

The Value of Coaching for Non-Profit Leaders and Staff

By Penney De Pas, CAE, and Cynthia Stringer

Burnout. Too many priorities to tackle. Insufficient resources. Difficulty motivating volunteers or staff. These are the challenges facing executives and managers of non-profit organizations and agencies. Non-profits are having the same problems as for-profit corporations, such as concerns of recruiting and retaining excellent staff, with the added difficulty of fewer resources to execute tasks and to attract employees.

In addition, those organizations receiving grantor funding must provide greater assurance that they will be able to deliver on the funded project goals. The work of non-profit organizations is vital to our society, but how do we inspire, motivate, and support the leaders of these important agencies? One of the most proven and cost-effective methods for enhancing loyalty, retention, and the accomplishment of goals is coaching.

In April 1994, the Ford Foundation program staff partnered with the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild of Pittsburgh to design and deliver a Community Development Corporation/Arts Resource Initiative (CDC/ARI)--a four-year investment in comprehensive neighborhood revitalization in eight urban centers from Massachusetts to California--in an effort to forge a bridge between the arts and community development. The premise was simply that, "Arts and cultural programs, if managed effectively, can make sustained contributions to social and economic progress. [Its] mission was to provide the professional training the arts administrators and community development leaders need to make the arts an important part of community revitalization."¹

Dr. Bruce Anthony Jones, an associate professor and director of the Center for Educational Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri-Columbia, was selected as the external evaluator of the Initiative.² One of the major elements for each project was the Cultural Arts Program (CAP) Managers at each CDC who became the change agents, not only for the Cultural Arts Program or the CDC, but also for the community revitalizations at large. "One hallmark of the Initiative was its ability to bring systemic change to all of the participating organizations—not only to the community arts programs and their parent CDCs, but also to Manchester Craftsmen's Guild (MCG), The Ford Foundation, and CDC/ARI National Advisory Board (NAB)."³

Although coaching was not implemented in the CDC/ARI project methodology until the final, exit, year, Dr. Jones observed in his "Coaching Impact Report," dated April 4, 1999, that "Coaching served as the most useful form of

¹ "Creating in Communities: The Story of the Community Development Corporation/Arts Resource Initiative," (Pittsburgh, PA: Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, 1999), p. 2.

² Ibid, p. 17.

³ Ibid, p. 45.

intervention largely because of its individualized nature.”⁴ His report further went on to observe that the CAP Managers “rated coaching as the most effective intervention, with technical assistance, training seminars and consulting following in that order. It was noted by those interviewed that this approach was especially valuable in managing change within the organization, as well as managing external political and funding realities. *All those interviewed felt that coaching should be adopted by all funders for management development of non-profit sector managers. Over half felt that ‘Coaching should have been adopted from the inception of CDC/ARI as opposed to halfway through.’*”⁵

Increasingly, for profit corporations are offering executive coaching to their top leaders and managers in an effort to increase performance and productivity, improve management skills, sharpen creativity, retain employees, and provide recruitment incentives. A recent study showed that 56 percent of corporations offered coaching services to their key staff and 20 percent more were planning to offer such services. Coaching has been available for corporations and individuals since the early 1980s, but it has only been in the last few years that non-profit leaders and organizations have found how powerfully coaching can impact the viability of the organizations and its staff.

Working regularly and consistently with a coach is a proven way to increase results and manage the demands and responsibilities of non-profit work with less effort. In the Ford Foundation funded CDC/ARI project, “...the coaching enabled CAP Managers to adapt the approach as needed in the minimum amount of time and at the lowest cost.”⁶

Coaching is an ongoing partnership that accelerates learning, performance, and progress. Coaching strengthens leadership and managerial skills and improves interpersonal relationships with customers, clients, volunteers, and staff. In addition, coaching can help fine-tune one’s skills in practical areas such as budgeting, public speaking, goal setting, organization, and time management.

With the CDC/ARI, CAP Managers found coaching to be critical to developing their team management skills and helping them to become better change agents for their CDCs. Although the CAPs had advanced in organizational value, before the introduction of coaching, most had not become a line item in the budgets of their respective CDCs. Less than a year later, having adding the coaching approach, “...six of the eight CAP programs had achieved significant structural impact, meaning they had fundamentally altered the way that their CDCs conducted business in arts and culture programming—and often in other ways as well.”⁷ Although the CAP Managers were not senior staff themselves, if senior CDC leadership demonstrated an openness to learning from all levels of the organization and acknowledged the commitment of the CAP Managers as arts catalysts to articulate their visions, pursue their missions and enroll others in what they hoped to build, a “leadership from the middle” emerged,

⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵ Ibid. (emphasis added)

⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 46-47.

