

Coaching for Power

A capacity-building approach to campaign coaching

Coaching is one of those words, like *organizing*, that means different things to different people. We're surrounded by many kinds of coaches – sports team coaches, fitness trainers, life coaches, spiritual gurus, etc. – all with different goals. The goal of a *campaign coach* is fundamentally about building an organizer's capacities – skills, awareness, confidence – around campaign strategy and tactics to strengthen their current *and* future organizing.

We believe any time groups take collective action to change their material conditions, there are some people playing a *coach role*, intentionally trying to develop the insights and skills of their peers, mentees and even top leaders. We're especially inspired by US social movements that made widespread use of volunteer-based leadership development networks – thousands of Black teachers were trained to lead Citizenship Schools across the South in the 1960s, and in recent years, hundreds of organizing coaches have enlisted with Sunrise Movement, IfNotNow and other formations.

Yet, this kind of coaching isn't always common in our organizing teams or workplaces. If a colleague asks for support on a lunch break, they often want concrete *advice*. Giving advice inevitably makes us feel useful – and that feels good! But as the saying goes, 'give someone a fish, they eat for a day; teach them to fish, they eat for a lifetime.'

Coaching beyond advice-giving takes more practice. So, why do it?

ACCURACY

As “outside” campaign coaches, we'll never have as much on-the-ground information as the organizer, or the ability to make the *most accurate* decisions for our coachees. Our role is to use the limited information we get to help them prioritize, assess, and make effective choices on the ground.

Part of campaign strategy is navigating complexity. The political landscape is always shifting; tactics that worked before no longer have the same effectiveness; our groups and even our opponents often change, requiring shifts in our plans, based on our latest organizing conditions. Our coaching won't be very effective if we're simply giving advice about how to manage the current set of campaign choices.

LEARNING

Studies show there's more to learning than just being instructed. As Michael Bungay Stanier puts it in *The Coaching Habit*, "advice is overrated. I can tell you something, and it's got a limited chance of making its way into your brain's hippocampus, the region that encodes memory. If I ask you a question and you generate the answer yourself, the odds increase substantially."

We believe the core element of coaching useful to organizers is the idea of helping someone *learn* a skill (or an insight, instinct, or theory). Coaching this way demands more discipline on the part of coaches, as it requires us to calibrate our methods to the individual learner, and to rigorously cultivate our own curiosity. The core practice of coaching "in a nutshell," according to Stanier, is "Can you stay curious a little bit longer? Can you rush to action and advice-giving just a little bit more slowly?"

SCALING OUR MOVEMENTS

Our movements are short on seasoned campaigners; we're much more likely to develop the number of campaign coaches we need if we focus on helping each other learn to campaign rather than simply advising new organizers how to handle campaigning challenges that emerge.

When we develop the capacities of people we coach, and model a culture of learning, they are better able to share lessons and support learning with the rest of their team. Beyond winning more campaigns, we develop more organizers able to lead with curiosity.

Campaign coaching is a balancing act. It's about helping organizers *learn about* campaigning, while also *designing and waging* effective campaigns. It's a virtuous circle – we learn to campaign, enabling us to run better campaigns, and then teach others as we design and run the next one. But what's the priority: *Learning the skills*, or making the most *strategic decisions*? Our overall orientation is that it's more important to prioritize learning above the "perfect" strategy; success and failure are both learning opportunities. But every coach gets to balance this tension within the context of a live campaign.