New Approaches to Technical Assistance: The Role of the Coach

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Introduction

Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) are neighborhood-based development efforts that seek—by way of multiple strategies—to improve the lives of individuals and families, as well as the neighborhoods in which they live. Although the individual initiatives that constitute the field of CCIs differ significantly in structure and in the programs they put into place, they hold in common a set of fundamental principles. They aim to replace piecemeal, categorical development approaches with "comprehensive" efforts that address the physical, economic, and social conditions in a neighborhood, and recognize and reinforce the connections among them. At the same time, they seek to strengthen the capacity of neighborhood residents, associations, and organizations, both individually and collectively, to define and effect responses to local needs on a sustained basis. Such a "community building" approach aims to catalyze a process that treats neighborhood residents as agents of change rather than clients of an external change agent; promotes local ownership, commitment, and leadership; and builds on a neighborhood's assets while addressing its problems.

Operationalizing CCI principles is a significant conceptual and practical challenge. Initiatives that seek to be comprehensive in building community can require neighborhood residents, community development professionals and organizations, and public and private funders to engage in new ways of thinking and working together in order to succeed. New forms of extended partnerships between funders and communities generate new power dynamics and roles, both within the community and among the community and its partners. In turn, these relationships and their roles in neighborhood improvement often call for new ways of thinking about accountability and evaluation. Implementing development activities in ways that engage residents and other stakeholders, build leadership and organizational strength, and create opportunities for program synergy have the potential to create many dilemmas for CCI staff about strategy, pace, sequence, and capacity. CCI experience to date suggests that many of these dilemmas have yet to be resolved. Among these dilemmas are: high potential for mission drift; strong pressures to fall back on traditional categorical solutions; a widespread lack of strategic capacity; and a complex—often troubled—nature of partnerships. This makes the role of technical assistance (TA) particularly important.

CCIs have relied heavily on TA, usually specialized support provided by outside consultants to address specific programmatic or organizational tasks in areas in which the staff may have neither the required time nor expertise. As the CCI field matures, funders, initiative leaders, and TA providers have become increasingly aware of the shortcomings of conventional TA. This development coincides with emerging thinking about knowledge-based development and the role of learning organizations.[1] As a result, a handful of CCIs has begun experimenting with new TA approaches, one of which is known as a "coach."[2] The coach provides support, guidance, and

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[1] Senge et al., 1994; Ellerman, 1998; Weiss & Morrill, 1998.

[2] Some people in the CCI field express reservations about the title "coach," believing that it carries negative connotations. In this view, the need for a coach can imply that a CCI is not performing well, and a coach can be

encouragement to key players in an initiative and helps them recognize and work through the fundamental tensions that must be negotiated as a CCI develops (The Aspen Institute, 1997).

The role of coach is still new and relatively untested. We know of no CCI that has either involved a coach at its inception or has implemented the role in its prototypical form. The few CCIs that use coaches have introduced them when the initiatives were already well underway, often in response to problems with existing TA structures. As a consequence, there has yet to be a case where the opportunities and constraints of this approach to TA can be tested over the full life span of an initiative. The goal of this paper is to describe early utilization of CCI coaches and to explore their potential to promote the strategic capacity of these initiatives. In the first section, we discuss the theory and practice of the coach role. The next section explores the conditions that may be required for successful implementation of this approach to TA. The paper concludes with some questions that need to be addressed to assess the viability of the coach role over the long run.

Our exploration of the implementation of the coach role draws on the experiences of two initiatives. The first is the Neighborhood Strategies Project (NSP), a CCI sponsored by the New York Community Trust that supports three community-based collaboratives in New York City. Launched in 1994, NSP is now in its fifth year of a six-year initiative. In mid-1998, four years into the initiative, the New York Community Trust hired a coach to work with the three NSP sites.[3] The second initiative we examine is the Annie E. Casey Foundation's five-site Rebuilding Communities Initiative (RCI), one of the first CCIs to experiment with the coach role. Coaches were introduced in 1996, two years into the initiative. This paper includes the results of semi-structured interviews we conducted with funders, coaches, initiative staff, and evaluators.[4] To provide a somewhat broader context for this exploration, we also interviewed several other TA providers and CCI observers.

Through this modest reconnaissance, we have developed an initial portrait of the coach role. We are expansive in this portrait, combining what limited grounded examples we could find with interviewees' notions about the ideal scenario for a coach, as well as our own conjecture about the possibilities of the role if fully implemented. Because our primary goal is to stimulate new

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perceived to hold more power than CCI participants. Although we acknowledge the limitations of this title, we use the term throughout this paper because it is increasingly associated with the approach to TA described here.