“...supported by coaches who provided the framework for planning how to navigate the daily and weekly realities of working effectively on an institutional level as well as a programmatic level.”⁸

Bill Bishop, a senior meeting planner with a national trade association, had reached a plateau in his position. He thought about pursuing law school, seeking another position elsewhere, or finding something more challenging inside the association structure, but he wasn't sure which direction to take. Within only two coaching sessions, Bill had taken the first steps toward taking the LSATs and had switched from criticizing a new product development team at his association to volunteering to be a part of that team with his supervisor's blessing. By his fourth coaching session, Bill was offered a higher-level, more challenging position in the corporate administration of the association by senior management—a position for which Bill had been passed over less than a year earlier because he was not an attorney. Bill also spoke with a financial planner to plot his strategy for paying for law school. The association had retained a valuable employee who was enthusiastically pursuing what was important both to him and the organization and who was, at the same time, seeking ways to enhance his value.

In her article, “The Case for a Coach,” in *Association Management*, April 2001, Sheila Maher outlines some of the advantages of coaching for non-profit leaders, managers, and volunteers. Maher's experience coaching key staff officers at various associations has demonstrated that coaching provides:

- The ability to lead with vision rather than just manage day-to-day activities
- Reduction of over-commitment and stress
- Continued strategic thinking even when pulled in many directions
- Maximized staff effectiveness rather than micro-managing
- Using time more effectively
- Improved interpersonal skills in dealing with difficult people

Mary Beth Bos, CFRE, in her article “Leading on the Frontlines with a Coach on the Sidelines,” *Customer Development Solutions*, quotes a social services executive, a human services executive director, a foundation CEO, and an arts executive director on what they obtained from coaching. Their descriptions can be summarized as:

- Feeling “heard” and being self-expressed
- Establishing a vision, encouraging ownership, fostering partnership, and improving pacing
- Improved ability to be pro-active, accessible and open to staff
- Building cooperation and team-spirit, increased respect from others, and a stronger ability to handle issues before they reach a crisis stage

In addition, the non-profit leader--whether board member, volunteer, executive, or department manager--benefits personally with improved health and well-being, greater life balance, less stress, and greater productivity. The organization benefits from a more well-rounded, loyal, and dedicated leader with a clear vision, better strategies to reach

⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

goals, improved relationships with and outside the organization, improved morale, and a more successful plan of work. They are also more efficient and work in a manner consistent with the agency's goals and plans.

Even the volunteer leadership of a non-profit organization can benefit from coaching when it affects one's individual career. Leigh Jones worked for a consulting firm as a middle manager and in-the-field consultant. She was hired by the CEO of the firm, Tom, a long-time friend and colleague who also served on the board of the non-profit. Leigh was directly supervised in the field by Jerry (who had the same level job as Leigh did when they worked at separate companies but is now her superior). Jerry criticized every project Leigh handled, making seemingly minute and tedious changes to her reports, often sending them back to her for re-writes despite the client's desire to receive the reports in a timely fashion. Other female colleagues reported similar difficulties with Jerry. Leigh tried not to complain much to Tom, but it was obvious to her that Jerry had complained to Tom about her. Leigh enjoyed the type of consulting, and made a good salary at it, but Jerry made her life difficult, which, in turn, was affecting her volunteer responsibilities for the non-profit. Initially in her coaching relationship, Leigh was looking to get out of her field completely and open her own business in a different area of the country. The nonprofit would have lost her as a key volunteer. But after coaching, she was offered an administrative position with her company's main office that took her away from supervision by Jerry, better used her talents, and gave her a more secure future with less travel. Her role with the non-profit was retained, and she was able to make a stronger contribution as a volunteer once she was no longer concerned with Jerry's political machinations.

Coaching can occur one-on-one or in groups, on the telephone or in-person. When considering the cost of replacing and training key staff members, volunteers, and leaders, it is one of the most proven and cost-effective methods for enhancing loyalty and retention, the accomplishment of goals, and the power to transform organizations and their communities.

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