

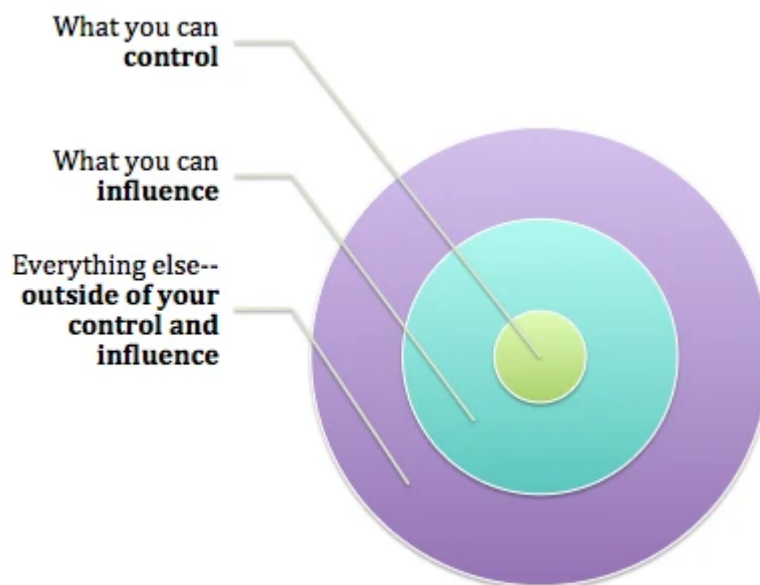
# Spheres of Control

By [Elena Aguilar](#) — January 22, 2014 ⌚ 4 min read

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A couple months ago, I described the “[Mind the Gap](#)” framework that I use when thinking about a coaching situation. This is one of the tools that I use to process what I hear a coachee saying that allows me to gain deeper insight and understanding into a situation. Here’s another simple framework that’s very useful--I didn’t develop the idea, (and I don’t know who did) I just created the graphic. It’s called the [Sphere of Control.docx](#)



This concept posits that the things we’re worried about or that we complain about fall into three domains: things we have control over, things we can influence, and things that are outside of our control and influence. When I hear a coachee talking about something that he is unhappy about, I listen through this framework and try to identify where this issue would fall.

## Try This Exercise

Before I explain how I use this in coaching, here's an activity for you to try. Think about your work life, your personal life, or both and list your complaints about this area--as many as you'd like. For example: I don't exercise enough, my rent is high, I hate waking up at 5:30a.m., and so on. Then code each of these complaints as either, "Within my control," "Within my influence," or "Outside of my control and influence."

Now, reflect on these questions:

1. What category did the majority of your complaints fall into?
2. Read the complaints that are outside of your control and influence and notice how your body feels. See if you can feel the emotional impact showing up on your body--perhaps your shoulders feel tighter, your breathing might shallow, and so on.
3. Of the complaints outside of your control, are there any that you can look at differently so that you can have more control over them? For example, if you were just told that as the head of the English department you needed to attend a twice a month evening meeting on the Common Core transition, you might feel like you have no control over this mandate. Perhaps you could talk to your principal about a rotating schedule where you'd attend some, but not all, of the meetings? Or perhaps you could request a stipend for attending? Sometimes we can find ways to influence what feels like something outside of our control, or at least to have a voice in it.
4. Of the complaints outside of your control, are there any that you'd like to let go of? Imagine putting them into a balloon filled with helium and then watching the balloon rise into the sky and disappear.
5. Look at the complaints that are within your sphere of influence and control. See if you can identify one concrete action you could do to address each one.

## How I Use This Framework

When I listen to a coachee talking about challenges she's facing, I use this framework to pay attention to where she's expending her energy. If I hear that she is focusing on the sphere outside of her control and I recognize the signs of mental and physical drain, I will ask her to do the exercise I just described above, or I might just call her attention to this (especially if we've discussed this before).

Here's an example of what I say:

I always carry around a copy of these spheres, printed in color (because that helps our brain remember things). I often pull it out and use it to help a client understand the concept and make decisions about where she wants to focus her energy.

## **When It's Time to Go**

If I am working with someone and I regularly hear him complaining about issues that are outside of his control, and if he's unable or unwilling to explore shifting his energies, then sometimes we explore whether the issues are related to a clash with his core values. For example, I worked with a principal who felt that he was asked, year after year, to modify his school's approach to teaching and learning in a way that deeply undermined the school's vision and mission. The school had been founded by educators and parents who sought an alternative to the standard public school, and after some years, the principal felt that district leaders weren't in support of this alternative. He constantly complained about hiring policies, curriculum mandates, PD requirements for administrators and much more--all things he had no control over.

As we dug deeper and what emerged was that he felt that his core values and those of his school were being eroded, he recognized that he could do nothing about the changes at the district level and he resigned. Sometimes a coach can be instrumental in helping a person recognize that his energies are being drained in the "outside of my control" domain, and that what's needed may not be a shift in perspective or a letting go and refocusing, but a change in position.



Things aren't always cut and dry as far as what's within or outside of our control. Sometimes there are things that are outside of our control that we really can have some influence over; the boundaries are murky. This is worth exploring with a client--as long as the focus is always on looking for opportunities to shift into a place of empowerment.

## **Use Your Energy Where It Counts**

This framework is about taking responsibility for our feelings, our choices, and our lives. It helps us move away from blame and into our own power. The bottom line is this: we have a finite amount of energy. The things that we can't change drain us, but we do have control over how we respond to them. Can we reduce the amount of energy that goes into our frustration about those things? Can we shift that energy into something we have more control over? The key is to use our energy where it counts. The more we focus on what's in our control, the more effective we'll feel. The happier we'll be. The more we'll be able to tackle what's within our sphere of influence. And for those of working in schools and towards a

vision of a transformed education system, if we focus on what's within our control and influence, there's a greater likelihood that we'll positively impact children.

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