[3] From 1995 through mid-1997, during NSP's first two and one half years, the New York Community Trust contracted with specific TA providers to work with the sites on developing program goals and implementation plans and on building community organizing capacity to increase resident involvement. The experience with these TA providers, however, was mixed. From the perspective of the Trust, the usefulness of this TA was limited because: the consultants were based outside of New York City, and the sites were reluctant to develop relationships with outsiders; the TA was episodic and lacked follow-up; and, despite efforts by the Trust to coordinate the work of the TA providers, it remained fragmented. By mid-1997, all of the original consultants had discontinued their work with NSP, and for a period of nine months the sites received little formal TA. In 1998, The Trust decided to pursue a new strategy, relying on a coach as the main source of TA.

[4] These interviews focused on the rationale for using a coach, the tasks of a coach, and the benefits and limitations of this approach to technical assistance. Because two of the authors, Brown and Hirota, have been core members of the NSP evaluation team since the initiative's inception, the paper also draws on their ongoing fieldwork at the NSP sites.

thinking, we treat current experience as a take-off point rather than a limiting factor in identifying these possibilities.

The Coach Role: The Prototype and the Practice

Rationale for the Coach Role

Few community-based organizations or collaborating entities possess the breadth of substantive and management skills or the experience required to meet the demands of implementing a CCI. Consequently, most CCI sponsors include provisions for TA at various stages of an initiative's development. However, many CCIs have had mixed experiences with TA. Sites have often found TA useful, but in many cases the structure and delivery of TA overall has been disappointing, and has contributed, at times, to frustration and tension felt by both communities and sponsors. These experiences point to several inherent limitations in established TA approaches for CCIs and underline the need for the development of new kinds of capacities in these complex initiatives.

First, the vast majority of TA in the community development field is oriented toward enhancing programmatic and organizational capacity through short-term interventions that focus on a particular goal, solution, or product (e.g., enhancing capacity in a particular substantive area such as economic development or community organizing, conducting strategic planning or board development, bringing in best practices, etc.). Although, this type of TA serves an important purpose, it has not always been sufficient in scope or intensity to address the broad challenges faced by CCIs as they attempt to translate the complex objectives of comprehensiveness and community building into a set of functioning operational strategies.

Second, in the case of most CCIs, TA has been funder-defined and driven, contracted by the funder to provide help to the local effort to achieve the funder's vision (Wahl et al., 1998). Funders typically identify an initiative's TA needs and hire consultants to work with sites.[5] In many cases, TA has become an arena in which underlying power dynamics between sites and their funders have surfaced and caused significant tension (The Aspen Institute, 1997; Brown & Garg, 1997). Sometimes sites perceive that they have little input into what types of assistance they receive, when and how it is delivered, and by whom (Pitcoff, 1997). In other instances, the TA delivery mechanism has been unwieldy or unproductive: the work of individual providers has not been well coordinated or followed up in a timely manner, roles have been ill-defined, or sites have found the whole TA enterprise to be overly time-consuming and insufficiently related to the tasks at hand. In the real or perceived absence of qualified local TA providers, funders often resort to retaining national-level consultants who may lack knowledge of a site's circumstances and context or the ability to provide TA that is sufficiently intensive and responsive. In these and other situations in which the site has little ownership of the TA process, TA may seem to the site more like what one lead organization director called "snoopervision," a means for the sponsor to promote its agenda and priorities or monitor the site's progress than an effective way to deliver assistance (Brown et al., 1998).

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[5] A "site" refers to a locality in which a CCI operates. Many CCIs are multi-site, supporting programs in several cities across the country or several neighborhoods within a city. Depending on the structure of a CCI, the site encompasses the lead organization or a collaborative of organizations, community members, and other local institutions involved in the initiative.

Third, the CCI field does not yet have an established body of wisdom that can be easily transferred to initiative participants through time-limited consultation. The field is still in the early phases of developing a praxis of implementation. Building this praxis is as much about learning how to advance the capacity for development as it is about putting new programs into place. This capacity involves skills and activities that go beyond the usual focus of TA in such areas as self-evaluation and critical reflection, program leverage and synergy, strategic linkages between neighborhood work and broader system change, sustained engagement and management of multiple stakeholders, and so forth. Not only is the content of TA resistant to easy knowledge transfer, but the TA relationship must evolve in such a way that it reflects and supports a knowledge development process that contributes to the capacity of participants to learn and grow in many ways as the CCI unfolds. Not surprisingly, TA providers who are uncomfortable with either the content or the process of this challenging relationship tend to fall back on a more traditional program or organizational development focus.

