



Coaching Across Differences



An equity-centered coaching approach asks coaches to see the person, see the system, and see the interaction between the two. That balance creates the conditions for deeper growth, stronger relationships, and more effective leadership development. This guide is designed as a guided reflection for coaches about their intersectional selves and how that can shape their coaching practice.

Coaching Across Differences for Campaign Lab Coaches

Coaching is a core leadership skill and a critical tactic in the Campaign Lab approach to building high participation locals. Effective coaching helps leaders develop confidence, strengthen organizing skills, broaden participation, and build the capacity of others to lead. When coaches and leaders differ by race, gender, job classification, age, geography, or other dimensions of identity, coaching does not occur outside of those differences. Power, experience, credibility, and communication are often shaped by social and organizational dynamics that can influence how feedback is given, received, and acted upon. Strong coaches remain aware of these dynamics without making assumptions about another person's experience. They coach with curiosity, humility, and a commitment to understanding both individual circumstances and broader organizational realities. An equity-centered coaching approach asks coaches to see the person, see the system, and see the interaction between the two. That balance creates the conditions for deeper growth, stronger relationships, and more effective leadership development.

Key Ideas to Hold

When a coach and a leader differ by race, gender, job classification, age, sexuality, class background, geography, or another identity, the goal is not to ignore the difference nor make it the center of every conversation. The goal is to understand that difference may influence trust, credibility, communication, risk, and how feedback is received.

1. Coaching Is Never Separate From Power

The relationship is not just Coach ↔ Leader.

It is also:

- Race ↔ Race
- Gender ↔ Gender
- Staff ↔ Member
- Manager ↔ Employee
- HQ ↔ Field
- Older ↔ Younger
- Credentialed ↔ Non-credentialed

People enter coaching conversations carrying their lived experiences with power.

A useful coaching question:

"How might the power differences between us be shaping what is easy or difficult to talk about today?"
Communication and trust are influenced by race, class, gender, role seniority, and power dynamics.

2. Assume Difference Matters, But Don't Assume You Know How

Common coaching mistakes is:

Minimizing Difference

"We're all the same."

Overgeneralizing Difference

"Because you're a woman/person of color/support professional, you must experience X."

Instead:

- Stay curious
- Ask rather than assume
- Let the leader define their experience

Examples:

- "How does your identity show up in this situation?"
- "Do you think race, gender, role, or another factor is affecting what is happening?"
- "What dynamics am I not seeing?"

3. Separate Behavior From Identity, While Still Paying Attention to Identity

Strong coaches avoid two traps:

Trap A

Explaining everything through identity.

Trap B

Ignoring identity completely.

Good coaching asks:

- What happened?
- What behavior occurred?
- What systemic dynamics may also be present?

For example:

A woman leader receiving feedback about being "too direct."

A coach should explore:

- What specific behavior occurred?
- What impact did it have?
- Would a man displaying the same behavior receive similar feedback?
- How might gender assumptions be influencing interpretation?

Your own equity-integrated materials highlight how identical behaviors are often interpreted differently based on identity.

4. Watch for Credibility and "Prove-It-Again" Dynamics

Leaders from historically marginalized groups often carry additional burdens:

- Needing to demonstrate competence repeatedly
- Being scrutinized more closely
- Having expertise questioned
- Being interrupted or overlooked

A coach should help the leader:

- See the pattern clearly
- Avoid internalizing systemic problems as personal failures
- Identify what is within their control
- Develop strategies while also naming inequitable dynamics

Your materials specifically call out patterns where expertise, directness, emotion, and leadership behaviors are interpreted differently across race and gender.

5. Be Alert to Common Misreads

Several predictable misinterpretations show up repeatedly:

- Directness becomes "aggressive."
- Emotion becomes "unstable."
- Reserved behavior becomes "disengaged."
- Informal communication becomes "unprofessional."
- Relational leadership becomes "soft."

Coaching Across Differences for Campaign Lab Coaches

Coaching is a core leadership skill and a critical tactic in the Campaign Lab approach to building high participation locals. Effective coaching helps leaders develop confidence, strengthen organizing skills, broaden participation, and build the capacity of others to lead. When coaches and leaders differ by race, gender, job classification, age, geography, or other dimensions of identity, coaching does not occur outside of those differences. Power, experience, credibility, and communication are often shaped by social and organizational dynamics that can influence how feedback is given, received, and acted upon. Strong coaches remain aware of these dynamics without making assumptions about another person's experience. They coach with curiosity, humility, and a commitment to understanding both individual circumstances and broader organizational realities. An equity-centered coaching approach asks coaches to see the person, see the system, and see the interaction between the two. That balance creates the conditions for deeper growth, stronger relationships, and more effective leadership development.

