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# Facilitating Successful Sustainable Change Initiatives

## An Intermediary or Delivery Organization's Guide to Coaching for Community Change

by Ken Hubbell and Mary Emery

Intermediaries or delivery organizations such as nonprofits, educational institutions and the Cooperative Extension Service often play a key role in community change initiatives. Increasingly, funder-supported projects look to intermediaries to guide the work on the ground. This practice is especially common in community change work that involves coaches. As a result of working with funders who support coaching as a strategy for sustainable community development, many intermediaries have made coaching their own and include it in their service delivery options. We offer this brief guide as an introduction to how intermediaries can use coaching to successfully facilitate sustainable community development.

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Our learning about the role of intermediaries in community change work that involves coaches comes from many sources, and particularly from the results of two coaching roundtables (Boise 2005 and San Antonio 2007).

The roundtables featured several key projects. For example, in the Northwest Area Foundation Horizons project, several state projects relied on Cooperative Extension systems as the intermediary, as did the participants in the second phase of the Rural Community College Initiative. During the initial phase of RCCI, Ford worked with MDC as an intermediary. Currently, the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Duke endowment also work with MDC as their intermediary. In other cases, regional nonprofits have played that role.

Despite differences among the programs, we found some striking similarities in the conversations about the intermediary role from all perspectives: those of the coaches, the intermediaries themselves and the funders.

### **What Role Do Intermediaries Play in Change Efforts?**

The role of the intermediary ranged from a focus on administrative (payroll, hiring, travel reimbursement, etc.) to programmatic oversight, including providing feedback to the funder on

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 intermediaries or delivery organizations 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.

project implementation and overseeing program development and implementation at the local level. In our work on community coaching we have encountered four different models of how intermediaries participate in funder-supported community change initiatives:

**Model 1:** Funder develops a cadre of coaches that can be brought into a change initiative as needed. Intermediaries or delivery organizations such as nonprofits, community foundations or the Cooperative Extension Service can play a role as part of the project network, particularly in regard to identifying a coaching opportunity at a community or institution, but the coaching role is managed by the funder. Funders often do not have a specific evaluation strategy in place for the work of the coaches but rather evaluate the overall funded strategy. An example of this approach is the initial stages of the Mid South Delta Initiative funded by W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

**Model 2:** Funder is very invested in supporting coaches and community leaders, creates and supports the cross-community learning and communities of practice, and has an on-the-ground presence that may include visiting the actual communities and convening community leaders. The intermediary provides administrative support for coaches and participates in funder-led learning and evaluation activities. An example would be the Northwest Area Foundation's Horizons project.

**Model 3:** Funder provides funding to the intermediary or delivery organization (typically a nonprofit, Cooperative Extension or other educational institution, or a community foundation). In this situation, the intermediary not only has administrative responsibility but also manages both the coaching and community processes. In these

“Coaches are there to see you though the good stuff and the bad stuff.”

cases the intermediary can be challenged to manage these processes and also to create and manage the learning community focus. Often the intermediary is charged with some evaluation work and, in many cases, the funder also contracts an outside evaluator. An example would be the Ford Foundation funded Rural Community College Initiative.

**Model 4:** The intermediary plays the key role in identifying and engaging funders and manages the community change process, including the coaching, community processes, and administrative and evaluation functions. An example of this model is the HomeTown Competitiveness Strategy operated by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development, the Nebraska Community Foundation and the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship.

Regardless of the model employed, intermediaries can be critical to change efforts in four ways.

### 1. Intermediaries Connect the Circle of Funders, Coaches and Communities

All participants viewed creating a communication bridge among communities, coaches and the funders as the most problematic but most essential role for intermediaries. At first glance, this task may appear to be just a matter of communicating goals, objectives, expectations and a timeline but, in fact, this communication function serves not only to convey instructions down to the coach but also

to convey questions, observations and suggestions up. Indeed, from a knowledge management point of view, the most successful bridges created a community of learning format so that expectations and understanding might grow among all parties, leading to transformational learning at all levels.

### 2. Intermediaries Create Communities of Practice

In successful change processes, intermediaries invest time and effort in the creation and development of communities of practice. For example, HomeTown Competitiveness<sup>®</sup> brings coaches, community leaders and key partners together, sometimes as separate communities and sometimes all together. These learning opportunities create new knowledge as examples of practices are shared across communities and participants deepen their wisdom on facilitating successful sustainable change through reflection and discussion.

