My Secret Coaching Weapon: Compassion

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I’m frequently asked, “What’s your secret weapon for coaching. What’s the number one tool or strategy you use?” I think people want a response such as, “It’s active listening,” or “I always plan for coaching conversations,” something concrete and replicable. After some reflection, I’ve identified my secret coaching weapon. It’s compassion. Working from this stance has made a night and day difference in my coaching practice.
When I’m training coaches, some say things like, “I will never be able to coach like you!” I always respond with this: “These are just skills. I learned this. I wasn’t always able to coach like this. I have learned and practiced and practiced and you too can develop these skills.” The majority nod and agree. They know they can learn.
This is also true for my secret coaching weapon. For me, coaching from compassion is an acquired skill, a habit I have intentionally cultivated for a long time. My tendency (like that of so many of us) was to work from a place of judgment, to use “urgency” as a manipulative weapon with which to treat teachers and other adults without kindness or empathy or respect. When I recall those ways of being, I feel angry with myself and sad, and then I exercise some self-compassion and acknowledge that I was doing the best I could with what I had. And I’m also grateful that I recognized the limitations of acting from a place of judgment and that I shifted my practice.
 **The Lens of Compassion**
It is compassion that helps me most when I hear a teacher say something that I feel is racist or doesn’t serve all students. I can say to myself, “I wonder what’s led this teacher to think this way? I wonder what’s underneath this statement?” rather than going to an angry place. These questions then allow me to genuinely explore a person’s beliefs and to do so in a kind way. Compassion is what calms my racing heart when I see students being treated unfairly–I know that it’s my compassion for both the students and the teacher that will allow me to calmly engage in a conversation about what I saw and to hopefully help that teacher gain some awareness about his or her actions. I’ve learned that I can hold compassion for both the teachers and the children at the same time–it doesn’t need to be one or the other. I can hold both and advocate for children by being compassionate towards adults.
Compassion is what reminds me that it’s really hard to work in schools–hard on our minds, bodies, hearts and souls. It’s also really hard to be a human being! I love this quote (attributed to different sources) that says, “Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” I remind myself that I don’t know what’s going on for every educator I meet, observe or work with, and that our lives are very complicated and often very challenging. And I’ve had a whole lot of experience which showed me that acting from a place devoid of compassion didn’t work.

For a couple years I led a team of transformational coaches in the Oakland Public Schools. Every Friday, we gathered for learning and reflection time. During a rough few months when there were many changes that were outside of our control and many changes that we disagreed with, I began noticing that I was getting hard, I was drifting from a compassionate stance. I noticed my judgment creeping in and I saw this happening in my colleagues. As a team, we did some reading together, (we read Margaret Wheatley’s [*So Far From Home*](http://www.amazon.com/So-Far-Home-Found-Brave/dp/1609945360/ref%3Dsr_sp-atf_title_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1410710636&sr=8-1&keywords=so+far+from+home)) we talked a lot and then we created this [Lens of Compassion.docx](https://brightmorningteam.com/wp-content/uploads/edweek/Lens%20of%20Compassion.docx) The Coaching Lenses (originally developed by the National Equity Project) that are in my book do not include this lens–and it felt essential that we intentionally funnel our thinking and analyses about what we were dealing with in schools through a lens of compassion. Our actions emerge from our thoughts and beliefs. If we were taking a hard and judgmental stance, our actions would not be transformational nor as effective as if we took a stance of compassion. Using this lens, this approach, was tremendously helpful for all of us that year.
The “Lens of Compassion ” consists of “assumptions” and “questions.” The assumptions remind me of beliefs that I hold but that I sometimes forget. For example, when I read this assumption, “If we pause and choose a response to a situation, we are more likely to feel compassionate,” it reminds me that I can choose my response. It reminds me to pause. It reminds me of how to cultivate compassion. The questions in the Lens of Compassion direct me towards actions I can take. They remind me of the extensive tool set in my coaching tool box and help me figure out a way to respond to whatever I’m seeing or experiencing. I now use this Lens in consultancies that I facilitate, as well as in my own thinking and reflections on my work.
