Fraser, 2025, **Leading with Hope and Kindness**)

Listen for human connections in a sample coaching pre-conference.

Read the article, “Leading With Hope and Kindness: 5 Ways to Be a Better Leader” here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.000] – Steve [Intro]
Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I’ve gathered over the years. I’m thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:29.460] – Steve
Coaching Conversations that Promote Coachability. I’ve been becoming increasingly convinced that coaching that occurs in a conversational tone can have the greatest impact on an individual’s coachability and thus on their opportunity for growth. In a recent article in Psychology Today, Dr. Christine O’Connel described five qualities of a great leader as hope, trust, gratitude, strength, and purpose. You’ll find the link to that article in this podcast lead-in. I believe that her five elements provide good indicators for examining our coaching dialogs. Coaches’ questions and responses can communicate those five elements. A coach’s vulnerability can

extend the impact element of the five elements. Together, the coach and the coachee make a human connection. What follows is a shortened example of a pre-conference I had with Tim, a music teacher. He generously allowed me to share our conversation, which was recorded as he and I modeled peer coaching conferencing with his colleagues.

[00:02:00.000] – Steve
As you listen in, note in my questions and responses and in Tim’s participation, the elements of hope, trust, gratitude, strength, and purpose.

[00:02:16.860] – Steve
Tim, thank you so much.

[00:02:19.660] – Tim
You’re welcome.

[00:02:21.300] – Steve
Can I get a little bit of info about you, Tim? I’m wondering the the role that you have there at Denver Valley and your past experiences comparing to the role you have there.

[00:02:41.180] – Tim
I’m the music teacher. I teach music to all three divisions, Lover School, Middle School, Upper School. As far as my background is concerned, this is my 19th year at DV. It’s my 30th year of teaching overall. Before coming to DV, I was an English teacher, and I ran an after-school music program. When I came to DV, the music program developed. Over the years, my interest has been in developing curricula for kids who were neurodivergent and looking at the relationships between music and language and how we develop curriculum. Most of what I do with the students is intended to be both a music lesson, but also I view it as a therapeutic intervention to help them with their language processing. That’s the quick overview.

[00:03:57.760] – Steve
When you just When you started, the question that was in my

mind is, so you've developed what the music program is at DV?

[00:04:08.240] – Tim
Yes.

[00:04:08.740] – Steve
That's pretty much what you came back to say. It's sounding to me very unique. Are there many places to go and meet with other folks implementing the program?

[00:04:27.720] – Tim
It's very hard to find other music teachers who who do what I do. Although recently, I have been partnering with a music teacher at another LD school, and we've been looking for ways to start a group of teachers who work with LD communities. It was just fortunate that this person just one day sent an email to music teachers all these other LD schools saying, "Does anybody understand what I'm going through?" We all started – and there's been a group of about three or four of us who've been getting together every couple of months just over Zoom and saying, hey, what are you working on now? Most of us are finding that most of our approaches, we all live in these niche environments where we're doing things that they're not really doing in mainstream music programs. But just because of who we work with. There's a bunch of factors that go into that, though. It's not only just our students, it's also facilities, it's class size, it's scheduling. There's a lot of things that go into that.

[00:05:40.440] – Steve
Based on the things you've said so far about the group, what's important in your mind as you're working with them at this particular time, that particular group at this particular time?

[00:06:00.000] – Tim
One of the big things that I work on with them is synchronizing to a beat. You probably see there's a lot of

this in this video. This is a lesson that I do a lot with them. We do a lot of drumming, and we do a lot of work on how to synchronize to a beat because synchronizing to rhythms within the environment is essential for language processing, and it's also an essential musicianship skill It's something that our students, for the most part, cannot do. This is something where we really spend a lot of time and almost any activity – I think we were doing work with ukuleles, and some folks were playing guitar, but it's like a layered lesson. On the one hand, they're learning to play these ukulele cords, but most of what I'm interested in is, are they feeling where the beat is, and are they synchronizing their actions in their body, their hand movements, with where the beat is? That's an abstract thing for them to do, to identify this sound in the environment and to be able to predict when it's coming up again and then play with that.

[00:07:20.320] – Tim
That's something that our students really struggle with, and it's a processing delay.

[00:07:25.940] – Steve
I got to tell you, I loved what I've learned so far.

[00:07:31.660] – Tim
I can really geek out on this stuff.

[00:07:33.860] – Steve
Particular things that we pay attention to as we watch the two short clips to enter into a conversation with you, any place you'd point us?

[00:07:48.360] – Tim
Well, as far as if I were soliciting feedback, there are two areas that I really struggle with. One is transitions in the lesson. First we're doing this, then we're doing this, then we're doing that. Those transitions are always, I feel, really messy. I've gone through so many different processes and

systems to try to clean those transitions up. No matter what I do, it's always very messy. I think it's just because the nature of you're putting this instrument down and now you're moving to this instrument, or we're grouping into these ensembles over here, or this kid needs a cable and this kid doesn't, and this guitar is out of tune, and doing all that stuff and keeping the lesson moving without losing the momentum is really challenging. So any thoughts about that. The other piece that I really struggle with is looking for ways to quantify what they're learning and for more meaningful assessment for the students. That's something that I really struggle with. I often land on, you either did it or you didn't, but I feel like that's really hard to do.

