

Coaching Practice in Public Health Partnerships

The Role of Coaching in Advancing Community-Based,
Public Health Collaboration



Antonia Lewis, MPH, PCC

Elena Tamas Ragusa, PsyD

Jonathan P. Scaccia, PhD

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in cross-sector collaboration, both in the public and private sectors, leveraging their diverse perspectives and resources to solve societal problems centered around a shared goal.¹ Built on the premise that collaborative partnerships can influence social and economic factors connected to health, these partnerships can affect widespread behavior change and population-level health outcomes and increase opportunities for health equity.

Health equity means striving for the highest possible standard of health for all people and giving special attention to the needs of those at greatest risk of poor health based on social conditions.² Public health achieves equity by working with other sectors to address factors that affect health, including employment, housing, education, health care, public safety, and food access, to name a few. In collaborative settings, you work with groups of people with different skill sets and strengths, often from different organizations.

Enlisting a coach in a collaborative process can enhance the efforts and outcomes.



¹ Becker, J., & Smith, D. B. (2018). The need for cross-sector collaboration. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 16(1), C2-C3.

² Braveman, P. (2014). What are health disparities and health equity? We need to be clear. *Public health reports*, 129(1_suppl2), 5-8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00333549141291S203>

Background

New Jersey Health Initiatives (NJHI), a statewide grantmaking program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, utilizes a strategic grantmaking approach. A key component of NJHI's work has been the technical assistance³ they provide to grantees that strengthen their capacity to serve their communities.⁴

In 2015, NJHI selected 10 communities across New Jersey for its Building a Culture of Health in New Jersey: Communities Moving to Action (CMA) initiative. Funded via 10 hub organizations, the chosen communities each received four-year grants to support coalitions that would work together to identify opportunities for healthier living. The project was designed to create stronger multi-sector collaborations, influence policy, and lead to sustainable, long-term change in these communities. In 2016, NJHI selected an additional 10 communities to join this cohort with comparable four-year investments, resulting in 20 New Jersey communities funded through this initiative.

As part of this investment, NJHI supported the communities' efforts with leadership development opportunities, monthly webinars, annual convenings, technical assistance, network building, and a community coach. The coaching model for supporting the community coalitions was responsive to each community's specific needs and evolved. Initially, the model mirrored the approach of the County Health Rankings and Roadmaps program, with a prescribed number of coaching sessions at set intervals within a time-limited engagement.

Early feedback indicated that grantees needed flexibility; coaching became available on-demand to meet grantees' individual needs. After the CMA initiative concluded in 2020, NJHI sponsored two additional cycles of funding, including coaching support for 10 collaboratives between 2018-2020 and 10 from 2020 onward, with some communities receiving coaching through 2022.⁵ Outside of these NJHI initiatives, the coach also provided services to **a)** other interested public health partners, **b)** interested New Jersey nonprofits and **c)** grantees of other NJHI initiatives. Coaching was cited most often as extremely valuable in grantee feedback. This report identifies the key factors and processes that made coaching useful.



³ Coaching falls on the category of technical assistance as defined by NJHI.

⁴ Edith G. Arrington, Ph.D. and Tessa Eidelman, Ph.D. of COMM|VEDA Consulting for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation NJ Team, New Jersey Health Initiatives: Retrospective Evaluation, May 2022

⁵ Upstream Action Acceleration Initiative and Communities Forging Hyperlocal Data Collaboratives

What is Coaching?

Coaching is the process of a coach working with a client to achieve goals and enhance learning. Coaching releases potential in individuals and organizations, sparking a process of transformation and growth.⁶ A coach's objective is to develop and cultivate a deep and meaningful relationship with their clients and support them as they progress toward their goals. **The principles of effective coaching include:**



Coaching can be confused with technical assistance. Technical assistance implies that the provider is an expert who holds the knowledge. With coaching, the coach realizes the expertise is already there, strengthening the client's ability to realize their capacity to achieve results. Unlike technical assistance, consulting, or training, the coach "knows nothing" because the knowledge is in the person or persons receiving coaching, shifting the power toward the 'coachees.'

Technical assistance, consulting, or training typically doled out equally fosters reliance on the experts to fill a perceived capacity gap. Coaching is relationship-based rather than focusing on the transfer of skills. Coaching builds "soft" skills, such as confidence, more than technical skills, and it does so based on each client's specific needs, even if some groups get more than others.