For these reasons, CCIs call for a different approach to TA: one that builds the strategic capacity of participants to undertake the complex challenges of comprehensive service delivery and community building, one that generates investment by all CCI stakeholders, and one that supports a learning process that promotes new knowledge to help CCIs improve their effectiveness and accountability to the communities in which they operate. The coach role evolved as an attempt to institutionalize this expanded notion of TA. Although no "pure" model of the coach role exists, our discussions with pioneers in this field point to four primary dimensions of the coach role: carrying the vision of the initiative, fostering learning communities, facilitating dialogue and productive interaction among initiative participants, and developing capacity. Before we discuss these four dimensions, it is important to understand how the coach role has been structured and to whom the coach is accountable.

Defining Accountability for the Coach
Although operationally the coach works for both the funder and the site, conceptually he or she is accountable to the vision and goals of the CCI. This gives the coach a unique vantage point from which to view the evolution of the initiative. The role allows both an insider and outsider stance. The coach is part of, and invested in, the initiative, having close relationships with but also autonomy from both the site and the funder. This position allows the coach to develop independent relationships with all the key players (funders, the lead organization, staff, collaborative partners, etc.) and to view site dynamics and relationships in their complexity and within context. From this vantage point, the coach is well situated to see and speak freely, to raise important and timely questions of strategy and initiative interests, and to push all parties to clarify issues and flesh out arguments that may not be fully voiced (Pitcoff, 1997).

CCIs have chosen different structural arrangements to ensure the appropriate balance of accountability. Each RCI site hired its own coach, although the Casey Foundation was consulted before a final hiring decision was made. In the case of NSP, the New York Community Trust invited representatives from the three NSP collaboratives to participate in the hiring process, including developing the job description and selection criteria, interviewing candidates, and selecting the coach. Giving the sites significant control over the selection process is designed to promote their investment in making the relationship a productive one.

In most cases, the foundation pays for the coach, either directly or through targeted grant support to the site. Typically, the coach and the site work together to develop a scope of work that reflects a site's TA needs and is consistent with the initiative's goals and vision. In RCI, the coach has reporting requirements to both the foundation and the site. In that way, the foundation can ensure that the coach is fulfilling his or her contract and the sites can ensure that the coach stays focused on locally defined priorities. Both parties assess the coach's performance; however, according to RCI's national TA coordinator, the site is "more equal" because it has a better view of what the coach is doing on the ground. In NSP, the coach provides quarterly activity reports to the Trust but has no formal reporting requirements to the sites.

Whatever the particular structure of accountability, building trust is an important element of a coaching relationship that takes time to develop. This time can be reduced if the coach has a prior positive relationship with the sites, as was the case with two coaches we interviewed, one involved with NSP and the other with RCI. But regardless of prior history, it takes time for the sites, the funder, and the coach to work out the parameters of the coach role in a way that fosters clarity and trust among all the parties. Early on in RCI, the Casey Foundation was concerned about how some sites were using the coach. Foundation staff perceived that in some sites, the coach was playing a traditional consulting role rather than the more proactive role the Foundation had envisioned. Although uncomfortable, the Foundation did not intervene. Eventually, a more active coaching relationship developed in a couple of sites, and then the other sites began to see the potential of the role. Foundation staff in this case underscore the importance of a sound relationship between the foundation and the sites, believing that foundations have to be willing to be less prescriptive and not panic if they do not like what they see at any point in time, and sites have to be willing to take risks and be open to a level of intervention that typically makes them wary.

Dimensions of the Coach Role
The four dimensions of the role that we have identified overlap substantially, each reinforcing the others. We have separated them simply to highlight some of the most important functions that a coach can play in a CCI.

Carrying the Vision of the Initiative
Most TA providers focus on discrete tasks with particular groups or individuals in the CCI (e.g., board development with the CCI governance entity, program consultation with the CCI director, assistance on the development of a management information system with CCI staff, etc.). The coach may work on similar tasks but always with the underlying goal of assisting all CCI participants, including the funder, to operationalize the vision of the initiative. This involves helping participants internalize and apply the ideas underlying the larger initiative as they go about project-specific activities. For example, while working with a site on particular tasks, such as creating a governance structure or developing a strategic plan, the coach aims to reinforce commitments to larger initiative goals by encouraging sites to think about how and why to engage partners in a governance structure and how to integrate leadership development into every aspect of the process or how to shape a strategic plan so that it acknowledges and exploits the interdependence among program activities.