Roundtable participants appreciated intermediaries who found ways to convene regular meetings among coaches and supervisors, and suggested these meetings occur at least quarterly. They also saw a role for the intermediary in creating opportunities for peer learning. As one participant commented, we need “...open spaces to say what needs to be said.”

Since coaching is often a new role for those in the field, coaches want to learn how to do it in discussion with other coaches and also want to access the knowledge of experienced coaches. Intermediaries are often critical in developing and managing these learning opportunities.

### 3. Intermediaries Monitor the Process and Assist in Evaluation

Successful coach/intermediary partnerships include working on joint strategies to help the coaches move the project forward and providing support where necessary. Roundtable participants commented on the need for the intermediary to somewhat “protect the coach from the funder.” Intermediaries sometimes help gather data on project success as well. When intermediaries do a good job with monitoring and evaluation, that work adds value to the learning process for all. Often intermediary staff function as a “super” coach and provide coaching to the coach, as well as intervening in difficult circumstances or filling in when a coach is not available.

### 4. Intermediaries Administer the Project on the Ground

Finally, in most of the projects we heard about, intermediaries also played key roles in such administrative tasks as hiring, firing, training and overseeing coaches, as well as managing the paperwork involved in administering funder resources.

## Best Practices and Challenges for Intermediaries

Across the change initiatives, we found several best practices that can help intermediaries be successful in supporting community change and in building community capacity for future community-based work.

1. Intermediaries who saw their role as encompassing more than just an administrative function were more successful in creating successful bridges and supporting the community of practice learning function.

2. Community change work and community leaders benefit from access to multiple coaches. In one case a group of coaches worked together in a Mid South Delta Initiative community to help a community work through the demise of a collaborative effort. In another case, coaches could call upon colleagues with different sets of expertise to step in and assist with a difficult situation. As mentioned above, the intermediary can also supply a “super” coach who assists those in the field and steps in to deal with difficult issues or when a coach is unable to respond.

3. Several coaches said the places where they felt they were most successful were places where the community had some say as to which coach was assigned to their community.

4. When the intermediary has a written agreement with the community on its role and on the expectations of and for the community, this agreement provides a great tool for evaluating progress and making changes.

5. Similarly, the intermediary can report stronger results when he/she works with the coaches to develop a written agreement or contract with the community. The opportunity to frequently revisit the contract helps the community and coach identify how the coach can best be useful to the community’s change process.

Our work with coaches, intermediaries and funders also helped us identify several critical challenges.

- Intermediaries play a key role in creating transparency within the change initiative. They must be able to translate the funder’s intentions to

the coach and the target community; then they must translate the notion of coaching to the community. They must also close the loop by reflecting back to the funder the realities on the ground and suggest techniques to improve transparency and the dissemination of information.

- A second challenge discussed was how to find and hire a good coach. In response to questions about how to hire a coach, one roundtable respondent commented, “What we would look at in a hiring situation— flexibility, openness, passion.” Another participant in the intermediary break-out session commented on the “need to triangulate between the personality and skills of a coach; the personality, skills and assets of the community; and the function and agenda of the funders.”

To address these challenges more successfully, intermediaries were looking for more information on what is working in various locations and institutions and what might be done differently to increase project success. Indeed, multiple comments indicated that intermediaries want to learn from each other’s best practices.

- Third, many people have puzzled over how intermediaries can best determine the coach’s success. How might they involve the community

“Our coach gave guidance and exposure to so many people. She helped us connect with other organizations, community residents and corporate businesses.”

in the assessment without jeopardizing the coach's role and reputation? They were also interested in the question, "What does coaching success look like?" and described how success would look very different across communities, depending on the assets and leadership of a particular community and the challenges that community is grappling with.

- Many intermediaries who have used coaching see it as a very valuable tool. While they have ways of costing out training and technical assistance, it has become a challenge to figure out how to include pricing for coaching in their array of services.

As we have worked on this initiative in the past two years, we have seen more examples of institutions choosing to provide coaching as part of their service delivery. We will have the opportunity to learn more about how coaching can add value to intermediaries, nonprofits and other service delivery institutions as more technical assistance and training programs focus on coaching as a way to help local communities, leaders and institutions uncover local knowledge and wisdom to create a platform for new ideas and approaches.

To participate in a social networking opportunity related to coaching and to share what you are learning about coaching, please visit:  
<http://communitycoaching.ning.com>.

To sign up for an occasional newsletter, visit <http://www.communitycoaching.com>.

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### 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



Community Coaching Project/Ken Hubbell 2007

## 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
- 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.*

## 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

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.*

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.