⁶ <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/insight/introduction-to-coaching/>

Coaching and Equity

Coaching is an asset-based approach that recognizes the expertise, resources, and unique needs of those engaged in the coaching process, fostering self-efficacy and confidence in achieving the desired outcome collectively. A trained coach can inspire community coalitions to lift solutions that achieve health and racial equity through direct communication, storytelling, and thought-provoking questions. In short, coaching helps collaboratives achieve optimal equitable results.

The downside is that coaching is not affordable for people with a moderate or low income, which comprises most people working in the public and

non-profit sectors. Offering to coach people having less access because of their financial resources is an equitable approach to investing. Coaching people who are financially disadvantaged shifts power and advances equity.

Coaching is distinct because it is client-driven and untethered to the goals of the collaboration because it is focused on the client's goals - which is a fundamental principle of equity. However, there is tension for the funder coaching topics unrelated to the collaboration. Funders must appreciate that the larger context where people work impacts the collaboration's success.

Lessons

A retrospective evaluation of the coaching engagement resulted in three significant considerations funders should explore when supporting community-based public health collaborations. They are detailed throughout this brief but are generalized as follows:

1

Building trust and welcoming a coach's role takes time.

Stakeholders should be mindful of coach-client fit and the time needed to build a strong foundation. A coach will partner with the client to determine client-coach compatibility. A coach should remove judgment and ego and be transparent about potential bias to succeed. Like any relationship, building trust requires confidentiality and consistency, with the same coach available for the duration of the project engagement.



The coaching relationship has reverberating benefits.

Supervisors, teammates, partners, and people connected to those coached get the derivative benefits. A coach can serve as a broker to establish meaningful connections to advance the client's goals. The coach can intentionally connect with different individuals based on shared interests.

In NJHI engagements, communities saw their coach as a trusted partner. Therefore they were open to introductions, willing to speak freely, offer support to other collaboratives, and share resources. Further, research suggests that when people receive coaching paired with training and technical assistance, they are more prepared to perform tasks to achieve goals, extending the impact of capacity-building work.⁷ Lastly, coaching supports how the collaboration and its outcomes might continue after the funding period, strengthening efforts toward longer-term sustainability.

A coach-client relationship helps collaborations be more strategic, track their outcomes, and ultimately think and behave differently.

The core competencies of coaching outlined by the International Coaching Federation⁸ begin with identifying or reconfirming what the client seeks to accomplish. The coach then partners with the client to define or reconfirm the measure(s) of success. Throughout their work together, the coach assures confidentiality, enabling people to speak frankly, be vulnerable, process their thinking, and make thoughtful decisions. The confidential, trusting relationship creates an opportunity for reflection, revelation, and transformation.

One community used its coaching time to strategize how to let go of power and design an effective community-led program. By asking thought-provoking questions, the coach and client(s) can explore new or expanded ways of thinking about their situation. Sometimes, a coach's role is to challenge views, ideas, values, and aspirations and even share "hard truths." Each coaching session becomes a way to structure accountability measures to ensure the client's proposed action steps get executed. Therefore, coaching shifted collaboratives from the usual reactive approach, described as "putting out fires," to strategic thinking⁹ identifying goals, problems, solutions, beliefs, values, actions, and outcomes.

⁷ Losch, S., Traut-Mattausch, E., Mühlberger, M. D., & Jonas, E. (2016). Comparing the effectiveness of individual coaching, self-coaching, and group training: How leadership makes the difference. *Frontiers in psychology*, 629.

⁸ <https://coachingfederation.org/credentials-and-standards/core-competencies>

⁹ Strategic-thinking involves seeing the big picture, planning ahead, and putting thought into action

What Makes Coaching Work?

Several things can contribute to the success of coaching. This section considers coaching from three different perspectives: the funder, the coach, and the coaching recipient.



FUNDER

- **Offer coaching as a suite of different supports. Make it optional, not mandatory, and honor the coach-client relationship.** Coaching needs to be decided on by the group or individual, not imposed upon them by someone with authority. The key within the NJHI partner communities was to promote coaching services continuously.

The coach regularly contacted those not being coached and offered to schedule a check-in. For the benefit of coaching trust and impact, the funder as a sponsor must understand the coach cannot share its notes or conversations.