Key Ideas to Hold

When a coach and a leader differ by race, gender, job classification, age, sexuality, class background, geography, or another identity, the goal is not to ignore the difference nor make it the center of every conversation. The goal is to understand that difference may influence trust, credibility, communication, risk, and how feedback is received.

1. Coaching Is Never Separate From Power

The relationship is not just Coach ↔ Leader.

It is also:

- Race ↔ Race
- Gender ↔ Gender
- Staff ↔ Member
- Manager ↔ Employee
- HQ ↔ Field
- Older ↔ Younger
- Credentialed ↔ Non-credentialed

People enter coaching conversations carrying their lived experiences with power.

A useful coaching question:

"How might the power differences between us be shaping what is easy or difficult to talk about today?"
Communication and trust are influenced by race, class, gender, role seniority, and power dynamics.

2. Assume Difference Matters, But Don't Assume You Know How

Common coaching mistakes is:

Minimizing Difference

"We're all the same."

Overgeneralizing Difference

"Because you're a woman/person of color/support professional, you must experience X."

Instead:

- Stay curious
- Ask rather than assume
- Let the leader define their experience

Examples:

- "How does your identity show up in this situation?"
- "Do you think race, gender, role, or another factor is affecting what is happening?"
- "What dynamics am I not seeing?"

3. Separate Behavior From Identity, While Still Paying Attention to Identity

Strong coaches avoid two traps:

Trap A

Explaining everything through identity.

Trap B

Ignoring identity completely.

Good coaching asks:

- What happened?
- What behavior occurred?
- What systemic dynamics may also be present?

For example:

A woman leader receiving feedback about being "too direct."

A coach should explore:

- What specific behavior occurred?
- What impact did it have?
- Would a man displaying the same behavior receive similar feedback?
- How might gender assumptions be influencing interpretation?

Your own equity-integrated materials highlight how identical behaviors are often interpreted differently based on identity.

4. Watch for Credibility and "Prove-It-Again" Dynamics

Leaders from historically marginalized groups often carry additional burdens:

- Needing to demonstrate competence repeatedly
- Being scrutinized more closely
- Having expertise questioned
- Being interrupted or overlooked

A coach should help the leader:

- See the pattern clearly
- Avoid internalizing systemic problems as personal failures
- Identify what is within their control
- Develop strategies while also naming inequitable dynamics

Your materials specifically call out patterns where expertise, directness, emotion, and leadership behaviors are interpreted differently across race and gender.

5. Be Alert to Common Misreads

Several predictable misinterpretations show up repeatedly:

- Directness becomes "aggressive."
- Emotion becomes "unstable."
- Reserved behavior becomes "disengaged."
- Informal communication becomes "unprofessional."
- Relational leadership becomes "soft."

The coach's role is to help the leader evaluate:

Is this a performance issue, a communication issue, a perception issue, a bias issue, or some combination?

6. Listen for Adaptations

Sometimes what looks like a weakness is actually an adaptation.

Examples:

- Over-preparation
- Being hyper-careful
- Avoiding conflict
- Excessive deference
- Controlling details

Before coaching someone to change the behavior, ask:

"What has this behavior helped you survive, navigate, or accomplish?"

7. Create Psychological and Identity Safety

A leader should not have to choose between:

- Being authentic
- Being successful

Coaches build safety by:

- Listening before advising
- Being willing to hear difficult truths
- Acknowledging mistakes
- Inviting correction
- Naming uncertainty

One of the most powerful coaching moves is:

"I may be missing something because of my own experience. Help me understand."

8. Practice Cultural Humility Rather Than Expertise

The coach is not expected to know everything about another person's experience.

The expectation is:

- Humility
- Curiosity
- Accountability
- Learning

Rather than:

"Let me explain your experience."

Try:

"Help me understand how you're experiencing this."

9. Focus on Impact, Not Intent

Differences often create misunderstandings.

When they occur:

- Explore impact first.
- Explore intent second.

Questions:

- "What impact did that have on you?"

- "What impact do you think it had on others?"
- "What would repair look like?"

This keeps coaching grounded in learning and growth rather than blame.

10. Help Leaders Navigate Systems, Not Just Individual Behaviors

Coaching should not only ask:

"How could you do better?"

It should also ask:

"What is the system rewarding, discouraging, or making difficult?"