 **Strategies for Cultivating Compassion**
Sometimes when I share this “secret weapon” with others, I’m asked, “How do you cultivate compassion?” While I can share my own practices, this is a personal practice because it gets deep into our values, our beliefs, our spiritual lives, and our traditions–and so I encourage you to explore what works for you.
One simple way I cultivate compassion is by slowing down, by quieting my mind and breathing. I practice mindfulness meditation which helps me create more pauses between what I experience and how I react–within those pauses lies the option of compassion. Mindfulness helps me have perspective and see things that I might not otherwise. Another practice that helps me cultivate compassion is to spend a few minutes before meeting with a client trying to imagine what their day has been like. I visualize everything they’ve experienced so far in their day, I wonder about how they might be feeling–physically, emotionally–at that point, I try to put myself in their shoes for the day. The more I know about my client the more real my visualization can be. This practice always helps me soften and empathize.
I also find wisdom and guidance in Buddhist texts. Sometimes reading just a passage or two of a favorite book waters my compassion seeds for the day. There are a number of other contemplative activities that help me stay grounded (most of the time) in a place of compassion. What I know is important is that I intentionally and regularly cultivate this way of being, otherwise I digress to unskillful ways.
I encourage you to play around with the [Lens of Compassion.docx](https://brightmorningteam.com/wp-content/uploads/edweek/Lens%20of%20Compassion.docx) Print it out, carry it around, and for a few days read it before, during and after meetings or coaching sessions, and see what the difference is in your work. This kind of exploration is often best done in community–so if you have another coach or two with whom you can discuss what you’re trying and experiencing, you’ll get more out of it. But just see what happens if you use this lens to bring some awareness to your heart–take an inquiry stance and see what happens–which also means that you don’t get to judge yourself or get angry with yourself! You simply notice what’s happening.
**Compassion as a Necessity**
The primary “problem” I see in our schools is a compassion-deficit. I think this is perpetuated by the frenetic pace at which we’re asked to work, as well as the transactional hierarchical leadership models in place in the majority of our institutions. It’s also not valued by many in our education culture: compassion doesn’t show up on rubrics to assess teachers nor on report cards for kids (which I’m grateful for, let me make that clear!). But while we’re spending millions on testing and STEM initiatives and so on, I wish we were allocating equal time and resources to cultivating compassion in educators and children.
What we’re doing isn’t working; there are very few places where we’re seeing the changes we want to see in schools. Teachers are leaving the profession in record numbers. Stress-related illnesses for educators have never been more prevalent. It’s not working and it’s time to try something else. The Dalai Lama offers simple and wise words on this matter: “Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.” It’s time that we attend to building these capacities.
I’m committed to shifting the big picture–the education system, the world–and while I’ll keep chipping away at what seems to be outside of my control I’m also continuing to cultivate my own compassionate stance–that is certainly within my control. Compassion is within me and always has been, but it gets clouded by my fear and insecurity, and so on a daily basis I feed the seeds of compassion so that it is strong and healthy and vibrant. And when I act from a place of compassion, when I coach from a place of compassion, I’m so much more effective.
So that’s it. That’s my secret coaching weapon. Onward!
**Some books I like about compassion:**
[Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of a Buddha](http://www.amazon.com/Radical-Acceptance-Embracing-Heart-Buddha/dp/0553380990/ref%3Dsr_sp-btf_title_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1410711005&sr=1-1&keywords=radical+acceptance), by Tara Brach
[An Open Heart: Practicing Compassion in Everyday Life](http://www.amazon.com/Open-Heart-Practicing-Compassion-Everyday/dp/0316930938/ref%3Dsr_sp-atf_title_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1410711036&sr=1-1&keywords=an+open+heart), by the Dalai Lama
[Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion](http://www.amazon.com/Comfortable-Uncertainty-Cultivating-Fearlessness-Compassion/dp/1590300785/ref%3Dsr_sp-atf_title_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1410711069&sr=1-1&keywords=comfortable+with+uncertainty), by Pema Chödrön.
[Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness](http://www.amazon.com/Lovingkindness-Revolutionary-Happiness-Shambhala-Classics/dp/157062903X/ref%3Dsr_sp-atf_title_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1410711094&sr=1-1&keywords=lovingkindness+sharon+salzberg), by Sharon Salzberg