

Ep #283: An Important Question About Vulnerability and Transparency in Coaching



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Hey, this is Lindsay Dotslof, and you're listening to Mastering Coaching Skills, episode 283.

To really compete in the coaching industry, you have to be great at coaching. That's why every week, I will be answering your questions, sharing my stories, and offering tips and advice so you can be the best at what you do. Let's get to work.

Hey, coach, I'm so glad you've joined me today. Before I get into today's episode, I want to tell you what kind of episode you can plan for because it's a little different than what I usually do here. So I have been thinking about this thing for a long time. It's been swirling around in my mind, taking up a bunch of real estate. It comes and goes, and I have formed some opinions about it, and I also have some things that I'm still working out, and I want to make that really clear up front. Not as a disclaimer, but because I think it matters that you know I don't feel like the authority on this, and I also think that's okay.

I will actually be ending the episode asking you to send me your thoughts on this and your ideas. So just think about that as I'm talking, okay?

There is this idea that I don't think I talk nearly enough about that I truly believe in my core, and that's what's going to come out today. So I think this goes back to Socrates, something about the wisest person in the room is rarely the one with all of the answers. And the wisest person in the room is actually the one who knows exactly what they know and is completely honest about what they don't.

And I think about this a lot in the coaching industry because I think sometimes the messaging can be that you have to be completely confident and certain in everything you say because you are the expert. And I think we just have a tendency sometimes to conflate authority and certainty because I think you can be certain without being fully authoritative. And you can be an authority on something without being completely certain on every single aspect of it.

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If you're still figuring something out, you don't have to have a take on it just yet. You don't have to turn it around and turn it into your intellectual property or make it a theory that you are putting out into the world.

And I just think it's important to have that framing before we move into what I'm about to say.

So here's what sparked this, a quick story. A couple weeks ago, I wrote a newsletter to my list. I send out a weekly newsletter called Full Disclosure, and I wrote a newsletter during Coach Week, which historically has been one of my biggest coaching events of the year. And in that newsletter, what I wrote was, basically, I think I made a big mistake in planning this and gave some insights to why, how I'd come to that conclusion, and just what was happening for me in that moment. Because that is the whole point of the newsletter is that it's a little peek behind the curtains, a little behind the scenes.

So I wrote the newsletter, and then I added it to my shared document that I share with my business manager, and it was supposed to go out the next day. And then I went on with my evening, and then I went to bed. And then I woke up in the morning, not in a full body panic, but with an immediate knowing that I needed to message her immediately and tell her, do not send that newsletter because it's not complete. It's a little messy, it's a little too vulnerable, and I'm going to save it and or delete it, and I will write a new one.

So I went to my computer, very first thing in the morning, and thinking I had a couple hours to spare before the newsletter was being sent, I sat down, I got cozy, I pulled up my email because I was just going to check that really quickly as I was thinking through, okay, that means I need to write a new newsletter. What will that be about? And I just felt relaxed at that point, right? So I opened my email and the very top email is a reply to my newsletter that had been sent about 10 minutes before I sat down at my computer.

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So I had no other choice in that moment. I just had to sit in the discomfort. I had to sit in it. The discomfort that newsletter went to my entire list, and I had shared this thing that felt maybe a little too vulnerable, a little too in the moment, I guess. And that's just where I was. So I sat there.

And what came up for me sitting in that discomfort, honestly, is a question that I think about a lot, way before this newsletter, and it's only gotten stronger since then. And it's one I don't think it's talked about very often. And so I want to have a discussion here, and this is where I'll be asking for, I'm really curious how you think about this, what you think the answer to this is.

And the question is, what is yours to share? When it comes to your business, when it comes to sharing with your clients or potential clients, what do you share? What feels important? What is appropriate to share and what isn't? Over the last year, I've been leaning fully into a lot of transparency, and that has been incredible. And I feel I'm always writing this line or trying to find this line between the transparency that's useful and the transparency that's too much.

So this isn't necessarily a content question. It's not necessarily a social media strategy question. But it's just a professional one or a human one. Because I see coaches navigating this all the time at every angle in their business, at every stage, at every corner. New coaches wondering how much of their story to bring into a session, how many examples of their own to use, and whether sharing their experience helps a client feel less alone or if it accidentally makes it about them, about the coach. Or coaches building an audience trying to figure out where the line is between transparency that builds trust and transparency that just makes people uncomfortable or makes people rally around this bad thing that happened to you or this hard thing that happened.

Or even established coaches wondering if showing that messy middle—this is what I felt I was doing—makes them more relatable or if it quietly undermines the confidence their clients need to have in them. Or if it even

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plants seeds for those clients that are, if it can happen to her, it can happen to me.

