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Engaging in Sustainable Community Change

A Community Guide to Working with a Coach

by Ken Hubbell and Mary Emery

Coaching from a Community's Perspective

Today, coaches work with more than athletes. Personal life coaches work with individuals; executive coaches work with leaders in the private and public sector; and community coaches work with local leaders and community organizations.

Coaching for communities is new for many of us. Simply stated, coaching for community change is a strategy that helps community leaders plan for and overcome challenges to progress and community development. Coaching offers a hand in keeping groups focused on long-term vision and priority goals despite setbacks. Coaching helps communities be purposeful and strategic about initiating, implementing and sustaining change.

Often, members of a community group attend conferences and training sessions that introduce them to community development *best practices*—strategies that have worked in others places, leading to increased capacity and supporting community change. Sometimes, leaders hear about other communities that have been transformed to succeed in the 21st century and wonder how they can do something like that in their own commu-

nities. Attending great conferences, hearing inspiring stories or participating in excellent training alone, however, are often not enough to implement change at home.

Experienced community change practitioners identify three things that serve to put the brakes on great intentions and plans:

1. **Loss of momentum.** Often when people come home from a training session all jazzed to get started, two things happen. First, the virtual pile of e-mail is toppling off virtual desks and the list of things that need to be done doubled since you left for the training. At the same time, co-workers who did not attend the event are definitely not as excited as you are about doing something new; they want you to get back to the tasks at hand.
2. **Change processes are messy.** Community change initiatives often unfold in a “one step forward, two steps back” style as new players, partners and leaders come forward. It is easy to get discouraged when you feel you are stepping back.
3. **Power of naysayers.** For every reason you have about why it is

Over the past 10 to 15 years a number of organizations, funders and practitioners have engaged in an evolving new practice which we call coaching for community change.

What is coaching for community change? Coaches do not assume the typical roles played in communities such as facilitation, teaching, training or mediating.

Ken Cohen, a former Horizons coach in Idaho, developed another definition: Community coaching is an adaptive process tailored to unique community contexts to guide systemic change via participant empowerment. Coaches don't do the work or lead the work; they help communities and community leaders develop the capacity to do their own work. Community coaching at its best is both the art of creating community and the craft of working in community; it is value-driven and adds value. Coaching supports and builds on the best in the community and often leads to catalytic change.

The Coaching for Community Change Initiative (funded in part by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation) developed this guide to as a resource for community leaders currently working on or planning to work on community change initiatives. Our work has benefitted greatly from the reflections of coaches involved in the two phases of the Rural Community College Initiative (Ford Foundation), the Mid-South Delta Initiative (W. K. Kellogg Foundation), the Horizons and Ventures projects (Northwest Area Foundation), Making Connections (Annie E. Casey Foundation) and others as well.

This working paper is designed to help you determine if you need a coach, and if so, how to make the best use of a coach's skills, knowledge and expertise.

important to see things differently or try something new, naysayers give three or four reasons why it won't work. Once the naysayers gain an audience, the pressure on other leaders to cave gets stronger. People are especially resistant to change when they feel someone else is imposing their idea of change on the community.

What can a community coach do to help you address these challenges? A community coach is a guide who helps communities and organizations identify and achieve their goals. A coach works with a community over the long term building the capacity to: improve communication, resolve conflicts, strengthen relationships, identify and connect to internal and external resources, provide opportunities for individual and collective learning, and respond to change. Community coaching can be used to create sustainable change, develop partnerships, build prosperity and create a hopeful future.

Coaching occurs at three levels— we like to think of it in terms of a map (Figure 1). At the simplest level, a coach can help you develop your itinerary, shape your community change agenda and identify resources. At the second level, the coach may help you identify alternative routes, strategies to avoid construction and ways to add to the journey's value. Transformational

coaching is the third level where you and your coach may discover new destinations that fit better with your vision. Transformational coaching helps communities address the elephants in their community living rooms, see above the ruts that confine the vision and conversation and create the “aha” moments when new possibilities appear.

