

What is Coaching and What are the Benefits?

Coaching is a process that supports individuals to make more conscious decisions and take more effective action. In a coaching relationship, an individual with leadership and coaching experience (the coach) provides customized support to one or more nonprofit leaders (coachees) for a limited period of time. This piece introduces how grantmakers can help promote and advance coaching as a core leadership development activity, explains what coaching is and some of the forms it can take, and shares the benefits of integrating coaching into our ongoing work with nonprofit leaders.

Introduction

A variety of reports and research efforts have documented the urgent leadership challenges facing nonprofits today. In the face of these challenges, coaching can provide nonprofits and grantmakers with a powerful, cost-effective strategy for developing and supporting current and future leaders. While coaching has long been seen as a core leadership development activity in the business sector, it has only more recently taken off in the nonprofit community. GEO's 2011 [study of philanthropic practice](#) showed that coaching is gaining attention among grantmakers in our work with grantees. Among grantmakers who provided grantees with capacity-building grants in 2011 (the most recent year for which data is available), the highest percentage supported the development of leadership and management skills for grantee staff.

What is coaching?

The [Coaching and Philanthropy project](#), a partnership between Informing Change, Leadership that Works, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and GEO, defines coaching as *a process that supports individuals to make more conscious decisions and take more effective action*. In a coaching relationship, an individual with leadership and coaching experience (the coach) provides

For more on this topic, see [Coaching and Philanthropy: An Action Guide for Grantmakers](#) (Washington, D.C.: Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, 2010).

customized support to one or more nonprofit leaders (coachees) for a limited period of time. The coach's principal job is not to tell leaders what to do but to help them figure out the best approaches to the challenges and opportunities associated with leading their organizations. In contrast to some other forms of leadership development support, which often provide general guidance applicable across a range of situations and organizational contexts, coaching is tailored to the coachees. Therefore, it provides opportunities for individuals to develop their leadership capacities as they address real-time challenges and opportunities facing their organizations.

What are the benefits of coaching?

Coaching can make an important contribution to keeping more good people in the nonprofit sector and helping them grow as leaders. Many coaches, coachees and grantmakers consider coaching to be especially valuable at certain inflection points in the life of an organization — for example, when its leaders and senior staff are having to manage change, such as an executive transition, or when the organization is embarking on a new mission or strategic plan, or if the organization is undergoing an expansion in programs or funds.

Nevertheless, coaching is not a cure for all challenges that nonprofit leaders and organizations face. Typically, coaching is not the best solution for a staff member who is dealing with personal problems that are interfering with on-the-job performance, nor someone whose skills are a mismatch for the job or simply needs training and mentorship to build competencies required for a new role or task. Likewise, a different intervention, such as targeted consulting or mediation, may be better than coaching for organizations facing an internal crisis or deep systemic issues (e.g., lack of a clear business model, weak financial controls, etc.) that are causing poor performance.

“I found the coaching created a place where I could work with someone to bounce ideas back and forth about what I was learning and how to apply it.” — James Kass, Youth Speaks

Benefits for individual nonprofit leaders

According to David Coleman, a seasoned executive coach who works with nonprofit leaders, the primary benefits for coachees are as follows:¹

- Helping leaders gain new perspectives on themselves and their situations

¹ David Coleman, “A Leader’s Guide to Executive Coaching,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, Spring 2008.

- Building the confidence of leaders
- Retaining valued employees
- Developing new leaders
- Bringing renewed energy to longtime leaders so they can recommit to the tasks ahead

Benefits for the nonprofit organization

A mark of effective coaching in the nonprofit sector is clear link between individual development and improvements in organizational performance. When this occurs, coaching's benefits extend beyond the individual coachee(s), creating a ripple effect on the effectiveness and efficiency of organizations, communities and entire movements.