Thus, integrating the fundamental goals and principles of the CCI into day-to-day action, championing the lens that distinguishes the CCI from other development strategies, is a central function of the coach. The coach, however, is more an enabler than a director, acting less like a master strategist than like a facilitator and wise conscience.[6] The vision must belong to the CCI participants. The coach's role at different times and in different ways over the life of an initiative is to help them articulate, implement, assess, and reshape the vision as needed.

Because CCIs are such complex enterprises, they frequently face the challenge of drift—drift created by trying to do everything at once (which can result in the CCI actually accomplishing little); by the absence of strategic capacity; by getting mired in the day-to-day responsibilities of managing the CCI's administrative demands and keeping the projects on track; and by getting stalled by political issues, fatigue, or temporary lack of will. The coach's job is to remind participants of the "big picture," to help them discover when their actions are out of alignment with the initiative's broader goals and ideas, to provoke and energize, and to help them steer back on course (or reconsider the initiative's goals and change the course).

The coach can resort to a range of strategies to carry out this aim: actively challenging individuals about why they are pursuing a certain strategy or going in a particular direction, acting as a mirror to reflect back to them the actions and behaviors that are interfering with the achievement of agreed upon goals, suggesting different options by reframing the process, or raising the implications of making one choice over another. Sometimes the coach works through suggestion, but at other times he or she may play the role of devil's advocate. On occasion, the NSP coach has written memos to a site presenting various options for how to approach a particular issue, some of which he knows site partners are likely to find undesirable.

Nonetheless, from his perspective, giving them something to react to may help the partners to clarify their own thinking on an issue or begin to see it in a different light. The coach is able to do this strategically, with sensitivity to timing and "message intensity," because he is a trusted insider, embedded in the project. At other times, the coach can act as an outsider, reflecting back how outsiders perceive the site (e.g., is the physical set-up of the office accessible and engaging, do different racial and ethnic groups find initiative staff differentially available? etc.).

To keep the CCI's vision salient as the operative lens for his or her work, the coach must not be pulled into the organizational culture and demands of any one of the CCI partners. Coaches report the danger of "joining" with an organization in a way that diminishes the effectiveness of their role can arise, particularly as the relationship between the site and the coach deepens. One coach, who has worked closely with a lead organization in a site for several years, continually asks herself if she is approaching a situation objectively or becoming part of the organization. If she suspects that she is getting too close to the organization, she will distance herself until she feels able to observe and act in an unbiased way and maintain accountability to the initiative's vision.

On the ground, carrying the vision of an initiative often means placing specific tasks within the context of a broader strategic framework, rather than directly promoting specific initiative goals. For example, the NSP coach has worked with initiative staff and the governance boards in two

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[6] R. Hamilton, personal communication, September 1999.

sites to think about and begin to strategize on ways to operationalize NSP's community building goals, particularly involving neighborhood residents in initiative governance and programs. In both cases, the coach has had to identify a pace that balanced the site's capacity to move forward with the larger goals of the initiative.

In one site, the coach facilitated a series of discussions on community building, beginning with an introduction of community-building principles, then helping to develop a consensus around the meaning of community building in the context of NSP, and culminating with a discussion on how the site could incorporate community building objectives into a particular project, in this case the formation of an editorial board for a community-wide newsletter.

In the other, the coach has been involved in ongoing work to expand NSP's governance board. In theory, the collaborative partners supported NSP's vision of empowering residents through representation on the governance board; in practice, they have been slow to change the decision-making structure and process that such inclusion demands. The coach suggested that, rather than immediately expanding the board, the partners engage in a gradual outreach process to identify and build relationships with potential community representatives. This has involved holding quarterly community forums focused on broad topics—such as welfare reform, technology-based employment strategies, and youth employment—to introduce and educate community members about NSP programs and strategies, network with others involved in similar activities, and solicit community input. Through these meetings the partners hope to familiarize the community with NSP and eventually recruit new governance board members.

The coach's work with the first site yielded limited progress due to a combination of factors, including staff changes and the low priority given to increasing resident participation in its programs. The coach was able to help the second site use community forums to identify potential governance board members and to establish relationships with neighborhood organizations doing similar work. Neither site, however, has operationalized its original community-building goals to the degree anticipated at NSP's inception. Five years into the initiative, for example, neither had achieved the goal of engaging community residents in governance or other advisory mechanisms. Despite the insight and experience that the coach brings to the initiative, he cannot force change—the decision to act is the site's to make. In this case, both the funder and the sites backed away from NSP's community-building goals, a key element of NSP's original vision. As we discuss later, if the funder and the sites do not agree upon or are not committed to a clear vision, a coach has nothing to leverage—no overarching initiative goals toward which to coach the different players and to which they are all accountable.