Steps to Finding the Best Coach for Your Community

Once you decide you want to use a community coach, the goal is to make community coaching the resourceful, effective tool you need it to be. A four-step process will help you get the most from your coaching partnership. This process and the suggestions following each step are gleaned from conversations, evaluations and interviews involving experienced community coaches and people from groups that use coaches.

1. Determine Why You Need or Want a Community Coach

Communities get the best help from their coaches when the communities have important characteristics already in place as they organize for change or implement a community strategic plan. The Levels of Current Capacity grid on the next page lists those characteristics and prompts

a response describing the community's level of capacity in each area (“1” is not yet in place and “5” is very strong.) This grid can be used in group settings, as a survey tool or at community meetings, prompting conversation about the characteristics of community change. Those items with the highest scores are assets for community change that already exist in your community. Paying special attention to those items with the lowest scores will help determine if the current situation is ripe for coaching assistance and the specific areas in which a coach might be most helpful.

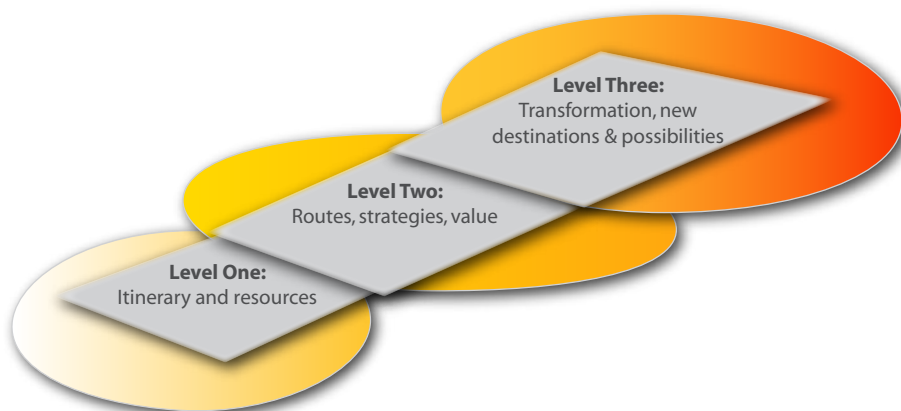
2. Select a Coach

Coaches usually come to communities or groups in one of three ways: as part of a foundation-supported change initiative, through an intermediary that is receiving foundation support to manage a technical assistance or capacity building program that involves coaching or because a community group determines the need for a coach and secures a coach for their efforts.

Finding the best coach for your group or community team is very important and may take some time. If your group is part of a foundation or intermediary initiative, a coach may be assigned to you or provided as part of a team of coaches. In this case, it is important for you and your group to work with the foundation or intermediary staff to find a coach that matches your needs.

If you are seeking a coach on your own, determining how a coach might help you is the first step. Discussing and completing the grid in Step 1 provides information that will help you to create a job description and develop ques-

Figure 1. Three Levels of Coaching



Characteristics of Community Change	Levels of Current Capacity					Comments
	1	2	3	4	5	
People are open to bringing in outside help.						
People are open to sharing and learning together.						
Local groups are connected and trust each other; spirit for collaboration.						
People focus on the discovery and appreciation of local assets.						
An emerging vision for the future is widely shared in the community.						
The leadership team believes it has the power to make change.						
A big challenge calls people together with a sense of urgency.						
A hopeful attitude is present despite the challenges.						
A game plan or roadmap for the community is in process.						
Community sparkplugs (people who keep the flame) are willing to champion the effort.						
A good-sized and representative group is committing time and energy to the work.						
Cultural brokering across community differences is evident.						
Change agents express willingness to be coached and to serve.						
People understand how a coach will work for and with the community.						

tions for interviewing prospective coaches. Once you have determined why you need a coach, you can seek referrals from your foundation partners or distribute informal requests for proposals or qualifications from practicing coaches. Many university-based Cooperative Extension staff have contacts with coaches.

