

# Data Conversations That Don't Shut People Down: Episode 288

**Elena:** If you've ever had a client shut down, get defensive or spiral into shame the moment you bring up student data, 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 that build connection and spark change.

Today we're talking about one of the trickiest parts of coaching, navigating data conversations. Especially when they get emotional, so let's get into it. Years ago I was supporting a coach who, I'll call Vanessa, and she had a middle school math teacher on her caseload, and I'm gonna call him Marcus. And he was kind and hardworking and deeply committed to his students.

But every time they sat down to look at student data, the conversation fell apart. Marcus would cross his arms and he would say things like, this doesn't show the full picture, or, my students don't test. Well, Vanessa wanted to help, so she'd push, she'd respond with things along the lines of. Okay, but we still need to figure out what to reteach next week.

And then Marcus would shut down. They were stuck in a loop and it wasn't working for either of them. So here's what I wanna say. When data conversations feel hard, it's often not about the numbers, it's about the story we hold about what those numbers mean. And that's where real coaching and real learning begins.

So today I wanna walk you through three powerful shifts that you can make to guide data conversations with more compassion and effectiveness. So shift one is start with story, not strategy. So before you dive into analysis or planning, pause. Ask, what's coming up for you as you look at this? Or what's the story you tell yourself about these results?

So these kinds of questions help people process meaning before jumping to solutions. Because here's the thing, every educator carries a story about data, and maybe that story generates shame. Or exhaustion or fear or pride. But if we don't surface that story, we're likely to coach the symptoms, not the root cause.

So give space, stay curious and let your client talk before you move the conversation forward. And also be sure to regulate yourself. If you are uncomfortable with silence or if you get defensive, you might rush to reassure or redirect, but growth lives in the pause. Shift number two is to name power and clarify.

Purpose data can trigger all kinds of power dynamics. It can feel evaluative, even if that's not your intention. So say it out loud. Name your role, state your purpose. You might say, I wanna remind you, I'm here as your coach, not your evaluator. Or you could say, my goal is to help you grow, not to judge your effectiveness.

So this kind of clarity builds psychological safety. It lets your client take a breath and stay in the conversation. Also, be honest about what the data can and can't tell us. It's okay to say this is just one snapshot, but it can help us ask useful questions. So that kind of transparency builds trust.

Shift number three, coach the emotional landscape, not just the intellectual one. When you notice emotion in the room, name it gently, and that might sound like saying, I noticed that you looked away just now. What's going on for you? Or. I heard you sigh. What are you feeling as you sit with this? These kinds of simple observations offered without judgment can open the door to powerful reflection.

One of my clients once said, I didn't even realize how much I was bracing every time we looked at data. I was making the numbers mean something about who I am, and that's when the real transformation began. So don't rush past the feelings. Don't try to fix or cheerlead. Just stay present. Let the emotions surface and then help your client explore how it connects to the beliefs they hold and the actions they want to take.

Because data doesn't change people meaning making does. Now, if you want help with how to structure these kinds of conversations, then the data conversation matrix, which is inside of our coach learning library, is a fantastic tool. It helps you locate where your client is emotionally, and it guides your next coaching move.

So here's your challenge for this week. The next time you plan a data conversation, pause and ask yourself, what's the story my client might be holding and what can I do to create a space where they feel seen not judged? Because when we coach data, well, we don't just improve test scores. We help educators reconnect with their purpose, their power, and their potential.

Thank you for being with me today. If today's episode was helpful, please share it with a colleague and consider leaving a five star review on Apple Podcasts. That helps others find us. And if you're watching on YouTube, then hit like and subscribe so you won't miss what's next. You'll also find links in the show notes to our learning library, including that data conversation matrix that I mentioned.

All right. LesLee Bickford is our podcast producer and Stacey Goodman does the sound engineering take care and be well, everyone.