

When NOT to Speak Up

By Tony Stoltzfus

Maria is a coaching client with too much on her plate. She has trouble meeting her commitments, she is always a day late and a dollar short, and her life is a jumble of competing demands and half-remembered promises. As her coach, the change agenda that would make the most difference is pretty obvious: Maria needs to get her life under control. But she doesn't see it that way. What do you do? As the old song goes, "How do you solve a problem like Maria?"

Coaching is the art of helping people change by believing in them unconditionally. Instead of telling them what to do, you listen and ask, because you believe in the person's relationship with God and their ability to make the changes they need to make. That means you let go and let Maria choose what to work on. That's the simple answer.

But letting go of an obvious blind spot to work on something else is a counterintuitive concept. At first hearing, people always raise a million practical objections. The discussion usually boils down to a question like this: "If I see my client doing something wrong, don't I have an obligation to say something about it?"

Here's how I respond. Pause for a moment to really ponder the following question, and answer it with a number:

How many things does God see right now that are wrong with your life or that don't meet His standards? _____

As the expression goes, there's a hole with no bottom! The gulf between God's holiness and yours is larger than the universe. If we saw a true picture of God's holiness alongside our own depravity, it would literally kill us (See Exodus 33:18-23). Yet of all our infinite number of shortcomings, how many is God explicitly prompting you to work on right now? My experience is that I can count that number on the fingers of one hand. Of all that God sees in me that needs to change, he only chooses to reveal a few things at once. Applied to coaching, I call this the See/Say principle: *Just because I see something doesn't mean I'm supposed to*

The See/Say Principle

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say it.

Seeing a problem in a client's life does not make me responsible to address it. At any moment, God sees many things wrong with me, but asks for change on only a few. Therefore, I need to figure out what things God is speaking to the client about and limit my agenda to match His. I'm only responsible to say the things that God prompts me to say. Even Jesus accepted this limitation, when He stated, "...The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). That's pretty amazing.

So, you are not responsible to speak to everything you see in others. Your mandate is only to address what God specifically prompts you to address. Accepting this principle frees you to let go, love your clients and believe in them unconditionally. That letting go of responsibility for others is a big part of the greatness of the coaching relationship.

Adapted from the book, [Leadership Coaching: the Disciplines, Skills and Heart of a Coach](#), by Tony Stoltzfus