Once you have assessed the “fit” for coaching in your situation and clarified ways your community can work with a coach, you can use the tips below to help you secure the best coach for your community or group.

- Get recommendations, referrals and credentials; find out about his/her experiences, the processes s/he uses and his/her skills.

- Make sure multiple groups/ stakeholders are involved and participate in the interviews.
- Understand that the coach works both for and with the community.
- Learn about the values and principles that underlie coaching for community change. Ensuring a match between the values and principles of the community and those of the coach is the foundation for a productive relationship.
- Assess the potential coach’s communication and cultural competency skills. Is s/he a good listener?
- One coach cannot address every possible issue; find out what the

options are for accessing other coaches with different skills and interests?

- Develop an understanding of the time and resources needed to support a successful coach/ community relationship and determine if these resources are available.

3. Negotiate the Coach’s and Community’s Relationship

Both you and the coach want this process to be as successful as possible. These tips help ensure that the relationship you establish with a coach is productive.

- Have a conversation among leaders and the coach about what you see as the opportunities and challenges in your community. Ask the coach what skills, experience, and expertise s/he has in relation to these challenges and opportunities.
- Make a plan of how often you will connect: by e-mail, on the phone and in person. How will the coach engage with those leading meetings and with the group itself?
- Make a written agreement with your coach about your expectations. It is likely that these expectations will be a bit vague initially, so write into the agreement a time to revisit and revise the agreement.
- If you feel uncomfortable about the relationship or if it is not progressing as you expected, act sooner rather than later by expressing your concerns to the coach using the written agreement as the basis for this conversation. If the coach is chosen and

paid by a foundation or intermediary, first talk with the coach; if the relationship does not improve, share your concerns with foundation or intermediary representatives.

We also recommend that resources to pay for the coach's services are identified and committed prior to finalizing a contract with the coach. Several options exist for paying a coach. Some communities set aside or dedicate the necessary amount from community development funds. In some cases, foundations arrange and pay for community coaches. Also, an intermediary may broker and support the community/coach relationship. A combination of two or all three of these options is also possible. Whatever the source of funds, a written contract between the coach and community or group provides the opportunity to discuss, clarify and document expectations.

4. Evaluate the Relationship for Success

As with every professional relationship, it is important to periodically evaluate the coach/community relationship to determine if expectations are being met or if the terms of the relationship need to be re-negotiated. If the relationship is not productive and an alternate agreement cannot be negotiated, it may be necessary to terminate the relationship.

The written agreement negotiated by the coach and members of the community provides the basis for a regular review of progress and expectations. It is important and appropriate to change the terms of this agreement to reflect the chang-

“Coaching is much needed, and if teams have the right coach, it can be an incredible asset.”

ing nature of the relationship and the specific assistance the community needs from the coach.

Conclusion

Community coaching is a valuable nutrient and catalytic agent to any group effort that requires innovative ideas, shared leadership or participation, and comprehensive or integrative approaches across boundaries and economic sectors. Effective coaching alone among strategic approaches provides the gestalt and enabling environment for collaboration, problem-solving and shared learning for the common good or for creating positive futures.

Coaching is both an art and a craft and an extremely effective tool for helping groups reframe their operating systems, unleash new ideas, transition to new leadership and negotiate partnerships—critical competencies for successful community building.

The following resources provide more information about coaching and the coach/community relationship.