- **Better leadership and management** — Participants in CAP's research noted that coaching helped them manage more effectively the staff and personnel issues as well as the finance and fundraising responsibilities of their jobs. They also said were better equipped to handle conflict in their organizations because of coaching.
- **Smoother transitions** — Similarly, participants shared that coaching helped them lead their organizations successfully through periods of change, especially executive transitions.
- **Stronger leadership teams** — CAP participants also said that, through coaching, they came to understand that they couldn't do the job of running their organizations on their own. Coaching helped them take steps to strengthen staff and board leadership teams and to improve communication and interpersonal relationships with colleagues.

How does coaching look in practice?

Grantmakers and other supporters and providers of coaching have adopted various approaches to the format of coaching engagements. Coaching for nonprofit leaders comes in many forms:

- **One-on-one** — A coach is assigned to one nonprofit leader. The coach can be an external provider of coaching or an internal member of the organization's staff who has been trained in coaching. The goal is to develop the leader's capacity and skills to address a range of personal and professional issues that affect job performance and organizational success.
- **Manager as coach** — Nonprofit managers can serve as coaches to other staff members, providing training on an ongoing basis as a means to develop their colleagues' skills and effectiveness.
- **Peer coaching** — Peers from one or more organizations assemble at a central location to receive training in coaching and to share support,

feedback and materials. They help each other address leadership needs or organizational priorities. This type of coaching can be useful in reducing isolation, providing opportunities for leaders to talk through issues and brainstorm solutions, and offering a confidential forum for learning from peers.

- **Targeted or content coaching** — A coach works with a nonprofit leader to help develop his or her capacity and skills to address discrete, well-defined organizational issues that focus on specific topics or content areas, such as human resources or board issues.
- **Blended or hybrid approach** — This technique combines coaching with other methods of improving organizational effectiveness, such as consulting, to address larger organizational development goals and issues.
- **Team coaching** — A coach or group of coaches works with a team of nonprofit leaders from the same organization. The goal of this approach is to help the group work more effectively as a team over time while developing the skills team members need to achieve their shared goals.

“People too often focus on coaching just for one person — usually only the ED is eligible — and then that one person returns to an organizational system that is unsupportive of the ways in which they are trying to change or where only the ED is receiving support and others are still left on their own.” — Emily Goldfarb, independent coach

How should we invest in coaching?

Grantmakers will need to figure out an approach to supporting coaching that addresses the specific needs of our grantees, as well our own mission and operating style. However, the key to success for coaching is to connect support for coaching to broader grantmaking goals. Grantmakers that are new to this work, or that want to expand and refine what we already do to support coaching, should consider the following:

- What are our goals for strengthening the leadership and organizational effectiveness of grantees, and how can coaching support those goals?
- Are there ways to integrate coaching into what we already do and fund?
- What form of coaching and in what instances will coaching help grantees the most?
- What resources and encouragement can we provide nonprofit leaders to help them apply coaching skills in their day-to-day work with others so that coaching becomes more embedded in their organizations?

Conclusion

Coaching, when done well, is an effective tool for strengthening nonprofit leadership and making organizations more effective. Through coaching, nonprofit leaders can learn more about themselves, about their organizations, and about how to manage people and conflicts, how to delegate responsibility for day-to-day tasks, and more. Grantmakers play a crucial role in advancing the application and practice of coaching, and we hope more invest in it so that increased numbers of nonprofit leaders and their organizations experience the benefits firsthand.

Readiness criteria for coaching: Questions to consider

To help ensure that potential coachees have the time and energy required to make coaching work — along with a willingness to learn and to adapt their leadership styles and a base of support within their organizations — consider:

- Is the individual or team prepared to devote the time needed to make coaching work, including time for meetings and homework in between?
- Is the individual or team ready to work on personal or leadership issues that affect job performance?
- Is the individual or team open to new ideas and new ways of doing things to facilitate positive change and growth?
- Are the prospective coachees experiencing personal challenges or crises that might get in the way of successful coaching?
- Do board members and staff leaders support coaching for the individual or team? Do others in the organization understand the goals of coaching?
- Is the organization experiencing a change in strategy, leadership or external conditions that can become a focal point for coaching?
- Is the organization suffering because of interpersonal conflicts or other problems that might blunt the effects of coaching?