Fostering Learning Communities
One of the most important functions of a coach is to help CCI participants develop an active learning capacity that will lead to new ways of thinking about and working to promote change at the local level. The purpose of such TA is the creation and institutionalization of a learning culture that involves continual dialogue, reflection, and experimentation and places a high value on learning from what is not working as well as from what is (Brown et al., 1998).[7]

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[7] Current thinking in the field of organizational development defines a learning organization as one that promotes the institutionalization of new knowledge so that the organization can continuously improve its effectiveness and accountability to its constituencies (Senge et al., 1994; Weiss & Morrill, 1998; Ellerman, 1998).

The ambitious nature of CCIs calls for all parties to take on new roles, develop new relationships, and build new capacities. Although individuals and organizations may embrace a CCI's goals and approach, they often resist or are unable to implement the changes in organizational structure, operation, and culture that such an approach requires. Funders may fall back on usual modes of grantmaking, and community-based organizations may resort to established ways of doing business. A decade of experimentation with CCIs demonstrates that changes in organizational culture and behavior do not come easily. External incentives, such as foundation funding, may induce changes in short-term behavior, but they are unlikely to change the underlying institutional matrix that determines an organization's ways of working. As one CCI sponsor comments, "You can use money to make people tell you something differently, but not to act differently." Similarly, foundations can profess their desire to partner with communities but find themselves unable to change their institutional practices in ways that make partnerships viable.

The coach can facilitate the creation of a learning culture in several ways. Rather than entering a site as an "expert," the coach can act as an "educator," who prompts learning by asking questions and encouraging dialogue that uncovers participants' intrinsic desire to learn and improve their practice (Ellerman, 1998). One coach describes the most important aspect of her work as making sites critically aware of why they do the things they do. She hopes her legacy will be to make participants conscious of the critical decisions they make on a daily basis, to institutionalize that kind of reflection, and leave them with the capacity to figure out for themselves how to solve problems. Similarly, another coach sees his role as "asking the right questions: What do you expect to accomplish? What do you do that you are proud of? What has changed so that you are no longer doing what you said you would do?" This coach calls his work "helping people discover their own wisdom."

Thus, rather than espousing "one best way" to approach a problem, a coach might propose a variety of options and encourage dialogue and experimentation in order to encourage a solution that is locally appropriate. Instead of presenting best practices, a coach would be more likely to stimulate the local reinvention of best practices, so that they are contextually relevant to the circumstances and opportunities that exist within a particular neighborhood or configuration of organizations. Another strategy to promote learning is facilitating cross-site issue groups and the use of peer consultants, whereby a person with a particular area of expertise at one site provides assistance to another site. The coach is often well positioned to identify the opportunities for this type of cross-site learning and to support both the "teacher" and the "learner" in this mutual learning enterprise. A final approach to fostering the process of action and reflection is helping the site use data to inform its planning and to assess its practice. A site's strategic capacity is greatly enhanced if it can clearly define what constitutes success for its different efforts and how that success might be measured.

Sometimes a coach may decide to be less engaged with a site on a specific issue to assess its ability to work out a problem on its own. Several coaches noted that they might become aware of a problem, but decide to back off and allow things to take their course. One coach comments that, "Even if the outcome is negative, I believe that it is important for the group to experience the full impact of its actions. In that way it is more likely to learn from the experience." Instead

of fearing that a site might make mistakes, a coach promotes autonomy through active learning, which includes the "right" to make mistakes, to pay for them, and thereby to learn lasting lessons (Ellerman, 1998). Sometimes a coach needs to demonstrate by doing, but always with a watchful eye so that he or she does not perform a role more appropriate for staff. Limits and boundaries are important components of a coaching relationship that promotes learning and does not build dependency.

This role is a challenging one for TA providers who are trained to draw on a clear and delineated body of knowledge, who are often accustomed to working within relatively short time frames, and who face funders and community groups who sometimes appear to want short-term answers rather than longer-term capacity. Several TA providers commented that sites often feel that, given pressures to generate visible results, they do not have the luxury of time to build capacity—at some level, they "just want the TA provider to tell them what to do or to do it himself." Moreover, for the active learning community to flourish, all parties must be brought along in the process, even though they may move forward at different paces and bring opposing interests and perspectives to bear on the direction of change. A coach must be sensitive to and continually negotiate these differences, while at the same time reinforcing a commitment to moving forward.

