Coaching Interventions: Responding to Bias and Deficit Thinking

There is not a single “best way” to respond when we as coaches hear comments or observe actions that demonstrate deficit thinking, negative assumptions, or unconscious bias against a particular student, adult, or group of people. As we determine what type of response might be most effective in shifting a person’s thinking or actions, we must consider essential factors such as:

- What is my relationship with this person? To what extent do we know and trust one another, and how might that impact this conversation?
- What might I need to consider about how this person may experience me, given who I am and who this person is (age, race, gender, sexuality, role, experience, etc.)?
- What am I “enrolled” to coach this person toward? If I’m not in a coaching role with this person, what kind of permission might I need to engage this issue meaningfully?
- What assumptions and beliefs am I holding about this person? How can I hold on to “grace” in this conversation (empathy, distress-free authority, and respect for people to choose when they learn or grow)?
- How might I approach the conversation in a way that will actually get this person to try out a new understanding, approach or strategy?

Sample coaching questions and statements:

- Can we talk more about this? Can you tell more about what you mean by ___?
- Can I share an observation? Here’s something I’ve noticed: ___.
- It sounds as though you’re feeling very frustrated, which is understandable. Are you open to talking about this more? Are you open to considering some other ways to understand / approach this situation?
- What makes you think that? What leads you to that conclusion?
- What other factors do you think might explain what you’re seeing? What else might be going on?
- What do you know about how this student is thinking or feeling about ___?
- I hear an assumption in what you’re saying – can I check that?
- You may not be aware of this, but when you ___, I’ve observed that it seems to result in ___.
- May I share a different perspective?
- I hear what you’re saying. I see this situation differently: ___.
- Here’s a disconnect I’m seeing: ___.
- Let’s look more closely at this (student work, assessment results, classroom observation data, student interview / focus group data, etc.). How can this help us understand what’s going on?
- How could we learn more about why you’re getting this result / response / behavior from this student (or group of students)?