COACH

- **Create psychological safety.** A thoughtful and intentional approach to coaching creates psychological safety, and psychological safety breeds trust.¹⁰ Once trust is established, clients share their belief systems, values, and social identity more readily, ultimately increasing the likelihood of transformative work. The client's fixed and potentially limiting beliefs are explored through powerful, thought-provoking questions. In some cases, building trust required overcoming a history of strained relationships, e.g., concerns about people exerting excessive influence. From an outsider's perspective, the coach can facilitate crucial conversations to address this, allowing people to communicate concerns, relinquish individual agendas, and forge a common one.

“It's important to have a safe space to be able to discuss the challenges of working as part of a coalition. Also, helpful to get an outside perspective on the functioning of partnerships we are trying to establish beyond the borders of our own coalition.” – Coaching client

- **Be on-demand and flexible.** It is crucial for a coach to be available whenever the client needs them, within or outside business hours, and to build a customized approach for each client or team. Flexibility will optimize engagement opportunities regardless of the level of structure or fluidity a team desires.
- **Be trained in coaching and equity.** Equity has emerged as a critical component of all social services. Similarly, coaches must recognize how their perceptions and biases show up and how they resonate with different types of clients.





RECIPIENT

- **Be willing to change.** The people who desired to work with a coach believed in the value of collaboration and had grit – a combination of passion and perseverance. Collaboratives were willing to allow the coach to observe their action (or inaction) and valued and trusted the coach as a thought partner. Those willing to change moved from dysfunctional to functional or functional to optimal collaboration.
- **Ready to engage with a coach.** Many people from nonprofit and governmental agencies reported not having the benefit of working with a professional coach. Understandably, a prospective client could view an offer of coaching as a criticism or distrust of their abilities. Readiness for coaching can vary greatly. Within NJHI, some communities readily engaged with their coach, while others took months or years to accept coaching support.

To assess readiness for coaching, the Coaching and Philanthropy Project funded by W.K. Kellogg Foundation used a readiness assessment

developed by CompassPoint and saw coaching readiness shift positively in a relatively short period of time – six months to a year. Coaching research suggests that themes related to the ability to be ready to receive coaching include culture and class, knowledge about coaching, access to coaching, psychological interpretations, feeling safe, and a commitment to change.¹¹

- **Know the cost and benefit of coaching.** Grantees received coaching gratis unbound to any limit, unlike grant funding which is a limited amount of dollars and time-bound. The coachee would benefit from being shown how much coaching time they received, how much it cost, and outcomes attributed to coaching, for example goal attainment. Future consideration could be given to **1)** offering an amount of time (10 sessions) with the ability to re-commit if interested; **2)** sharing the coach time monetary value; and **3)** tracking goal attainment.

¹⁰ Edmondson, A. C., Kramer, R. M., & Cook, K. S. (2004). Psychological safety, trust, and learning in organizations: A group-level lens. *Trust and distrust in organizations: Dilemmas and approaches*, 12(2004), 239-272.

¹¹ Kretzschmar, I. (2010). Exploring Clients' Readiness for Coaching. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching & Mentoring*.



Coaching Impacts

Coaching offers ways to shift organizations from working in silos and promoting short-term programmatic solutions to **collaboration for long-term systemic and policy change**. For those already in collaborative partnerships, coaching helps focus on **improving partnership practices** and **developing equitable solutions**, e.g., removing the obstacles to health, such as poverty and discrimination. Coaching can also **accelerate progress** by **1)** encouraging action methods and goal setting for assessing progress toward measurable and specific goals; **2)** structuring accountability measures ensuring that action steps are achieved.

An external evaluation of the NJHI initiative included evaluating the coaching relationship's impact on grantees and reaffirming that coaching is an asset and benefits the work (Equal Measure, 2021). In this engagement, the effects of coaching included: impacts on the partnerships, individual beliefs and behavior, and initiative outcomes, as follows:

On collaborative partnerships:

- **Improved capacity to overcome power and structural constraints:** By listening to all voices and reflecting, the coach shifted the traditional hierarchies of unearned status and privilege toward a culture of inclusion. Inclusion has the potential to level power dynamics, allowing people to offer their ideas, talents, and assets. Further, by sharing observations of power dynamics, coaching helped groups allocate and distribute resources or status within their social, cultural, and organizational hierarchies.