Finally, the changes in strategic capacity that an active learning process aims to bring about are often slow to evolve and difficult to measure. Instead of asking whether the initiative developed an improved economic development program or a new management information system, equally relevant questions related to the coach's performance are: Do the actions of all the parties reflect the core ideas behind the initiative? Is active learning taking place and being integrated into practice on an ongoing basis? Can CCI participants articulate at any point in time how their day-to-day work contributes to the CCI's larger goals and strategies?

Facilitating Dialogue and Productive Interaction among Initiative Participants
CCIs involve complex webs of relationships among funders, the lead organizations or collaboratives, various governance bodies, and community residents and other stakeholders. At different points within the course of an initiative, these relationships can become strained. Collaborative structures, as in the case of NSP and RCI, face particularly challenging individual and organizational dynamics. Because of the coach's outsider status, he or she is often perceived as someone who can play a mediating role when mistrust or suspicion develops among parties. In this capacity, the coach helps to build or strengthen relationships that are critical to moving an initiative forward.

In several RCI sites, tensions have flared between the lead organization and the CCI's governance board, composed of representatives from other neighborhood groups and institutions. For example, one site's lead organization was reluctant to engage governance board members because they were not perceived as allies. The coach responded to complaints from the board members who felt excluded by creating a space for dialogue, first raising the issue with the lead organization and then bringing all the parties together to discuss the problem and work through solutions. In another instance, the NSP coach helped to resolve tension between a staff member and her supervisor, who had very different working styles. Over time, communication between

the two had broken down. The coach was able to bring the two together and facilitate dialogue, which eventually led to more constructive ways of working together.

The coach can also serve as a mediator or broker between sites and the CCI sponsor. When the NSP sponsor was frustrated with the lack of progress on a project planned by one of the collaboratives, the site director called on the coach to intervene. The coach identified the problem as a lack of communication among the collaborative partners and agreed to work with them to establish more effective lines of communication. At the same time, the coach was able to assure the funder that the site was making a good faith effort to address the impediments to progress on the project.

Successful mediation depends on a strong foundation of respect and trust. Communication needs to be clear, confidences maintained, and the interests of the initiative held foremost. The coach cannot be a spy. By holding everyone accountable to the CCI's vision, the coach can serve as a bridge between the funder and the site, helping to "level the playing field" and promote productive discussion between them. Often the coach can challenge the site in a way that it might perceive as overly interventionist or controlling if such a challenge came directly from the funder. A sponsor may find it easier, and more constructive, to first raise an issue or problem in a site with the coach. The coach can then broach the sponsor's concern to the site in a way that site participants would likely be more open to than if the funder did it directly. This works the other way as well, with sites turning to the coach to raise issues with the foundation that they may be hesitant to bring up on their own.

Ultimately, however, the coach aims to move out of the mediator role by working to increase direct and constructive communication between the funder and the sites. This communication is part of the new behavior that CCIs require if the partnerships between funders and community initiatives are to flourish in the long run: complex and difficult issues of race, power, and organizational culture and language must be addressed so that they do not become barriers to CCI progress. A coach can play a key role in helping to structure and facilitate this process of building trust and effective communication.

Developing Capacity

Any community development initiative as complex as a CCI requires an organizational vehicle to coordinate and oversee the planning and implementation of initiative projects and activities. In some initiatives, this entity may be a lead organization, in others it may be a collaborative of neighborhood-based organizations and institutions. Regardless of the type of entity, it is likely to need new or strengthened organizational capacities to manage the change effort. The majority of TA in the community development field, however, has focused on developing program capacity. The CCI field has come to recognize the need for organizational development assistance, and CCI sponsors are increasingly apt to invest in organizations' capacity-building needs (Burns & Spilka, 1997; Brown et al., 1998).

As a result, there are an increasing number of TA providers who specialize in organizational development assistance. Ideally, what a coach has to offer, beyond what these providers can deliver, is an ongoing presence at the site, strong relationships with site personnel, and a broad understanding of the organization or collaborating entity's CCI goals and program. The coach

can be attuned to timing, personalities, political sensitivities, and other issues that can inform the development of an overall approach to building the capacity of the organization. He or she is often better positioned than a short-term consultant would be to push an organization when its neglect of, or resistance to, change undermines accomplishment of CCI goals. The coach may also be better positioned to resequence capacity-building activities when one approach does not seem productive. Finally, the coach's emphasis is less on knowledge transfer than on supporting and developing local strength (Wahl et al., 1998).