Resources on Coaching as a Practice

- *Masterful Coaching: Extraordinary Results by Impacting People and the Way They Think and Work Together* by Robert Hargrove
- *The Heart of Coaching: Using Transformational Coaching to Create a High-Performance Coaching Culture* by Thomas G. Crane

- *Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others* by James Flaherty
- *The Handbook of Coaching: A Comprehensive Resource Guide for Managers, Executives, Consultants, and Human Resource Professionals* by Frederic M. Hudson
- *The CCL Handbook of Coaching: A Guide for the Leader Coach* by Sharon Ting and Peter Scisco

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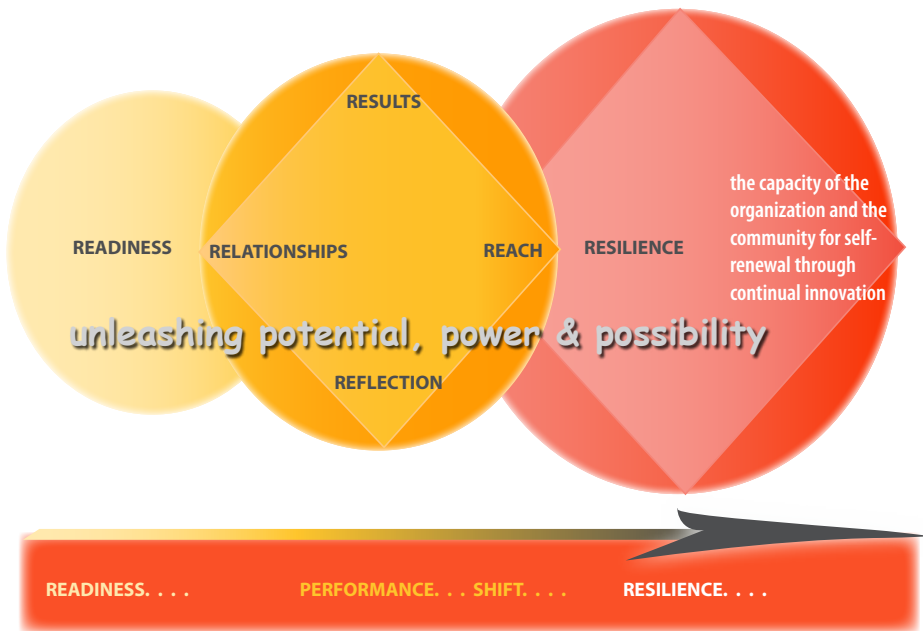
For more information about community coaching, visit:

<http://www.coaching.com>
<http://communitycoaching.ning.com>

The Six R's of Community Coaching

Community coaches work with a whole group or team, the leaders and sometimes on a one-on-one basis. They help community leaders assess **readiness** for community change. They coach for **results** as they help a team get unstuck and move forward. Coaches help leaders develop strong, trusting **relationships** within a team and across the community; they help create relationships that link leaders to resources, information and potential partnerships. Community coaches play a key role in crafting opportunities for leaders to learn from their experiences by creating space for **reflection**. Coaches also encourage leaders to **reach** out to the whole community, to stretch beyond the first glance of what is possible, and reach for a more vibrant and sustainable community. Finally, coaching helps leaders lean toward **resilience** by innovating new approaches and developing and monitoring sustainable strategies for change.

Figure 2. Community Coaching: Six Connected Pieces



The Case for Coaching for Community Change as an Innovative Practice: Four Reasons

- 1. Rapidly Changing Communities.** The rise of the Information Age has required changes in the practice of community economic development and organizational development. No longer can we rely on the expertise of others to guide us and external resources to support us. Communities, organizations and their leaders must identify and build on existing assets and find ways to continually expand their ability to learn from one another and the world around them; ways that are place-based and address the unique challenges and opportunities of that place. *Coaching offers communities a way to make use of best practices and outside expertise by learning how to adapt them based on community assets and capacity and by using local wisdom.*
- 2. New Leadership Structures.** Foundations, corporate structures and agencies have poured millions of dollars into succession planning as boomers retire and the organizations restructure around new leadership strategies. *Coaches aid people in recognizing the assets of traditional and non-traditional leaders, while at the same time framing the work in ways that lead to the co-creation of new leadership structures that are more fluid, adaptable and engaging.*
- 3. Increased Emphasis on Impact.** The fields of life coach, executive coach and personal coach are growing as people struggle with ways to achieve their goals and adapt to our rapidly changing world. Similarly, communities and organizations are looking for ways to learn about change, apply what they have learned and reflect on that process. *Coaching offers a different approach, one that facilitates leaders' ability to energize and mobilize people around a change agenda and help community institutions become learning organizations.*
- 4. Increased Return on Investment.** More foundations are supporting coaching as a way to increase long-term benefits of community change initiatives. *Coaching increases the return on investment in capacity building, leadership development and economic development efforts for outside funders and local investors.*