Examples:

- Who gets speaking time?
- Who gets stretch assignments?
- Who gets second chances?
- Whose expertise is trusted?

Your equity-centered materials consistently emphasize that coaching and leadership development happen inside systems of power, not outside them.

Three Coaching Commitments

A coach working across differences should continually commit to:

1. **Curiosity Over Assumption**
 - Ask before concluding.
2. **Impact Over Intent**
 - Explore outcomes, not just motives.
3. **Awareness Over Neutrality**
 - Acknowledge race, gender, class, and power when they matter rather than pretending they do not exist.

A simple coaching mantra is:

"See the person, see the system, and see the interaction between the two."

That balance tends to produce the deepest growth and the strongest coaching relationships

Intersectionality Wheel of Privilege: A Reflective Process for Coaches

The purpose of this activity is not to measure who is more or less privileged. Instead, it helps coaches develop greater awareness of how their identities, experiences, and relationship to power shape the way they listen, ask questions, interpret situations, and build trust with leaders. Self-awareness is a prerequisite for coaching across differences. Coaches cannot effectively navigate power dynamics with others if they have not first explored their own relationship to power and identity. To complete this, you will need to complete the Intersectionality Wheel that follows the directions and guided reflections. You will also need to plan about 60 minutes to complete the wheel and to journal through the guided reflections.

Step 1: Complete Your Intersectionality Wheel

Using the Intersectionality Wheel, identify the identities that are most relevant to how you move through the world. Examples might include:

- Race and ethnicity
- Gender identity
- Sexual orientation
- Class background
- Education
- Job classification or professional role
- Age
- Ability/disability status
- Religion or faith tradition
- Geographic background
- Language and communication style

For each section of the wheel, consider where your identity may place you closer to societal privilege, marginalization, or a combination of both.

Step 2: Identify Where You Experience Power and Where You Experience Marginalization

Review your wheel and reflect:

- In which areas do I typically receive credibility, trust, or benefit of the doubt?
- In which areas do I have to work harder to be heard, respected, or understood?
- Where do I experience both privilege and marginalization depending on the situation?

Notice that you likely experience a combination of privilege and disadvantage rather than fitting into a simple category. It is highly likely that the people you coach will also have perceptions, behaviors, and experiences informed by a similarly complicated intersectionality.

Step 3: Reflect on How Your Identities Have Shaped Your Leadership Story

- What messages did I receive growing up about leadership, authority, success, and belonging?
- Which parts of my identity have opened doors for me?
- Which parts of my identity have created barriers?
- How have these experiences shaped the way I lead, communicate, and respond to conflict?

The goal is to connect identity to lived experience rather than treating identity as an abstract concept.

Step 4: Explore How Others May Experience You

Imagine entering a room as a facilitator, organizer, or coach. And reflect:

- Before I say a word, what assumptions might others make about me?
- Which aspects of my identity may increase my perceived credibility?
- Which aspects may lead others to question my expertise or authority?
- How might different people experience me differently?

Consider how your identities influence coaching relationships whether you acknowledge them or not.

Step 5: Examine Your Coaching Defaults

Invite coaches to identify patterns:

- What behaviors tend to frustrate me?
- What leadership styles do I naturally value?
- Which communication styles feel most comfortable to me?
- Which styles are harder for me to understand or appreciate?
- How might your identities and experiences have shaped these preferences?

Doing this can help you distinguish between objective observations and personal assumptions.

Step 6: Identify Potential Blind Spots

Review the wheel again and reflect:

- Which identities do I rarely think about because they are normalized in my experience?
- Where might I unintentionally assume others have experiences similar to my own?
- Whose experiences might I have difficulty understanding because I have not lived them?

The goal here is to encourage humility and curiosity rather than guilt. Empathy is the path to coaching across differences effectively.

Step 7: Connect Reflection to Coaching Practice

Ask coaches to consider upcoming coaching conversations.

For each leader they coach, reflect:

- What similarities and differences exist between us?
- How might those similarities create connection?
- How might those differences affect trust, communication, or feedback?
- What assumptions do I need to test rather than accept as true?

Step 8: Develop Equity Commitments

Complete the following statements:

- To coach more effectively across differences, I will...
- One assumption I will actively challenge is...
- One area of my identity I want to learn more about is...
- One coaching behavior I will practice is...

Final Reflection Question

How does understanding your own intersectional identities help you better "see the person, see the system, and see the interaction between the two" when coaching others?

INTERSECTIONALITY WHEEL OF PRIVILEGE

As Observed in the USA