Most importantly, because the coach has the charge of stimulating *collective* learning, he or she should be able to design an approach to organizational development that maximizes the shared learning throughout the organization rather than isolating specific tasks (such as board development, financial management, or collaborative relations) and their associated lessons from each other. This does not mean that the coach has to deliver all the assistance him- or herself—it may be better to hire individual consultants for particular tasks, especially when they are technical and short-term. What it does mean is that the coach works with the site to design an overall approach within the broader framework of the CCI vision and goals and to ensure that coordination occurs and learning is aggregated across tasks.

In practice, most coaches tend to focus significant attention to building the capacity of organizations and collaboratives to respond to the increased demands that a CCI places on them. For example, in one NSP site, where there were no clear expectations for the different staff roles, the coach worked individually with staff members to define their scope of responsibility and create a work plan for the year. These were then pulled together to create a management tool that identified each person's responsibilities and created clear lines of accountability. In one RCI site, the coach helped the lead organization evaluate and improve its operating procedures, and worked with staff and governance board members to develop leadership and group process skills. One of RCI's evaluators comments, "The [RCI] sites would not be where there are today without the support for organizational capacity building provided by the coaches. Sites are different, and better equipped to take on the challenges of RCI, as a result of this effort."

One capacity particularly important for organizations or collaboratives managing CCIs to possess is the ability to identify and use TA resources. CCIs have not always been able to take full advantage of TA. Often, community-based organizations have little experience working with TA providers and may be unsure how to use and manage TA resources effectively (Chaskin et al., 1997). Although a coach may assist a site with various project-specific tasks (for example, the NSP coach has worked with one site on implementing a business development program for neighborhood entrepreneurs entering the food service industry and with another on designing an entrepreneurial training program for youth), more commonly the coach refers sites to other TA providers for specialized assistance on particular projects or activities while simultaneously helping sites develop the ongoing capacity to identify and utilize TA consultants effectively. This involves teaching sites how to recruit and select TA providers, define assignments and negotiate contracts, and assess consultant performance (indirectly, once again, fostering the site's strategic capacity). By developing this asset within sites, the coach seeks to prevent organizations from becoming too dependent on his or her presence and to leave them with the skills to take full advantage of outside expertise.

Preparing the Ground for the Coach

The coach role is clearly very challenging. The coach must be able to move back and forth among a variety of roles, including teacher, supporter, shuttle diplomat, broker, interpreter, technical advisor, challenger, and nudge. He or she must also be able to work with and establish credibility in the eyes of the many diverse parties involved in a CCI. This means that the coach must be able to speak the language of foundations, community-based organizations, and community residents, to appreciate the pressures and incentives operating in each world, and to earn the trust of people who may not always share the same interests. It calls for an individual who possesses a wide range of conceptual, interpersonal, problem-solving, and political talents. In addition to basic knowledge of multiple program areas, the role also requires someone who is invested in the success of the initiative and can see the "big picture," an individual who can keep his or her sight on the initiative's vision and goals while simultaneously attending to the details of its various moving parts. Finally, the coach must be able to draw upon enough experience and instinct to know when to push one role and when to back off on another, how to maneuver in complex political terrain, and how to work for all parties while protecting his or her independence.

Throughout, the coach's demeanor must be respectful, humble, and responsive. The people with whom the coach works should feel valued, supported at a personal level, and reinforced in the strengths they bring to the endeavor. In the long run, they must experience the coach as adding value, they must perceive their work together as resulting in better program outcomes, more access to resources, useful insights, more effective working relationships, or in other positive outcomes.

The pool of such individuals is not large, suggesting the need to design training and other strategies to develop the available supply of potential coaches. But even when an appropriate coach is identified, other conditions must be in place in order for the role to be successfully implemented. This approach to TA requires a commitment on the part of all parties to work in new ways. In particular, it calls for: a commitment to a shared vision, a commitment to a culture that supports experimentation and rewards learning, and clear rules of engagement regarding how the coach role is implemented.

Commitment to the CCI's Vision
The coach can contribute most effectively to a CCI when the parties have clearly articulated and agreed upon the ideas behind the initiative, the vision intended to guide the CCI. If the funder and the sites do not agree upon or are not committed to this vision, a coach has no overarching initiative goals toward which to coach the different players and to which they are all accountable. Under the stress presented by the need to make fundamental changes in their practice, both funders and sites can be tempted to back away from the vision. Indeed, in some cases they collude in this retreat, being more comfortable with the old ways of doing business, however limiting, than with the challenge of forging new relationships and new approaches. Often it is only the coach who can clearly see this resistance to change. But, if he or she cannot invoke the initiative's vision, and the funder and site's commitment to it, there is little opportunity to help the players understand and label the retreat and then reflect on whether and how the original vision should be modified or whether it should be used to help the initiative move toward the

direction originally intended. The ideas behind an initiative can—and usually should—evolve as the initiative unfolds. But a coach is able to identify and facilitate discussion when what the players say the initiative is about and what is actually happening operationally become disconnected. If the overall commitment to a common vision does not exist, more traditional technical assistance from experts in specific program areas may be a better use of an initiative's TA resources.