And for me, this question has never fully gone away. It just gets a little more nuanced, and I don't think that it's necessarily this huge problem to solve as in I don't think it's black and white. I don't think there's, here is the right answer. I think it's just a tension to know and for you to hear maybe that's normal and for us to understand and navigate together as an industry.

Here's something I've observed after about 10 years of watching my clients and coaches specifically wrestle with this, including myself. The first thing is that most coaches sometimes collapse authenticity and oversharing into the same category, and then overcorrect in one direction or the other.

Either they share everything because they've been told vulnerability builds connection, which it does, but as maybe you're hearing from what I'm talking about, maybe not all vulnerability and maybe not all the time. Or they share almost nothing because they're afraid of getting it wrong or they're afraid of sharing too much, or they just don't want to put any part of failure, getting it wrong, out there when it comes to themselves. And then they wonder why maybe their audience never feels close to them. Or they've been taught you can only share from being an expert, and expert means complete certainty all the time. No curiosity, no questioning. Which I actually think curiosity and questioning is our superpowers as coaches.

But I do think authenticity isn't about sharing everything. It's about sharing some of the truth that's really important to give context to what you're talking about and to what you're teaching. That's not the same thing as sharing every single thing, every thought you have, every fear you have.

And then the second thing is, and this is probably the one I think the most about, is that timing matters as much as content. So something can be true. It can be processed, it can be genuinely worth sharing, and it can still not be ready to be shared yet.

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What I've noticed in myself and in a lot of the coaches I work with is that the discomfort you feel after sharing something isn't always a sign you've done something wrong or you've shared something you shouldn't have.

Sometimes, it's just a sign that you didn't pause and question, is now the time to share this? Or is this fully cooked, right? Is this done baking? Before you've finished sitting with it long enough to hand it over cleanly, when you share it, that can feel really uncomfortable. And that's a different problem that has, I think, a different solution.

And then the third one is one I have the least unclear answer to. What is the unintended impact of what you're sharing? Because as a coach, here's what I know. I can ask myself all the great questions. I can have really good intentions. I can share something true that I fully processed and is well-timed, as in this is the right time, as far as I can tell, for me to share this thing. And it can still land with the listener or the reader or the content consumer in a way that I didn't anticipate.

So someone hears maybe permission where what I was trying to vocalize was caution. Or someone can hear doubt where what I was vocalizing was just honesty. And I don't think there's a way to fully protect against this piece. But I do think staying curious about the impact that you're having consistently, whether you have five people watching what you're doing or 5,000, it's just really important to stay curious always about your impact. And not defensive or defensively curious, but just truly curious. And again, as coaches, it's what we're really good at.

I actually think there's a part of staying curious that can connect you to your integrity, that can keep you out of saying things that you don't really mean or saying things that don't actually align with who you are or what you believe.

And what I think can happen with this unintended impact of transparency is if you are sharing something way before you've thought it through or before you've fully processed it yourself, especially if you have a large audience, if you have a bigger impact, which I think is important to consider, you can

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start to plant seeds, unintentional seeds in people's heads that, like I said earlier, oh no, if this didn't work for her, it won't work for me. Which I just think is really important to consider anytime you're sharing something.

So here's where I am with this right now. This is not a framework. This is not me saying I'm an expert at this and here's what you should take away from it. It's just actually what I'm thinking through in this moment.

I do think that the question, who is this serving, is worth asking every time, especially if you have a large audience, you have maybe some sort of authority outside of coaching that you're bringing with you into the space that just gives you more clout to begin with, right?

If you're, for example, a physician and you are talking about physician mental health and there's just a certain authority that comes with that might be different than even me talking about it from the point of view of just talking about opinions or things that I've noticed.

So again, just always considering who is this serving? Is this something I'm just processing out loud and this just happens to be a convenient place? Or is this something that when I really consider the message, I know deep down that people need to hear for some reason, one reason or the other?

And I actually know when I first started my coaching business, I was quite vulnerable on social media all the time, and I led myself with the thought, I'm willing to share this if at least one person will benefit from it. And that's something I teach my clients now.

But as you grow your business, that changes a little bit, right? If I'm, one person needs to hear this out of, I don't know, 10,000 listeners this month to the podcast, that's not quite the same thing. Because almost 300 episodes in, I have just developed a little more authority around what I share on here. And so you might hear it, anything I say, and think, oh, this is just the truth of the universe. And so I like to be a little careful about that, which is why it's something I think about all the time. See, we've come back full circle.