[00:09:15.760] – Steve
I was going to ask you what messy looks or sounds like, but I think you've described it as losing the momentum.

[00:09:25.940] – Tim
Yeah.

[00:09:27.080] – Steve
Okay.

[00:09:28.740] – Tim
Yeah, I feel like I've got an idea that I'm developing, and I introduce it in this way, and now I want to take this idea and build on it. But that involves putting this instrument down and now trying it with this instrument. In that movement of take this and put this over here, and now go grab this and come sit over here, that movement usually takes a lot longer than I would like it to. That's where…

[00:09:55.880] – Steve
It's a step. I need this change to that step but not lose you while I'm taking that step.

[00:10:03.620] – Tim
Exactly. Yeah, I don't want them to lose the focus of what

we’re doing. Often, pretty much always.

[00:10:10.200] – Steve
You know where you’re going and you want them to stay with it.

[00:10:14.460] – Tim
Yes.

[00:10:15.380] – Steve
Okay. I’m ready. I’m ready.

[00:10:20.480] – Steve
Human Connections. We lead and coach because we believe in the potential of others and ourselves to grow, learn, and positively impact students’ lives. Both coach and coachee are strengthened in quality coaching conversations. Thanks for listening in.

[00:10:49.060] – Steve [Outro]
Thanks for listening, folks. I’d love to hear what you’re pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.

Big Ears for Soulful Listening

Reading the blog, “The Art of Soulful Listening” by Greg Thomas, introduced me to a musical concept that immediately resonated—what jazz musicians call Big Ears. Thomas describes his deepening appreciation of jazz through immersive listening…

“The more I listened, the more I recognized patterns and devices of the music. The more I listened, the more I’d play by focusing on one instrument at a time, then two, then three, and so on, which attuned my ears to nuances that amplified the brilliance and magic that captivated me. Little did I realize that I was developing what musicians call Big Ears and paving a road to what the Jazz Leadership Project calls soulful listening.”

Soulful listening is “a dynamic act of thinking and feeling together, which opens the way to collective meaning and shared understanding.” It’s more than gathering information or responding with empathy. It’s generative—a way of listening that creates space for emergence and transformation. The concept of Soulful Listening resonates deeply with me. It echoes a journey I’ve been on for years—as a coach, facilitator, and learner of how presence shapes connection. The jazz-inspired idea of “Big Ears,” listening with such presence that you’re attuned to both the rhythm and the silence, the notes, and the intention deepens an understanding of listening. In many ways, soulful listening is the “next step” after foundational practices like active and empathic

listening.

In my post, Active Listening May Be Insufficient, I wrote about how active listening is often taught as a list of behaviors: maintain eye contact, nod, summarize. While useful as a starting point, this version of listening can remain performative. It's listening but without necessarily engaging with the other person's experience. It could keep the listener in control by appearing attentive without sufficient understanding of what you are hearing.

In Coaching and Empathic Listening, I described the shift from listening to respond to listening to understand. Empathic listening requires vulnerability. It means feeling alongside the speaker and allowing their emotions to resonate within you. It's no longer about solving, steering, or even soothing. It's about being present in a shared emotional space.

I offered confirmatory paraphrases as a practical tool to help listeners reflect understanding back to the speaker without shaping or controlling the conversation in Coaches Listening Skills. Confirmatory paraphrasing allows for meaning to be co-constructed rather than imposed. It respects the speaker's ownership of their thoughts while deepening clarity and trust. It's a move from assumption to curiosity—from knowing to wondering.

Listening that is active, empathic, and confirmatory forms a foundation. Soulful listening invites us into a space of being rather than doing with these five practices.

- **Stillness:** Quieting the internal chatter, agendas, and need to fix. This means resisting the urge to jump in with strategies and solutions.
- **Presence**: Fully inhabiting the moment. Not just physically, but emotionally and energetically.
- **Receptivity**: Opening ourselves to the other person's

thoughts, emotions, and even discomfort without trying to reshape or minimize it.

- **Humility**: Letting go of the need to be the expert. Acknowledging that the speaker may have the wisdom they need, if we're patient enough to help them find it.
- **Trust:** Believing in the process of shared inquiry. Trusting that something valuable will emerge if we hold space with care and curiosity.

"In jazz, "Big Ears" means hearing beyond your instrument. A musician with big ears is tuned into the whole group. They don't just wait for their solo—they respond, shift, and flow with what's happening around them. They trust the music to lead them somewhere new."

(Greg Thomas)

In a coaching context, soulful listening means listening beyond words. It means attuning to what's being said, what's left unsaid, and what's being felt. It's about showing up not just to help—but to witness. Big Ears in coaching encourages:

Listening for emotional tone, not just content

Sensing hesitation, excitement, or frustration.

Being willing to pause, let silence do its work, and follow the teacher's lead.

Soulful listening is not a technique to master—it's a way of being to practice. It takes intention, reflection, and humility. And like jazz, it's a lifelong exploration. Soulful listening can transform coaching conversations from transactional to transformational. When we listen soulfully, we're not just helping someone make a plan—we're helping them hear themselves more clearly. We're creating space for clarity, confidence, and insight to emerge. What possibilities might arise when we listen with Big Ears—and an open heart?