

## ***The Insightful Leader Podcast Transcript***

### **You Can Lead Through a Crisis. But Can You Coach Through One?**

**Jessica LOVE:** The coronavirus crisis is forcing all of us to grapple with new questions—questions that cut across our personal and professional lives. “What should be my biggest priority right now? How can I balance my work obligations with my home obligations? And how can I do the right thing amid so much uncertainty?” Brenda Ellington Booth is used to helping people sort through these kinds of questions. That’s because, in addition to being a clinical professor of leadership, she’s also a certified executive coach.

**Brenda ELLINGTON BOOTH:** Coaches are specifically trained not to give advice, but really to ask people really thought-provoking questions so that the client or the coachee can figure out things for themselves. The coach is really there as a sounding board to help make connections where the coachee maybe doesn't see them.

**LOVE:** And the more coaching she’s done, the more she’s realized that coaching shouldn’t just be the purview of people with the word “coach” in their job title. She thinks all great leaders need to borrow from the executive coaching playbook. Because the ability to coach others through their own problems is a hallmark of good leadership.

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** No one is going to grow and develop if you tell them what to do all the time or do it yourself, you're not a very effective manager. At some point you've got to look for these coachable moments to help people learn and grow and develop.

**LOVE:** And in the COVID-19 crisis, these coachable moments take on entirely new importance. For one, these moments tend to reveal new information and insights that can be critical for managers—information about what motivates a person, or the problems that could be getting in the way of their performance. But looking down the road, if you want to come out of the crisis with strong, healthy work relationships intact, that requires investing time and energy in your people now, at this moment when they’re grappling with so many new and complicated things.

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** When we’re talking about business, your relationship with a person is everything. And you could lose so much good talent if you don't take the time to really think about how to develop and grow people, and to demonstrate that you care about them at the same time.

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** Welcome to *The Insightful Leader* from Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management. Today on the podcast: how you can incorporate coaching into your day-to-day conversations with employees, whether you’re the CEO or just have a few direct reports. Brenda Ellington Booth shares three techniques. We’ll hear tips for getting into the right

headspace for a meaningful conversation, how to get past surface-level problems, and why it pays off to focus on the people—not just the work—even in the midst of a global crisis.

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** So first off, let's answer a basic question. What makes coaching distinct from, say, mentorship, or leadership?

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** Yeah, “coach” is such a broad word, right? And it's used so frequently. But what makes coaching distinct, I think: It's a whole different mindset of how you approach conversations. So it's really dissecting a conversation and understanding what makes a conversation useful.

**LOVE:** Which brings us to coaching technique number one, what coaches call “listening to understand.” The idea is, in order to be a good sounding board for someone, you need to truly KNOW what they're dealing with. And figuring that out requires a different kind of listening than we're used to.

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** A lot of times people are listening to respond to someone. So you're talking, and you're kind of waiting to interject. Versus when you're really trying to understand what the person is saying, what the person is feeling, and not trying to kind of jump in, but just really trying to understand, “What's going on with you?”

**LOVE:** Often, what keeps us from this deeper, more attentive listening is that we're just not in the right headspace. This is especially true when we're connecting virtually—when you're in your own home, surrounded by your own stuff, your own family, your own problems. Not to mention all of the distractions that can tempt you while you're trying to have a conversation on a computer screen. So Ellington Booth says, listening to understand actually begins before you start the conversation.

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** Take a minute, maybe check in with yourself, “Okay, I'm getting ready to have a conversation with X. Let me just see where I am, to make sure that I can start to shift from all the stuff that's in my head to being focused on that other person.” And I literally do this little ritual where I kind of start thinking about, “Hmm, I wonder what they're going to talk about. Last time we talked about this. I wonder how they're doing on that.” So it's this notion of self-awareness, kind of making sure that I'm free from clutter in my own head, and then starting to get curious about that other person.

**LOVE:** That gets you ready to stay tuned in throughout the conversation. And lest you think that this is just a nice thing to do, but not really mission critical for leaders, Ellington Booth thinks otherwise. Because when you “listen to understand”...

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** You hear more! Instead of thinking that you know everything or that you kind of got it and you just want to get the information that you think you need, if you really listen

to understand, it helps you solve complex problems better, because you're getting more information by assuming that you don't know versus assuming that you know more than you do.

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** So once you're in the conversation, and ready to really listen, what do you listen *for*? This is the next technique, what coaches call "identifying the core issue." That is, the issue at the heart of a given problem—the one that the person really needs to deal with in order to solve the problem.