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I also believe the discomfort you feel before sharing something is data, not necessarily a stop sign. It's just worth getting super curious about what is it telling you? Because there are differences. It could be telling you this isn't ready yet. It's not fully baked. It needs another few minutes. I can wait till next week, nothing will change by then.

It could also just be telling you, hey, this is really scary but also super important and people need to hear it, absolutely share it. Or it might also be telling you, this is mine, it's a little too personal, this is not for other people to hold right now. If I shared it right now, it would be more for me, not for people listening. And that scary moment can feel very similar if you don't take a second to question where is it coming from.

And last, I also kind of believe, or not kind of, I fully believe that not having it all figured out is not the same as not having authority. You can hold onto a question and own it with so much expertise. You can explore something out loud as I'm doing right now and still be the expert in the podcast room.

In fact, I would even argue sometimes that is exactly what your clients need to see you do. Your clients don't always just need to hear you say, here's the answer, boom, move on. They might need to hear you say, I don't know, let's think about it. What do you think? Because that's real coaching, right?

Okay, so here's the ask. Here's what I really want to know from you, and I'm serious. I know this can feel, I listen to podcasts sometimes and I hear them ask questions and I'm, nobody actually responds to that. Or my real thought probably is actually everybody responds to that. And here's what I want you to know on the back end of running a popular podcast that has lots of listeners, not many people actually reply. I think it's an ask that just goes into the ether.

And here's what I want you to know about this. This is a real, genuine ask. I want to know your answers. I may even share some of them anonymously or with your name if you give me permission on future episodes because I

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think this topic is super important and it's just something for us to be in conversation around.

Here's what I want to know. Two things actually, or you can answer one of the two things. First, what is the line for you? Maybe you figured this out and maybe you haven't, but what is the line for you around what you share? Maybe you're right in the middle of it, maybe you're learning. Or maybe you have a really specific example, something you've shared that landed differently than you expected or something you held back and later wished you had been more transparent about. This can be in a coaching session, it can be in your marketing, it can be in some form of content that you're putting out into the world, really anywhere.

Or what kind of transparency do you like? So if you're a listener to this podcast, do you like when I share personal stories? Do you like when I share things that I don't fully have figured out, I don't have the answer to? Or do you prefer more of that expert energy that's, here's what I did, here's what I learned, here's what you can take away from it? And I want you to know I really don't think there's a wrong answer. I'm just so curious. What is it that you like? And as the listener, what are you craving? What do you want to hear more of?

So find me on Instagram @lindsaydotzlaf and send me a DM and tell me, what is your answer to this? Or if you're on my list, you can reply to my newsletter and answer it there too. I read every single response. I read every single DM. And even if you're listening to this in the future, two weeks in the future, 10 weeks, two years in the future, as long as I'm still coaching and as long as I still have Instagram, you can DM me and I will find your answer fascinating, I promise you.

I'm really hoping this turns into a conversation that we can continue and that I can read some of your responses to because I think there's no one right answer and it could be really useful for everybody to just hear how differently people think about this.

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So in closing, if you aren't already on the Full Disclosure list, that's the weekly newsletter, and you want to be, if you're, okay, this sounds interesting, we'll put that link in the show notes and you can join there.

Now, this newsletter that I'm speaking of, when this comes out, that newsletter has already gone out. But if you want to read it, feel free to reply to, sign up for the newsletter list and then reply to one of the newsletters and tell me you want the newsletter from episode 283 or whatever, and I will forward it to you.

This is where the newsletter is where I share a lot of things like this, things I'm thinking about, things I'm going through in the moment, wins, losses, things I'm sitting with, things that feel hard, things that might work for you, just all kinds of different things. But it is fully behind the scenes, very transparent. That's why it's called Full Disclosure, and if that's the kind of thing that you're into, then you should join me.

I have really loved starting the newsletter. It feels a place where I can just be so candid, even more so than I am here on the podcast, which for some of you might be hard to imagine, but it really just feels not me thinking about what's this content I'm creating, but what is something I am actively working through, and what is useful about that to share with you.

It's also where you get a little taste for what it might look like to work with me in my containers. I'm pretty open and honest and transparent. And if that's something you're into, again, maybe consider joining me in the membership or in the mastermind. I don't think either of those things are currently enrolling when this episode comes out, but we will put the links in the show notes to join the wait list.

All right. I will see you next week, friends. Goodbye.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Mastering Coaching Skills*. If you want to learn more about my work, come visit me at lindsaydotzlafoaching.com. That's Lindsay with an A, D-O-T-Z-L-A-F.com. See you next week.