Podcast: Refocusing Problem Saturated Thinking

Problem saturated conversations can lead to a limited focus on any solution, a negative impact on morale, as well as a decrease in collaboration and teamwork. Lana Cecil, a coach of instructional coaches and teachers, shares her "**Positober**" strategy: a plan to address a common dip that occurs for many educators sometimes called the October dip. Some describe it as a long stretch while you're really tired. Others describe it as hitting the wall, barely making it through the week, with endless weeks of the school year ahead of you. How can coaches and leaders respond to problem saturated conversations?

Read Steve's blog on Problem Saturated Conversations here.
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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.650] – Steve [Intro]

Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you have a challenge to guide continuous teacher growth that promotes student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from our experienced guests and insights that I've gathered across many years. I'm thrilled you're here. Thanks for listening.

[00:00:29.480] – Steve

Refocusing problem saturated thinking. I recently posted a blog about problem saturated conversations built around problem saturated stories. A problem saturated story is one that tells the story of an experience in a way that makes the problem powerful and visible, but it leaves the values, skills, and choices and responses of the person experiencing the problem less visible. A problem saturated conversation might sound something like this: Teacher one: "I can't handle the constant disruptions of my class. It feels like there's always a handful of students who are disruptive, disrespectful, and refuse to follow any rules and instructions." Teacher two: "I know exactly what you mean. I have a group of students who seem determined to disrupt the class every day. They talk loudly, ignore my instructions, and show no regard for their classmates." Teacher three: "I'm dealing with the same issue. It's exhausting trying to manage these students and maintain a positive learning environment. I feel like I'm spending more time on discipline than actual teaching." Teacher one comes back into the conversation: "And it's not just during class. I received complaints from other teachers about their behavior in hallways and during lunch breaks. It's affecting the entire school community."

[00:02:09.460] – Steve

Teacher two: “I’ve tried everything – rewards, consequences, parent meetings but nothing seems to make a difference. The students continue to disrupt the class and show no signs of improvement. It’s frustrating.” Well, negative conversations like that can lead to a very limited focus on any solution, a negative impact on morale, a decrease in collaboration and teamwork, reduced creativity and innovation, and wasted time and energy. Those outcomes certainly indicate a need for strategies to refocus those conversations. When I posted that blog on LinkedIn, I received a response from Lana Cecil, reinforcing the need to shift these negative narratives. I followed up with a Zoom conversation with Lana, and I asked her to join me on this podcast to share her experiences personally and her experiences coaching teachers and coaching instructional coaches. Lana is in her 25th year as an educator and her 10th year as an instructional coach for ESC Region 13 in Austin, Texas. She coaches teachers and coaches across Central Texas, and she enjoys making products and services that support the hard work of coaching. Welcome, Lana.

[00:03:44.340] – Lana

Thank you, Steve. I’m so glad to be here. I was so excited when I saw your blog post because this topic is very near and dear to my heart – very passionate about it.

[00:03:56.650] – Steve

Well, let’s jump in then with some of the first reactions you had when you read the blog and its connection to your personal experiences.

[00:04:07.180] – Lana

You bet. The most exciting thing for me was that it gave me the language, the professional language, to talk very clearly about what I've been passionate about for the last ten years. I started what I call the "Positober Movement" as you move into October. And so that's what I was talking with you about on your blog post.

[00:04:31.080] – Steve

Well, let's get going with Positober. What's that about and how did you get there?

[00:04:37.930] – Lana

Okay, so ten years ago, I was in a place where I was negative and normally I'm a very positive, outgoing, kind of sunshiny girl. In fact, sometimes that can kind of be my weakness if everybody doesn't want to hear my sunshine. But I was there. I was in a negative place. I couldn't find my way out and I was saying to my friends, I was bringing everyone around me down, and I could feel it. And I thought, there has to be a way that I can get out of this through self reflection and just taking a look at myself and what I can do. And it just happened to be right around October, that shocktober time. Whenever we all say, well, it's just shocktober, and we all are just sad right now, it's the disillusionment period for everyone. And I just thought, there has to be a solution for this. We can't just keep saying, it's October, it's shocktober, we're sad. And so I started the positober movement. And for me, it was just when those negative thoughts that I was continuously having, that I was continuously voicing to everyone around me came into my thoughts, I just chose to look at it and name it and decide what I wanted to do about it rather than just kind of spread it around and just kind of sit in it, because I felt like I

was just sitting in it and there were no solutions happening.