Community Coaching Project/Ken Hubbell 2007

Sustainable Community Change: Why Coaching and Why Now

For nearly two decades, there has been a focus in the philanthropic and community change networks on capacity building. Ironically, even though most of the field has grown to understand and embrace an “asset or strength-based” approach to capacity building, the term still characterizes the focus on correcting something or someone who is remedial, substandard or inadequate.

As the focus has now centered on sustainability, we believe there is a window of opportunity to heighten attention on a positive and respectful approach to learning and development: community coaching. As a member of the “family of coaching,” community coaching is readily associated with “talented people” rising to an even higher level of performance rather than the more prevalent “deficit frame” of

capacity building. Coaching rises above the stigma often associated with other developmental strategies.

Community coaching is uniquely positioned to meet the challenge of achieving sustainability for organizations and communities; these communities may be geographic or communities of interest. By building the competencies and skills of people within the community, community coaching recognizes and builds upon the human assets of organizations and communities. Effective community coaching can help transform communities and organizations into high-performing sustainable entities.

Community coaching may also be a useful strategy in addressing the organizational and community barriers of

race, class, gender, age, culture, sexual identity and others by establishing a set of principles that embrace diversity as a prerequisite to achieving the highest level of mutual learning. Diversity is in everyone’s self interest in a true learning community. The more expansive the diversity, the deeper and more profound the learning.

As we move deeper into the Information Age society, our current roles as content experts, consultants and brokers continue to change. With a plethora of information resources on our desktops, we cannot be the experts for our teams on every topic, but we can be aware of additional resources and, most importantly, we can be the guide on the side to help them plan and implement a successful proactive community-based planning process.

East Carroll Parish in northeast Louisiana straddles U.S. Highway 65 and is home to Lake Providence and other recreational and natural assets. Residents of this rural Louisiana parish are challenged by a declining economy and barriers to change that include racism and hopelessness.

A group of concerned community residents organized the East Carroll Cultural Tourism Initiative and began working to bring the races together through planning and organizing cultural and tourism events—events that also enhance the image of the parish and create economic opportunities through tourism development.

In 1999, the ECCTI was chosen to be a member of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s Mid South Delta Initiative.

As part of MSDI, the group received a project implementation grant as well as the assistance of a community

coach, Ken Hubbell. Team members negotiated with Ken and developed a service agreement based on what the team members felt they needed to be successful and what Ken felt he could provide. After the document was signed, it helped the team and coach manage their relationship and expectations. The agreement was reviewed annually and terms renegotiated based on the team’s progress and capacity, and the changing circumstances in the community.

Components of an informal coaching plan that was developed include:

- Help the group stay on task with their proposal concepts, strategies and action plans.
- Help the group master project management when there are several inter-related activities involving multiple stakeholders that must be managed by a small staff and a busy, volunteer board.

- Build the team’s capacity in facilitation, team collaboration and leadership for change.
- Help the team identify and locate resources.
- Provide a “mirror” to the team that reflects insightful observations and challenges about their collaboration, shared leadership and capacity building.
- Help the incoming director understand the history of the Initiative, organize and manage an effective work plan to steer project activities, and develop a set of working relationships with the broader community team.