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** So a lot of times the presenting issue is not the real core issue. And a lot of times it takes some probing upfront—peeling the layers of onion—to get to what the real issue is.

**LOVE:** This is always a challenge. But Ellington Booth says that right now, it might be trickier than ever to isolate the core issues people are dealing with, since every problem these days has so many layers. For instance, if an employee is struggling to complete a report. is it that she doesn't know what's expected from that report? Or is she distracted by trying to homeschool her kids? Or maybe the uncertain economic outlook means she can't get the predictions she needs to complete the report. It's just hard to say. So in order to find out the real cause, you need to ask great questions.

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** A question that, you know, you can see that the person all of a sudden connects the dots and it's like, "Wow, I've never thought of that."

**LOVE:** These tend to be questions that drill down into someone's true concerns and motivations. "What *about* that report made it so frustrating?" "Why does this project really matter to you?" Or, "What are you *really* trying to convey in this meeting?" Ellington Booth gives an example of what this looks like in action. A few weeks into the coronavirus crisis, she was having a conversation with a client.

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** She had to lay off a lot of people. And she was getting ready to prepare for a meeting with basically the people that were left. And what she wanted to talk about was, "Okay, how do I have this meeting? You know, what do I do? What tone do I set?" And I asked her, "Well, what do you really want to accomplish in this meeting?" And it was really more her thinking about, "How do I connect to these people in a way that was authentic and genuine and to share her own experience. And it was less about the content, about what she wanted to say, but more about how she wanted to say it and what she wanted to convey so that people left the meeting feeling like she's in there with them and she has their back to the extent possible.

**LOVE:** This realization was only possible because Ellington Booth asked probing questions that dug below the surface. And you can do the same when you're coaching an employee. Asking these kinds of questions will not only help your coachee feel better understood. It will also help

train them to think about the real issues at play, so that the next time a similar problem comes up, they'll know where to focus their energy.

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** So once you've identified the real problem an employee is facing, you might think you know what to do next. After all, when leaders see a problem, their first instinct is usually to try and solve that problem. But being an effective coach means stepping back, and taking a different approach.

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** What really helps people is helping them figure out from their vantage point what to do about that problem. Because it's not us that's gonna solve the problem or execute on whatever ideas that we come up with. It's that person.

**LOVE:** This brings us to the third and final coaching technique, what Ellington Booth calls, "focusing on the who." The idea is, instead of fixating on the problem, you focus on the person, and how you can give them the tools to work through the problem themselves. For instance...

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** If someone feels overwhelmed with a big project and comes to you and says, "I even know where to start with this," instead of you saying, "Well, why don't you start here?" it might be, "let's kind of take a minute and think about this. Okay, what are all the elements?" And the person lays out the elements. "Okay, and where are you stuck? Okay, what are some ideas that you have for that?"

**LOVE:** To be clear, this doesn't mean leaders can't share useful information or offer guidance. Ellington Booth says it's OK to walk through what you might do if you were in the employee's shoes, for example. But the thing that transforms moments like these into coachable moments is realizing that *your* answer may not be the same as *their* answer. And you should encourage the coachee to reflect on that.

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** Really getting them to think about, "Now that I've given you this information, how does that sit with you? What appeals to you? What might not appeal to you?" And that's coaching the who.

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** So to recap Ellington Booth's three coaching techniques: First, set yourself up to listen to understand. Next, ask probing questions that really get at the core problem at hand. And finally, when helping them solve that problem; focus on the "who," not just on fixing the "what" of the problem.

Now, it may seem difficult to incorporate these techniques into the flow of everyday work. Turning an ordinary check-in with an employee into a deep, thoughtful conversation about their

deepest fears and desires may seem awfully time-consuming! But Ellington Booth says that coaching doesn't need to derail the usual course of business.

**ELLINGTON BOOTH:** It might take 10 minutes versus 30 seconds versus for you to tell that person what to do, but you rob that person of the opportunity to kind of take something complex and make it into succinct, actionable items. And that's a skill that they can use over and over again and it makes your job easier over the long-term versus you just telling them what to do.

**[musical interlude]**

LOVE: This episode of *The Insightful Leader* was written by Jake Smith. It was produced by Kevin Bailey, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Michael Spikes, and Emily Stone, and mixed by Michael Spikes. Special thanks to Brenda Ellington-Booth.

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We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of *The Insightful Leader*.