Commitment to a Learning Culture
The coach role requires that both the initiative sponsor and site participants share a commitment to developing a learning culture. This includes a commitment to candid dialogue, an openness to different views and new information, and a willingness to examine the results of the initiative's actions, positive and negative. Sites must be willing to move forward through a process of trial and error, and funders must be willing to tolerate "mistakes." A learning culture rewards informed experimentation and generates knowledge as a valuable product of the initiative in its own right. It also requires a significant time commitment—and related costs—that needs to be part of the initial negotiation between the sponsor and the community at the CCI's inception.

Commitment to Clear Rules of Engagement
The complicated nature of accountability that surrounds the coach role makes it especially important that clear lines of accountability are established from the outset. The coach must be given the autonomy or freedom to exercise his or her judgment about when and how to work with a site without interference from the funder. Similarly, the coach has to be able to challenge the funder, even though the funder often provides the resources for the coach's work. Lines of communication must be clear: the funder cannot expect the coach to "report" on the sites, and the site must trust the coach not to divulge confidential information to the funder.

<center>**Conclusion**</center>

Although the full potential of the coach has yet to be tested, the early experiences of CCIs that have introduced this role show some promise. CCI sites have benefited from the intensive technical assistance that a coach offers, particularly in working through the organizational and capacity building challenges that accompany such ambitious change efforts. By him- or herself, a coach is unlikely to meet all of an initiative's TA needs. However, as a central component of an overall TA strategy that may also include project-specific assistance from more specialized TA providers, a coach may be able to foster a capacity for critique and reflective action that is likely to improve long-term practice and contribute to broader learning in the field.

We have speculated about the possibilities of the role but, especially in the absence of substantial implementation experience, this speculation raises many questions for further exploration:

- Will the conditions to support a coach ever become a reality from the beginning of an initiative? For example, will funders and CCI managers be willing to expose themselves to each other and to themselves in a way that generates useful knowledge for the field? Will funders be willing to invest the resources required to implement the coach role from the inception of a CCI? Can we identify and/or train a pool of talented coaches willing to experiment with the role?

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- What are realistic expectations regarding how long a CCI should expect to retain a coach and at what level of intensity? Does the coach emphasize different aspects of the role at different stages of the initiative's development? How can a coach avoid becoming a crutch for the initiative?

- What can we learn from TA providers and documentors/evaluators who have fallen into informal coaching roles?

- What are the dangers of poor coaching? Can we anticipate where coaching might go wrong or possibly be harmful? Even when the coaching relationship appears to be working, are there any drawbacks or negative unintended consequences of having a coach in a CCI?

- What are the consequences of having the coaching function carried out by a team from an intermediary or training organization, rather than by an individual coach?[8]

- Can we begin to look systematically at the consequences of the coach role for what the initiative accomplishes, as well as for how it does so?

- What are the consequences for the initiative if the coach works only for one group of CCI participants, for example the funder or the lead organization, rather than for the initiative as a whole?[9] Is it possible for an initiative to have more than one coach, each one working with a different group of participants?

More work is needed to address these and other questions about the prototype and the reality of the coach role. In addition to tracking current and future TA in whatever form it takes in CCIs, special attention needs to be devoted to exploring what is required for sites to see a coach as providing added value. And we need to understand better the intangibles of the TA relationship, such as the role of good "chemistry" among the partners (Wahl et al., 1998).

The coach is not a quick fix for all the challenges facing CCIs. It takes a tremendous commitment of time, effort, and resources. Indeed, a coach may not be appropriate or necessary for all CCIs. However, early experimentation offers the CCI field new ways of thinking about the capacities that these complex initiatives need and the types of TA that can support the attainment of their goals most effectively.

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[8] MDC is an example of an organization that has developed a methodology for working with communities on planned change initiatives very similar to CCIs. Many of MDC's values and operating premises are similar to those described here as characteristic of a coaching relationship. For more information, see Dodson and Thomasson, 1997.

[9] For its multi-site Community Ventures initiative, the Northwest Area Foundation (1998) hired a "learning coach" who focuses solely on helping the foundation review on a regular basis such questions as: "What have we done right? What have we done wrong? What did we learn? What do we change?"

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