- **Increased leadership:** Coaching requests were often to support developing leadership skills and transformation, e.g., systemic change. The coach served leaders from different sectors by offering an outsider's perspective and the ability to see things from multiple angles and uncover blind spots, ultimately enabling better leaders.¹²
- **Improved team function:** Despite potential confusion, uncertainty, and chaos, a shared focal point kept the team moving forward, which was particularly helpful during the pandemic.¹³ The coach **1)** guided teams to improve performance, acted as a sounding board, and addressed derailing behavior; **2)** helped teams focus on the current state and identify the desired future state; **3)** addressed team dysfunctions around trust, conflict, commitment, accountability, and results.¹⁴
- **Increased access to resources, data, evidence, stories, and connections:** One New Jersey-based coach in a statewide network of grantees from different communities amplified the number of network connections. The coach pointed grantees to tailored funding opportunities, data, and research evidence and assisted grantees with their use.
- Through coaching, the **efficiency of coalition meetings increased**. Generally, coalitions looked to improve their partnership practices to increase engagement and improve results. For example, some coalition meetings consisted of circling ideas ending without the next steps, decisions, or accountability. Regular coaching sessions focused on ways to set meeting objectives, share responsibility, and celebrate results.

¹² <https://www.inc.com/marissa-levin/the-top-10-leadership-blind-spots-and-5-ways-to-tu.html>

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/news-event/coronavirus>

¹⁴ <https://www.amazon.com/Five-Dysfunctions-Team-Leadership-Fable/dp/0787960756>

On belief and behavior:

- Coaching increases each client's awareness of behaviors, actions, and choices.
- A coach partnering with collaborators encourages **commitment to action and learning**.
- **Influenced a change in belief systems:** Coaching fostered a growth mindset (Dweck).¹⁵ The coach observed fixed mindsets that limited performance and intentionally asked questions about the context of people's beliefs.
- Evaluation findings showed that coaching clients reported **improved leadership capacity, increased learning, and identified new ways of collaborating**. Many valued active listening, hearing an outsider's perspective, thought-provoking questions, and receiving direct communication, validation, and strategic guidance.
- Coaching skills transfer occurred **naturally; coalition members emerged as coaches**. To encourage coaching practice to spread, the coach shared techniques by name: *"I am going to reflect what I heard to see if I understand."* This approach helped others learn coaching tricks. For example, coalition members began offering questions to consider instead of leading with, "I think we should do this," which can be off-putting. The answers lead the coalitions to better engagement, decision making, and collective action
- **Coached teams can better receive others' viewpoints and utilize diverse talents**. The gift of cross-sector collaboration is that it is possible to use differences as an asset – differences in resources, experience, demographics, industry, sector, and perspective.¹⁶ The coach asked about 'who' needed to be involved in fostering diversity and used inclusive language and processes to help people contribute. The coach guided partners to recognize that sustainable solutions come from designing health initiatives with -

not for - the communities that stand to benefit the most. External evaluation data supported this, highlighting that the coaching work helped coalitions customize learning to their community contexts.¹⁷

“The ability to reflect on what lessons we have learned and what changes we need to make as we move forward seems so simple. However, without this coaching session, I believe we would have labored this for days without getting to the same clarity.”

– Coaching client

On initiative outcomes:

- **Coaching addressed silos** and guided collaborators to learn about the interconnectedness of health and its multiple determinants, e.g., economic and social factors that impact health. The siloed versus interconnected view of health is an example of what exacerbated resource inequities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, for example: some people lost jobs while others were able to continue to work.
- **Coaching support led to system and policy change** by allowing people to think strategically to solve big thorny problems. Coaching stretched people from an urgency or reactive mindset to a more strategic, goal-oriented one. Many coalitions believed in the need to identify the easy win or “low-hanging fruit” to prove immediate results. This easy-win strategy prevented work from addressing more significant systemic issues, e.g., racism and poverty. Most coalitions reported being able to advance policy and system goals because of the coaching they received (Equal Measure, 2021).

¹⁵ Dweck, C. (2016). What having a “growth mindset” actually means. *Harvard Business Review*, 13(2), 2-5.

¹⁶ Becker, Jeanine; Smith, David; The Need for Cross-Sector Collaboration, Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2018.

¹⁷ Equal Measure, Upstream Action Acceleration Initiative: 2020 Grantee Interviews, May 2021.