[00:05:52.760] – Lana

So as I started to do that, and also for me, I lean on my faith too, the support of my coach, because I had a coach at the time that was amazing. And I also leaned on the support of my faith for that because that was something else that was supportive to me. So it's kind of rooted in that – my personal space. So that's what I started to do. I named it. I started to put out some funny memes, and I put it out on social media where everybody could join me to see if they wanted to join me in trying to kind of support me too. My friend group could support me in that and say, I need to make a change. I need to be more positive. And that was ten years ago. And this will be my 10th year for Positober. And I have about a group of about 150 to 200 of my friends that get on with me in Positober and they join me in this just and what I now know is shifting the narrative.

[00:06:55.790] – Lana

It's narrative therapy. It's getting out of those problem saturated conversations and moving to a more positive space without, and this is one of the most important things, is really not getting into that toxic positivity culture where you don't name because things are negative, especially in teaching. Teaching is hard. We're asking people to do hard things. And so if things are hard, like in your examples, if they're experiencing heavy discipline or issues and things like that, we can't just say that's not happening and we're just going to be like, "it's good, everything's great and wonderful" because that's not what we want to do either. We want to be sure we self-reflect and we get to a place of action that actually gets us some relief and some peace and

our agency back, our choice and our voice and we're moving forward instead of sitting in a place that makes us sad. So that's Positober.

[00:07:56.180] – Steve

I'm intrigued by the fact that it's a common October issue. I was listening to you – I was almost running in my head – is it like the honeymoon period is over? The start of the school year and we are kind of prepped up for everything and we have this high expectation and then October rolls around and some realistic picture in front of us that we don't want to accept?

[00:08:27.420] – Lana

Yes, it's kind of like that. So there's some research around it. I think it's new teacher college. I'm not sure if I'm quoting that correctly, but it's specifically around new teachers – the disillusionment cycle, you start off in that anticipatory, you're so excited…

[00:08:42.360] – Steve

I have seen that.

[00:08:43.450] – Lana

Yes, it's a graphic and it looks like a roller coaster. And so it kind of coincides with the implementation dip too of anything new, that kind of talk and research around that. But yeah, the disillusionment cycle happens and it always seems to coincide with the October, November period before we can get back up to that space. I don't know about you, but as a seasoned educator, October was always difficult too, because

we’re in the mentor space for all of those new ones. And it’s difficult for everyone, I think, in October, because your kids with discipline and everything, you’ve used all your bluffs. And all of that wonderful planning that you did during the summer, you’re kind of at the end of the planning that you did for the beginning of the school year, and you realize the reality of the group of people that you have in your classroom, the group of children you have in your classroom, might have expectations that you didn’t know that you’re having to plan additionally for. And so I think that planning piece really gets everyone too. But yeah, shocktober. But we’re not going to have shocktober.

[00:09:52.830] – Lana

I tell them that. We’re going to have Positober. We’re going to acknowledge the negative and we’ve got strategies and things that we can do to get out of that space. We’re not going to sit down there at the bottom of the hill, the roller coaster.

[00:10:04.820] – Steve

So you’re looking to turn it into problem solving?

[00:10:08.200] – Lana

Yes, that’s what we’re doing. We’re going to identify it. We’re going to name it. Hopefully with teachers, as a coach, what I do is we try to get in and we name it. We say what’s causing this? Let’s get to the root cause. Tell me what’s happening. And as a coach, and when I’m coaching coaches, we think about active listening. What does it really look like to actively listen and to sit down in it with them? You’ve got to

have some empathy and get down in the trenches with them and really listen because things are negative. Again, it's not toxic positivity. This is not, "oh, we're just going to get over it. This too shall pass." So it really might not. We really may need to really take a look at what strategies or interventions and what support we might need as teachers to do that. So one of my favorite things about you, Steve, is your questioning and how you are responsive when you question. So I think it's actively listening and responding to whatever is said in that moment and thinking about what the teacher's needs really are. And one of my favorite things to think about is emotions, because a lot of times when we're getting to that frustrated place, we have strong emotions about it.

[00:11:33.680] – Lana

And emotions usually come sometimes from a need. Something you need is causing that strong emotion to happen. And so if you can drill down to what kind of angry are you? Or what kind of frustrated you are, and then what is that emotion connected to that you might need? And then take action on that need and get support for that need, whatever that need is. So, for instance, with your example of the teachers who might need support with discipline, we could talk about what does that really look like? And really, I would probably talk with each teacher individually because even though it seems to be a generalized problem, most likely, there's going to be a different problem in each of those learning spaces.

[00:12:23.590] – Steve

And with each teacher, I'd probably get to different kids. Because as long as you're looking at the overall of this problem, it's not a solution. You really can't start focusing on a solution until you can narrow it down further.

