

Designing for Emotions, Not Just Content

Elena: If you've ever felt like your PD session was technically fine, but still falling flat, then this episode is for you. Hello, friends, and welcome to the Bright Morning Podcast. I'm your host Elena Aguilar, and in each episode, you will learn how to lead conversations. And create experiences that build connection and spark real change.

So today we are going to talk about a truth that I come back to again and again, which is that learning is emotional. It's neuroscience, emotions, shape what people remember, what they engage with, and what they take with them. So if we are designing PD that ignores emotions, we are missing the foundation of learning.

So to get into this, let me tell you a story. A few years ago, I was leading a session for district-level coaches, and I had crafted the agenda so carefully it had clear outcomes. Varied structures and great resources, and I was so proud of the design. But five minutes into delivering it, I could tell that something was off.

People were too quiet; no one was making eye contact. My opening questions got minimal responses. And I saw crossed arms and felt heavy energy. And you know, you get that feeling in your gut as a facilitator when the room just feels off. That's what I felt. And to be honest, I did have a moment of panic. I thought, did I misjudge this content?

Have I lost them already? And then I paused and I took a breath and I remembered. The energy in the room isn't always about me, and it's not always about the session design. So I paused and I asked, how's everyone doing this morning? And there was a long uncomfortable silence. And then finally someone said, honestly, we just found out that two of our colleagues are being let go.

It's been a rough start to the day. That acknowledgement and the opportunity to name what folks were experiencing was crucial, and once that emotion had entered the room and had a space in the room, people actually relaxed just a

little. We did take a few minutes to acknowledge that news and to engage in a brief grounding exercise.

And then from there, the group was able to engage more fully. And that experience reminded me that even the best content in the world doesn't land if people aren't emotionally present. So our job as facilitators isn't just to deliver knowledge, it's to create the conditions where learning can take root.

And to do that, you have to pay attention to emotional energy. You have to tune in and then respond in small and meaningful ways. So let's back up for a moment. How do you know when the emotional energy in a room needs your attention? You might notice things like you offer a discussion question and no one responds.

Or participants are avoiding eye contact with you or engaging in side chatter, or maybe you feel like this heaviness in the room or flatness, like no one is really there. Or maybe someone makes a comment like, oh, let's just get through this. Or maybe you just sense the tension or the anxiety, even if no one's naming it.

Now when this happens, it is really common for facilitators to feel kind of panicky and to worry that they're failing and to kind of begin an inward spiral, and I'm gonna help you to not do that and not doing that starts with recognizing that these moments are simply what happens when you are working with human beings, and they're also invitations.

They are opportunities to shift the emotional tone so that people can show up more fully. And to do that, you don't have to be like a super extroverted, charismatic leader. You just need presence and you need some strategies. So I'm gonna share 10 pretty simple strategies. You can use to respond to the emotional climate in the room.

Now, none of them require you to be someone that you're not. These strategies are really about noticing and choosing a response intentionally so, so I'm gonna share these with you, but I have also pulled them together for you in a free tool that you can access in the show notes. And it's called 10 Ways to Shift the Emotional Energy in a Room.

Okay, so lemme tell you what they are. So the first one is name what you're noticing. And this could sound like I'm sensing that we're carrying some tension today or low energy is anyone else feeling that? So just naming it can create relief. You can also invite a brief pause, like 30 seconds of silence, or you can



offer a short breathing exercise or a stretch break that can really reset the energy in the room.

The third strategy is to play music. You can play instrumental background music during a transition or even during work time, and that can create a feeling of calm or of energy. The fourth strategy is to use humor gently. A light authentic anecdote can release tension. Just make sure that it feels natural or authentic to you.

The fifth strategy is to offer choices. For example, you can say you can reflect on your own or talk with a partner. Choose what feels best. Choice builds agency and that feels good. The sixth strategy is to ask a grounding question. You could ask, what's something you're proud of this week, or what gave you a little hope recently?

The seventh strategy is to celebrate progress. Acknowledge something that the group has already accomplished, remind them of their efforts. The eighth strategy is to get people moving. You could send them on a walk and talk, but even a quick stand and stretch can help people shift emotionally and reengage.

The ninth strategy is to tell a short story that connects to the content emotionally, and this can help people relate and remember. And the final strategy, the 10th strategy, is to slow down. Sometimes the energy is often a room because people are still catching up emotionally to where you are intellectually.

So give them time. Okay, those were 10 strategies, and of course you don't have to do all 10 of them. Just start with one and notice what happens. Emotional energy can be subtle, but when you attune to it, you'll see that small shifts create big impact. So here's your challenge for this week. Try one strategy to shift the mood in a space that you're leading.

And even if the energy seems neutral, just try one. You might be surprised by what opens up when you attend to how people feel. Now, if this idea of designing for emotion resonates with you, then I hope you will join us at the PD workshop. And that is where we dive deep into creating learning spaces that honor the full humanity of participants.

And if you facilitate virtually, then our workshop called The Art of Virtual Facilitation offers tools tailored for online settings. And in the show notes,



you'll find links to all of those along with links to our free webinars, our newsletter, and membership options if you want to keep learning with us.

So thank you for being here today, and if this episode gave you a new lens to look at your facilitation, then please share it with a colleague. And if you are listening via podcast, then perhaps rate us or review us because that helps other people find us. And if you're watching on YouTube, then hit the like button and subscribe so that you won't miss what's coming next.

And if you're not watching on YouTube yet, come and join us. The link is in the show notes. All right. This show is produced by LesLee Bickford and Stacey Goodman does the sound engineering. Take care, everyone. Be well, and I'll see you next time.