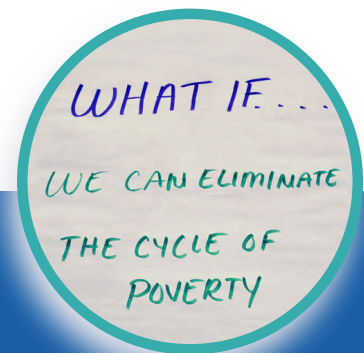
Coaching During the Turmoil of 2020

“I appreciate the coaching during this challenging time.” – Coaching client

The world we live in today is dramatically different from when the NJHI initiative began in 2015. Notable changes were the global COVID-19 pandemic and change in presidential leadership within the United States. Americans experienced social isolation, racial justice rallies, white supremacist riots, an attempted political coup, televised police brutality, unemployment, evictions, business closings, record numbers of people in need of free food, school closures, the movement to video for health, education, and social support, and record numbers of deaths and hospitalizations. It will take years to

understand the impact on collaborative partnerships in New Jersey, one of the places hit hardest from the early onset of the pandemic.

During the pandemic, the coach observed collaboratives shift to reactively deal with the immediate social and economic effects and pause strategic planning. A significant increase in the number of people seeking coaching occurred due to the pandemic based on the need to support people faced with immediate changes within their organization, role, and community work.



Conclusion

Through working across sectors of the community, collaborative partnerships inspired change in several ways, including creating school-based health clinics, police policy reform, improved access to healthy foods, increased safe walking and biking opportunities, safe and affordable housing policy, grassroots community organizing, improved health literacy, increased healthy food access, intergenerational social connectedness, and reduced childhood adverse experiences. The collaborations utilized the coach as a catalyst to negotiate, accelerate, and achieve progress.

Every collaboration has the potential to achieve racial and health equity with the guidance of a coach. Coaching was a worthwhile investment for the foundation; it informed how people worked, engaged in relationships, and strengthened their skill sets. By collaborating with the coach when and how they needed to, clients evolved in ways that best suited their needs. This “just in time” approach made the learning and application more salient and ultimately led to more substantial progress.

Case Studies

An Alliance Grows in Cape May by Sharing

Leaders in Cape May County from education, health care, police, nonprofits, and businesses discussed local youth and shared data. They decided it was essential to address preventing adverse childhood experiences by fostering resiliency in youth. The leadership team worked together to develop a strategy that would result in health impact by working with the neighborhoods where racism and classism caused segregation from opportunities to be healthy. The coach attended coalition meetings, observed the team's interactions, and inserted perspective when needed. Over the years, the team grew. It called on the coach to offer examples of ways the collaborative nature of the work could continue. Tom and the coach worked on implementing a shared leadership model with revolving roles and responsibilities. Those roles included: facilitator, notetaker, evaluator, and timekeeper responsible for preparing the agenda and ensuring a productive meeting. Eventually, the process stuck, and the team occasionally reached out to the coach for support. **Whether planning or executing initiatives, the coach intentionally ensured the team was leading the work and not reliant on the coach. Five years later, the coalition activities continued because of this shared leadership model.**

Equity Grows in Hammonton

Ivette Guillermo-McGahee came to coaching through a direct referral from the funding agent but without grant funding. Initially from a big city in Mexico, she now finds herself in Hammonton – a small hamlet in New Jersey, whose identity is changing steadily from people with European ancestry identifying racially as white to the majority identifying ethnically as Latino. As a young child, Ivette knew the power of relationships and their ability to do good. She can embrace people with her skill of listening attentively and responding with empathy. Open and willing, she came to her coach and took on coaching to foster her ability to do good for Hammonton. As a leader, Ivette explored goal setting with the coalition, and a shared focus emerged among the group. This focus was on building a culture of inclusion in Hammonton. This idea opened more in-depth conversations about segregation and racism. Only through the outside lens of a coach was the invisible made visible.

“Our coach named what we avoided speaking about for months, racism.”

Over more than 100 hours of coaching, one-on-one with her and separately with the larger group of coalition members came a willingness to be vulnerable to express feelings and emotions. The group ultimately had richer conversations about the root of health inequities. Since the coalition's founding, working with assets was proposed. Through the Hammonton Health Coalition, a plan emerged to work with its assets, the Latinx community members, called Connectors. Ivette had learned of the Assets Based Community Development model, which focuses on identifying assets/talents and supporting the development of connectors. The coalition, driven by Ivette and eight Latinx Connectors, offered the idea of an advisory council to effectively influence Hammonton's town council members on matters related to equity for Latino community members. The town officials took hold of the concept and modeled it to suit their needs and interest in addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion.