

Community Coaching: Insight into an Emerging Practice

Daniel Kahl, Ph.D.*
University of Kentucky

Mary Emery, Ph.D.
University of South Dakota

Patricia Holmes, M.S.
The Ohio State University

Abstract

Often, community groups or coalitions intending community change call upon community development professionals to provide support outside of information, technical assistance, or consultation. Some community development practitioners describe this supportive role as community coaching. In 2014, 26 community development professionals from across the United States gathered to explore assumptions, experiences, and processes related to community coaching in a pre-conference gathering of the Community Development Society annual conference. This report summarizes the details and insights from that gathering to help us further understand the important practice of community coaching.

Keywords

Community,
Coaching,
Change,
Development

* This denotes corresponding author. His email is: Daniel.Kahl@uky.edu.

Background

The art of convening citizens to address local concerns is a hallmark of community development work. Community groups or coalitions are often formed to address concerns related to community health, economics, violence prevention, or other issues. Identifying and implementing the best approaches to help citizens organize to solve their own problems has long been the dilemma of community development practice and professionals (Bowling & Braham, 2002; Cohen, Higgins, Sanyal & Harris, 2008).

Community development professionals may be called upon to assist a coalition at specific points of the development process, such as when groups need facilitated planning or assistance with addressing group conflict. Sometimes, professionals are asked to provide leadership to assist the group in their completion of a project. Increasingly, however, community development professionals find themselves called to these groups to do more than just provide information, advice, or specific facilitated services. Over the past several decades, the practice of effective community development has evolved from the community development practitioner as expert armed with technical solutions to a more supporting or guiding role, which allows the community members to be their own experts (Matarrita-Cascante, & Brennan, 2012). Fittingly, the art and craft of community coaching has emerged as a framework to support community members through change efforts. In this new model, the practitioner-as-coach engages the community group in discussions that allow the group to find solutions that work best for their community.

Coaching can support improvements in functionality among group members, so that they may work more effectively with each other, and coaching can help the group engage meaningfully with their broader community. Frequently,

coaching work specifically focuses on the effective function of the coalition (Brown, Pitt, & Hirota, 1999). Emery, Hubbell and Salant (2005) describe a community coach as, “a guide who supports communities and organizations in identifying and achieving their goals” (p. 1). The coach is not the leader of project work, but acts in a supporting role to assist the coalition. For example, the coach may assist the coalition with self-assessment and follow-up to support effective group interaction and function, assuming that a well-functioning coalition will be more likely to achieve their intended outcomes. In addition, the coach encourages the coalition to consider the best practices for engaging the broader community in their project efforts (Emery et al. 2005). Coaching the coalition for improved community engagement processes is also believed to enhance success with their intended community change goals. Practitioners have thus adopted the term community coaching.

In a preconference gathering at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Community Development Society in Dubuque, Iowa, 26 community coaches from across the United States gathered to further explore community coaching practice and assumptions. The meeting format provided a means for participants to share how this practice is being used in different settings and to share best practices and insights into successful community coaching. This paper offers a summary of that meeting and insights into coaching as an emerging practice and focus for community development professionals working with coalitions that intend to create community change.

Discussion Format

The event was called a Community Coaching Chautauqua. The Chautauqua was designed to be highly participatory through posed questions and organized discussions to explore community coaching practice. Questions explored the context in which coaching has been used and the community development philosophies that underlie the practice. The discussion explored what coaches do, how they do it, and what tools coaches found useful in their coaching work. To investigate current practices and assumptions about community coaching, the conveners of the Chautauqua used several processes to spark conversation and elicit feedback. Questions were developed by the workshop facilitators in advance to initiate discussion. Patricia Holmes, Family and Consumer Sciences County Educator and Extension Coach at The Ohio State University served as the facilitator. Because of the wide range of community coaching approaches, the facilitator began the investigation into coaching by focusing on the differences in coaching approaches. The facilitator asked the participants questions related to key concepts of community coaching. Participants were asked to move to locations in the room that best described their coaching along a line that represented a continuum of possible responses. Respondents then participated in small group discussions to describe the coaching context that influenced their approach, followed by a report out to the full group. Comments were captured from these conversations on flip charts. At the end of the workshop, participants were asked to respond to these same questions on paper to ensure that all perspectives were captured. This report thus represents the summary of the written and recorded responses from the participating practitioners.

Insights on an emerging practice: The spectrum of Community Coaching.

The context of coaching

The workshop opened with questions to assess the level of participant experience with coaching and the contexts in which community coaching has been applied. Participants represented a range of community coaching experience, from individuals with less than one year to those with more than ten years of experience. About half of the group was relatively new to coaching with only one to three years of coaching experience. Only three of the participants held more than ten years of experience. Participants represented coaching projects from eleven states and twelve tribal communities in the United States.

The facilitator asked about the primary impact intended from the coalitions they were coaching. Participants highlighted a range of focus areas: community health, rural development, water quality, organization coaching, tourism, refugee resettlement, community arts, nonprofits and neighborhood groups, and regional economic development.

Most participating coaches were connected with higher education and particularly Cooperative Extension community development programs. Some private community consultants were also represented. In most cases, coaching was a component of a grant or research project. A few participants said they were involved in projects organized by local government or non-profit organizations.

Coaches were asked how they connected with community groups to establish the coaching relationship. The majority of the coaching relationships represented in this workshop were initiated when university representatives asked communities to participate in research projects. Five workshop participants indicated that the communities contacted the coaching service provider with a request for assistance. Funding sources for the coaching services included grants, university support of staff, and direct payment to the coach by the community.

The role of the coach

Chautauqua participants were invited to place themselves on a continuum (Figure 1) to represent how they would describe the focus of their coaching work.



The resulting clustering of participants reflected their primary focus: organizational efficiency (five participants), personal performance (individual) coaching (six participants), coaching for community involvement (seven participants), and coaching for improved group function (nine participants). More than half of the respondents indicated that they worked with small groups, but their coaching included a combination of coaching interactions ranging from individual and group, to group and community. While the coaching interaction was taking place at different levels, the ultimate outcome of the coaching was community-oriented change in all of the above circumstances.

To explore the role of coaching more thoroughly, participants were asked how they describe their work. None of the coaches described themselves as a leader. Most participants identified their role as one of a process facilitator. Participants were asked if they saw their coaching as consulting work, facilitation work, or if they would describe it as “something else”. Most participants noted this was difficult to answer because all of those descriptions were accurate; their coaching did not really

fit cleanly into any one of these categories. While providing information and facilitating processes is a component of their work, the overall consensus was that the coaching relationship was more complex than these categories suggested. When asked to describe their work, coaches specifically described their roles as mentor, connector, assessor, devil’s advocate, teacher, reflection guide, convener, evaluator, and supervisor. Other descriptive terms used to describe the role of coaching included truth-teller, silence-holder, and dream-helper.

When asked about assumptions that guide their coaching, the distinction from consulting became clearer. Many participants indicated that “the community knows best” and “the community members should be the decision making authority”. All agreed that the coaching relationship is based on mutual respect between the coach and community members. While the coach may be the “guide on the side,” the community members possess the answers and ultimately must lead the change.

Participants were asked to describe the level of structure in their coaching practice. Choosing how to best describe their work between “fluid” approaches vs. more “scripted” processes, it became clear that there are a variety of approaches to coaching. Most identified their coaching as a fluid approach, describing coaching as being responsive to questions that arise and to the will of the group. Almost an equal number, however, indicated that their coaching tended to include some form of structured format, often through facilitation of reflection or planning activities. A few indicated that they have a formalized or scripted approach to interaction, but noted that the coached group often “breaks the script”. One participant commented, “I think it must be fluid, but not without order. It seems to me that building relationships and trust: helping the group function effectively, and identifying the existing community situation and assets must come early in the coaching process.”

Processes used by coaches

The coaches were then asked what structured processes or models they use in their coaching practice. Coaches indicated a variety of techniques, philosophies and activities they integrate. The list of processes included:

- Appreciative Inquiry
- Community Capitals Framework
- Asset mapping
- Clinical pastoral education: “The Reflective Practitioner”
- Communication and small group models
- Field guide (6 R’s model)
- Solution focused
- Technology of participation
- Art of hosting
- Circle process
- University of Minnesota Civic Engagement Model (to embed civic engagement in public issues)
- Strategic planning
- Dot voting, priority ranking
- Small group
- Incorporating breaks
- Strategic Doing
- Social Change Model
- Improvisational processes
- Reflective questioning (and a form similar to the “alternatives and consequences” model of situation analysis and action planning)
- Community organizing

Participants were asked how they assess the needs of the groups they work with. Many described their primary methods as listening and observing. However, several coaches mentioned that they also use organized listening sessions

(focus groups, etc.) to identify coaching needs. Others indicated that they collect written reflection from coalition members. Some coaches noted they use written feedback and/or structured assessment tools.

Evaluation of coaching success

The final set of questions posed by the Chautauqua facilitator focused on how coaches measure their success. Questions focused on four levels of impact; individual, group, organization, and community (See Table 1).

Not every coach measured individual change. The participating coaches that did measure individual change indicated that they assessed changes in attitude, increased awareness or understanding, change in levels of participation, and new leadership roles accepted. Others noted that recording the “Ah – ha!” moments served as an indicator of coaching success. Some coaches noted that changes in coalition member behavior were documented through collected incident reports, and others noted change was evident through the creation of plans and/or changes in plans of coalition members due to the interaction with the coach.

The most common way that coaches measured impact was through capturing changes in group behavior. Coaches tracked changes in the coalition structure, including tracking for greater parity and representation in the coalition of the local community demographics as well as tracking changes in levels of participation in the group. Coaches reported watching for changes in group function, including increases in shared responsibility for projects and work, times people come back to the group for assistance, changes in the speed at which work gets done, and shared decision making. They also mentioned reduced conflict and increased cooperation. Participants also suggested that the group could assess the shared sense of cohesion, trust, and improvements in communication as measures of success.

Some coaching situations include working with a collection of partnering community organizations. For organizational level outcomes, coaches identified change indicators including the number of partner organizations, adopting established organization plans with SMART goals, an overall improvement in understanding of the “bigger picture of the organization”, project achievement as an indicator of an outcome, and increase in community recognition for the organization. Participants also assessed changes in overall functioning, timeliness, and sustainability.

When asked how coaches were measuring community-level change affiliated with coaching, we discovered a variety of indicators being tracked. Indicators were mentioned specific to the goals of the convening group. These included indicators such as changes in water quality, the presence of healthy foods in food pantries, or specific health indicators. However, positive outcomes also included changes in engagement – who was doing the work, how the work was being done, and the impact of the work itself. Coaches measured changes in participation or engagement of community members, partner organizations, and collaboration with other towns or organizations (regional work). They tracked how the community was acting differently through changes in levels of community cooperation, newly shared community outcomes, changes in self-determination, and changes in the community’s ability to move projects forward. Other indicators included new initiatives undertaken, involvement in strategic planning (shared plans adopted), and the number of completed community projects.

Table 1
Methods of Tracking Change Suggested by Coaches

Individual/Personal	Group Function	Organization	Community
Increased awareness or understanding	Parity/membership changes	Number of partner organizations	Who plans and does the work
Increase in participation	Increase in group action/participation	Adopting specific (SMART) goals	Overall participation
New leadership roles	Increase in responsibility to group	Improved understanding of the organization	Levels of involvement (increase per participant)
New learning "Ah-Ha!"	Increase in rate work is accomplished	Project achievement	Organizational participation/involvement
Less conflict/incidents in group function	Reduced conflict/increased cooperation	Increased community recognition	Levels of internal community collaboration
Improved confidence in role with initiative	Trust and group cohesion	Timeliness of work completion	Collaboration with other towns
	Improved communication	Sustainability of commitment to effort	Adopted shared goals
	Plans created and accepted	Improvements in overall functioning	Increase in speed/ability to move projects forward
	Projects accomplished		New initiatives/projects completed

Conclusions

The Community Coaching Chautauqua was a forum to explore how practitioners support and encourage community change efforts through coaching. Listening to coaches revealed a diversity of focus, expectations, and strategies used to coach groups toward distinct goals. While the situation and community goals influenced the strategies utilized, the participants in this forum asserted that coaching was an approach to community development that enhanced the collective work of community members organized for purposeful change.

The coaches' explanation of their philosophies and approaches to community coaching expressed in this forum mirror and support the Community Development Society Principles of Good Practice. Participants agreed that their coaching was rooted in deep respect for community members, and that the control of the community change process lies with the coalition. Participating community members, not the coach, must provide the leadership to drive the change. Coaches also recognized that effective coaching encourages inclusivity and seeks full participation of community members. How coaching took place varied by context and location, however, there was agreement that sustainable community change efforts must consider the implications of the change. The community coaches' role includes helping the coalition to reflect on these considerations in light of who benefits, and who carries the burden of the economic, social, environmental, human and/or political aspects related to the intended change.

The processes coaches used to support the work of coalitions varied widely, as did the formality of coaching structure. This reflects the importance of being open to using a range of action strategies, tools and methods appropriate for the community situation.

Methods of assessing impact of coaching can include tracking change in individuals, tracking changes in the group being coached, tracking changes in organizational structure and process, and tracking community-level changes. The development and application of tools and processes to measure and document coaching related changes is an important contribution to the field of community development.

As community development professionals place less emphasis on consulting and more emphasis on helping to build agency and capacity of community members, community coaching skills will increase in use. The approach of community coaching will continue to gain clarity and definition as more community coaches share methods, ideas, and effective strategies as they have done through this Chautauqua.

References

- Bowling, C. J., & Brahm, B. A. (2002). Shaping communities through extension programs. *Journal of Extension*, 40(3). Online at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2002june/a2.php/index.php>.
- Brown, P., Pitt, J., & Hirota, J. M. (1999). New approaches to technical assistance: The role of the coach. Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.
- Cohen, K., Higgins, L., Sanyal, N., & Harris, C. (2008). Community coaching: Answering the call for innovative approaches to community-based development initiatives. *Community Development*, 39(4), 71-82.
- Emery, M., Hubbell, K., & Salant, P. (2005). Coaching for community and organizational change. Online at: http://www.kenhubbell.com/pdfs/coaching_for_community_and_organizational_change.pdf. Retrieved May, 10, 2007.
- Matarrita-Cascante, D., & Brennan, M. A. (2012). Conceptualizing community development in the twenty-first century. *Community Development*, 43(3), 293-305.