

How Power Shows Up in the Room: Episode 285

Elena: If you've ever felt the dynamics in a room shift, but you couldn't quite name why 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 experiences that build connection and spark real change.

Today we are talking about power. It is always present in PD spaces, whether we name it or not, but when you learn to recognize and navigate it with care, you open the door to deeper trust, stronger collaboration, and more honest learning. So, to get into this, I wanna take you into a session that I facilitated a few years ago.

It was with a group of teacher leaders at a large urban high school, and I had been brought in to help shift the culture of collaboration on campus. So the principal pulled me aside before the session and said, just so you know. There's a lot of tension between a few people in this room. They've worked together for years, but things have gotten complicated.

I nodded and I thanked her, but once the tension started, I realized this wasn't just tension. This was a power struggle. Two people were dominating the conversation. Many others stayed completely silent. One participant sat rigidly, arms crossed I down. It was just the kind of energy you feel before a storm electric, uncomfortable, and I knew I had to shift something.

So I paused the session and I said, let's take a moment to reflect. How does power show up in this room? And there was silence. And then a brave person said it's the same people talking. It always is. And someone else added. We say we're a team, but it doesn't feel like we're equal here. And those comments cracked something open.

The group started naming long held patterns and frustrations and assumptions, and it was hard, but it was honest, and that honesty led to real change. They ended up redefining roles. They co-created new norms, and the way that they met shifted. But none of that would have happened if I hadn't asked that question.

And I wouldn't have had the clarity or confidence to ask it if I hadn't done one thing ahead of time, which was that I had reflected using a tool that I call the Power Reflection map. So this is a simple but profound practice that I used before facilitating PD sessions or meetings or coaching conversations.

And it invites you to explore how power lives in the space that you're entering and how you wanna engage with it. This map includes three core questions, so I wanna walk you through them using this same story as our backdrop. First, what sources of power do I hold in this space? So for me, that included my role as the facilitator.

The fact that I was brought in by the principal gave me institutional power. My experience in coaching and facilitation my age, even my published books, all of these influenced how people might see and respond to me. Second, what sources of power might participants bring? So this was a seasoned group of teacher leaders with years of shared history.

Some of them had unspoken influence. Some of them were used to being the loudest voice in the room. Others had experienced being shut down or sidelined. So there was identity based power, race, gender, years in the district. And relational power that had been playing out for years. So the third question is, how do I want to use my power in this space?

And this is where this reflective process becomes transformative. So I ask myself, will I name power? Will I share power? How can I create structures? That help others feel safe stepping into their power, and that's why I opened space for equal Voice. That's why I stopped when I noticed that things felt really off, and that's why I asked that first honest and maybe hard question because I had already made the commitment to use my power with care.

So when we don't do this kind of a reflection, it can be easy to unintentionally reinforce the very power dynamics that we might wanna shift because we might silence voices without meaning to, we might center ourselves when we actually want to be building collective agency. But when we take time to get honest about power, when we see it, clearly we can use it in ways that build trust and possibility.

So let me give you one more example. Not too long ago, I coached a new facilitator who was feeling really nervous about leading a session for district leaders. And she kept saying, I don't have the same title as them. I don't think they're gonna listen to me. So we used the power reflection map. And in doing

this, she realized that although she didn't have positional power, she did have power from lived experience.

She had led transformational work in schools. She was grounded in equity. And she had the power of presence of being someone who listens deeply and invites others in. So we designed a session where she acknowledged all of that from the very beginning. She said, I may not have the same title as all of you, but I do bring a different kind of expertise and I'm here to help us learn together.

And that moment shifted the energy in the room. The leaders listen. They leaned in, and she led that session with confidence and clarity. All right, here's a challenge for you this week before your next PD session or meeting or coaching conversation, pause and ask yourself these questions. What power do I carry here?

What power might others be bringing? And how do I want to use my power today? Write down your reflections. Spend a little time with them, and then enter that space with intention. This is what it means to lead with integrity. It is what creates the conditions for transformational learning, not just for others, but for you too.

Okay? If this resonates and you want more tools just like this one, then check out the PD workshop. It's where we dive deep into how to design and facilitate learning experiences that are brave and human centered and truly transformative. And you will find a link to that in the show notes, along with links to the Art of Virtual Facilitation for those of you who are spending a lot of your days on Zoom or Google Meet.

And you'll also find a link to our free community webinars. All right, friends, thank you for being here with me today, and if this episode helped you think about power in a new way, I'd be so grateful if you might share it with a colleague. And if you are listening to me on a podcast app, then leave us a rating or a review.

It really helps others find their way to this work. And if you're watching me on YouTube, then hit that like button and subscribe to the channel so that you won't miss future videos. And if you're not watching on YouTube yet, then come on over. You will find a link in the show notes. All right. This show is produced by LesLee Bickford, with Sound Engineering by Stacey Goodman.

Be well everyone.