[00:12:45.860] – Lana

You really can't. We try to get out of that generalized space. Sometimes we generalize everything as bad when really it's not. Really, we can get down to whatever that specific need is for us, wherever we are in our experience as a teacher, or wherever we are in our need for tools and strategies and our relationships and connections with those students, whatever pedagogy we need, as far as being engaging, that kind of thing, it could be anyone. And any one of those things or something else. You just never know.

[00:13:22.290] – Steve

It's part of the coaching piece and having a team of colleagues to work with that extend your options. I frequently describe that you can struggle with a student day after day after day and not get stressed as long as you're coming in tomorrow with a new plan. Stress is when you're driving in. I would say, you're driving in and you know the student's going to be there because he's never sick. You know he's going to be there and you know what he's going to do, and you have no idea how you're going to respond. That's when the high stressor really comes at you.

[00:14:06.450] – Lana

It really does. And that's where it's like you call your coach, man, because your coach can be that thinking partner with you and help you come up with that plan. And another thing that I'm really passionate about right now around this topic is the idea of self concept for teachers and for coaches, yourself included, is self concept being self esteem and self efficacy and then locus of control. So in the

intersection of all of those. Self esteem being – I don't know if I'm worthy of this. I don't know if I can do can do this. And then self efficacy, I don't know if I have the tools to do this. I don't know if I physically can. And then also the locus of control – I don't know if I have control over this. I don't know if I have the ability to make this happen. I don't know if it's in my scope or in my job scope. So looking at that with them too, and just seeing where are we in our self concept? And how, as a coach, discovering that self concept, because self efficacy being different than collective efficacy. And how does my feeling of being effective affect our charge as a whole?

[00:15:26.260] – Lana

So that's another thing as a coach, when I'm coaching teachers that I like to look at with them, and that could just be a series of questions, like, just to get there, "how are you feeling about this?"

[00:15:37.800] – Steve

I think you've given me several pieces to this, but I want to push for some specificity as a first step. When as a teacher, I realize I'm hearing my own negative voice, in other words, the conversation I'm having is with myself, it's not the three teachers having the conversations, it's me inside my head. When that hits that I know I'm having my negative self talk, what's the first couple of steps that a person would want to consciously look to?

[00:16:16.760] – Lana

Okay, so when you're self-reflecting on a problem saturated

conversation with yourself inside your head, the first thing you need to talk to yourself about is what is this problem? Is it negative or is it not negative? Really just kind of talk to yourself about the problem. Is this something that's happening over and over again? Is this something that has just happened once? And really dig down deep. Might I have some blind spots about this issue because I'm so passionate about it? Might I need to seek out support from someone else who can help me see those blind spots, like maybe a coach or a peer, a colleague? So I think it's just talking with yourself about it. How do I feel? How do I feel about this really strong emotional thing that is making me feel negative? What is it? And then I think the second step would be, okay, it's causing me to have this emotion. But what do I need? What is it that I really need that's causing me to have this emotion? So if I were thinking about the teachers, if we were talking hypothetically about our teachers who have the discipline issues, they could ask themselves, okay, is this really all of my students in the classroom or is it really only just a few?

[00:17:43.520] – Lana

Really just trying to find your current reality. I really think that's what it is.

[00:17:49.640] – Steve

Good phrase.

[00:17:50.780] – Lana

Yeah. And just digging down again. If I were coaching coaches, that's where I would say, okay, be sure you're there to be that reflective partner with them and help them drill down and

help them find those blind spots that they might not see as you help self reflect. And I think that is what I did. When I do Positober I sit back and they'll come. The negative thoughts, they come and you can't help it. Like, they're there, you're thinking, what is this know? And so then you're like, come on Lana, stop and think is this really a mess or is this a mountain or a molehill? That kind of thing. So and I'm like, oh, this is really not a mountain. This is okay. This is not something I need to spend all of my time on. I can move forward with this or this is something I might need to reflect on a little bit more because I have something that I need and I need to figure out action steps. So then there's the plan to meet the need. You got to come up with some tactics.

[00:18:54.920] – Lana

What are the tactics that I'm going to need to meet this?

[00:18:58.470] – Steve

As I was listening to you, I was labeling it as next step. So if my first set of questions get me to what is the reality, then what would the next step of progress look like instead of what would the next miracle look like? If this is the problem I'm having with students, what would be that indicator? And sometimes as a coach, it's the question I ask. What would be the indicator of a next step? What would be, as a teacher looking at your students, what would be a sign that you're making progress and that we'd work towards getting that sign of progress? Because that's the piece that will pull you up from there.

[00:19:45.400] – Lana

I love it. And as a coach, it's good to have that calibration so that when they see what they think success or you have a common idea of what's not success, when you're unsuccessful, what does that look like? Because a lot of times, current reality, that's where you can get kind of shift. I agree.

[00:20:08.000] – Steve

So let's see if together we can kind of do one strategy-wise. So you're an instructional coach. You're working in a PLC meeting, and you realize that the problem saturated conversation has hit. What do you think are the steps that an instructional coach or school leader or teacher leader who's facilitating that meeting, what are the first steps you think you can take when you realize that that problem saturated conversation has begun?

[00:20:45.260] – Lana

So as a facilitator, I probably would throw out a question. Because that's usually where we start, Steve, is with a question or a paraphrase. Because if I'm listening, if I'm actively listening as a coach and I'm hearing these problems over and over again, I'm probably going to paraphrase back to them. What I'm hearing you say is try to capture those emotions that they're feeling along with that paraphrase. So I hear you are having high emotions about this particular issue, whether it be around data or whatever it is in PLC. So let's talk a little bit more about this, about what we feel like is causing us to feel this way and let's acknowledge it and then let's see if we can come up with some action steps to make this not bring us down, make us not feel so heavy about it. Because I'm hearing your voice. I'm hearing you say that this is obstructing our joy. It's obstructing our ability to do our

best work and our motivation to keep continuing to teach students in a fantastic way. So let’s take a look at it. So I think it’s just drilling down and then, okay, the next steps would be after we could kind of name it, we name it.

[00:21:55.040] – Lana

We name what that issue is. Okay, the issue is this, and it may not be the first issue. I like to take Michael Bungae Stainer’s standpoint on that. What is the real challenge here? Because a lot of times what they feel like is the real challenge, it’s not really. So through questioning you can get down to, okay, so we’ve got this need. We know that we might need some active learning strategies because our students are not engaged. We’ve exhausted our toolkit. We don’t know. So is it professional learning that we need? Can your coach provide that for you? Can I provide that for you? Can we go off site somewhere wonderful and have a beautiful learning experience with some lunch? What would that look like? And then take the appropriate action steps to get there. And then as a coach, I would be like, okay, and then implementation when we return after that, what would it look like when we implement it into each individual’s classroom? So that’s when I would then as the coach facilitator to go in and follow up one on one with each one of those teachers on how they will individually take that group learning that we had in our professional learning community and individually insert it into their practice from their point of learning and experience.

[00:23:06.920] – Lana

So I think that’s what I would do.

[00:23:08.060] – Steve

And I think you took earlier, the statement that you put out big was empathy. So probably the empathy proceeds and then the questions follow.

[00:23:25.280] – Lana

Yes, I think so, because I think it's so important and I love that the blog that you posted by Tiffany Sostar, I believe it was, and she talked about agency and voice and choice and the importance around that when you're having a negative or a problem saturated conversation, because that sometimes is what's missing. You feel like you don't have those things, that could even be your need. And when you need those things, then you just kind of sit there and you feel like you need a miracle. Just kind of like what you said earlier. You feel like the only thing that's going to help this is a miracle. But that really does not have to be that way. It really doesn't. But before the coaching, the listening, the empathy, which really is part of coaching, but that important piece of coaching is that empathetic ear, the non-judgment. And I learned from Steve Barkley that you can't paraphrase well if you aren't actively listening.

[00:24:34.260] – Steve

Well, I'm excited that I posted this blog at the right time for you to lead it into Positober. I'll make sure that the link to the blog that we've been talking about is in the lead-in to this podcast and in the blog you'll find the connection to the additional article that Lana mentioned. So that's there for you as resources. Lana, if somebody wants to talk a little bit more with you about this or get a look at some of your Positober memes, what's the way that they can get in touch with you.

[00:25:18.740] – Lana

So you can get in touch with me, you can always email me at Lana.Cecil@esc13.txed.net. That's me. So if you want to have coaching questions or anything like that and you just want to talk to a coach, I'm here. If you want to join me for Positober, I suggest Facebook. I'll try to push it out into Instagram this year, too, since we're there. But on Facebook, if you just put in Positober, my business page for Positober will come up. I typically do it on my personal page, but you know what? This year I'll push it out and I'll tell my people to follow me on my business page and so you can find me there. So if you just look up Positober.

[00:26:07.920] – Steve

Terrific. We'll put your email in the lead-in too. Thanks so much, first of all, for responding to my LinkedIn piece. You frequently wonder when you're posting, is anybody really looking at this? So it always feels good to get a note that somebody saw it and read it. But then for agreeing to join me here and doing the follow up, I really appreciate it.

[00:26:30.250] – Lana

You bet. Thank you for having me. I really enjoyed it.

[00:26:34.600] – 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, where send me your questions and find my videos and blogs@barclaypd.com.