



Coaching with Curiosity, Inquiry, and Equity

A Guide for NEA Campaign Lab Coaches



Effective coaching begins with relentless curiosity—a commitment to **"see the person, see the system, and see the interaction between the two."** To help a leader reach their full potential, the coachee's own goals, agency, and innate wisdom must remain at the center of the coach's work. Grounding the relationship in deep inquiry rather than assumptions creates the ideal conditions for personal growth, strategic clarity, and self-directed leadership.

Core Framework & Foundations

1. The Heritage of Coaching as Resistance

Coaching in organizing is rooted in a rich history of popular education. Rather than using the "Banking Method" of education—where an "expert" deposits facts into passive receivers—effective union coaching draws on the tradition of Myles Horton at the Highlander Folk School, Septima Clark, and Ella Baker. The coach's primary role is to "bring forth" the wisdom already in the room and enable leaders to build their own capacity to act in the face of challenge and uncertainty.

2. The Core Principle

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Equity and Power Dynamics

Coaching never occurs outside dynamics of power, privilege, and identity. When coaches and local union leaders differ by race, gender, job classification, age, geography, or credentialing, these dimensions directly influence trust, risk, credibility, and communication.

Core Equity Balance: An equity-centered coaching approach asks coaches to balance three dimensions:

- THE PERSON (Identity, Agency, Lived Experience)
- THE SYSTEM (Union, School District, Structural Power)
- THE INTERACTION (How power dynamics and lived experiences shape communication, trust, and risk)

Key Ideas to Hold When Coaching Across Differences

- **1. Coaching Is Never Separate From Power:** Recognize how social and organizational hierarchies (e.g., HQ vs. Field, Credentialed vs. Non-credentialed, Staff vs. Volunteer) shape what is easy or hard to discuss.
- **2. Assume Difference Matters, But Don't Assume You Know How:** Avoid minimizing difference ("We're all the same") or overgeneralizing difference ("Because you're X, you must feel Y"). Stay curious, ask open questions, and let the leader define their own experience.
- **3. Separate Behavior From Identity, While Paying Attention to Identity:** Avoid explaining everything through identity or ignoring identity completely. Analyze specific behaviors while evaluating how systemic biases or gender/racial expectations affect interpretations.
- **4. Watch for "Prove-It-Again" Dynamics:** Leaders from historically marginalized groups often face heightened scrutiny and must repeatedly demonstrate competence. Help coachees name these systemic patterns without internalizing them as personal failures.
- **5. Be Alert to Predictable Misreads:** Directness misinterpreted as "aggressive"; Emotion misinterpreted as "unstable"; Reserved behavior misinterpreted as "disengaged"; Relational leadership misinterpreted as "soft".

- **6. Listen for Adaptations:** Behaviors that look like weaknesses (e.g., over-preparation, excessive deference, hyper-caution) may actually be adaptive strategies developed to survive or navigate hostile environments.
- **7. Practice Cultural Humility:** Operate with humility, curiosity, and accountability rather than positioning yourself as an expert on someone else's lived experience. Focus on impact over intent when misunderstandings arise.

The Art of Posing Good Questions (Centering Agency)

What Makes a Great Coaching Question?

- **Open-ended:** Cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no".
- **Answerable:** Concrete and grounded rather than overly theoretical.
- **Elicit Agency and Insight:** Elicit reflection so the coachee discovers solutions and owns the choice of intervention.
- **Free of Embedded Advice:** Avoid "advice with a question mark attached".

Developing the Curiosity Underneath

Coaching Challenge	Gut Response / Advice Trap ✗	Curiosity Underneath & Agency Question ✓
Team discouraged by negative response from a secondary target	"Why is this such a big deal? Let's move on!"	Curiosity: Is there something I'm missing about what this target meant to them? Question: "I want to know more about how that response landed for the team. What felt 'big' about it, and what would it take to feel like you're on the right track again?"
Leader reluctant to escalate a tactic against the superintendent	"You just need to be more aggressive and do a rally."	Curiosity: What risk or system dynamic is the leader navigating that makes escalation feel unsafe? Question: "What risks are you weighing right now? What tactic feels bold enough to build power while keeping your core group secure?"
Coachee fixated on a single unhelpful coworker	"Stop wasting time on them and talk to someone else."	Curiosity: What underlying structural pattern is showing up in this interaction? Question: "If there were a challenge underneath this one dynamic that represents a broader pattern in the building, what might it be?"

Core Types of Coaching Questions

To effectively guide coachees toward agency and self-diagnosis, coaches should strategically draw from several specific types and structures of questioning:

1. Open Questions

Encourage reflection, draw out longer reasoning, and explore the coachee's context, opinions, and experiences.

- Framework (TED): Tell, Explain, Describe.
- Examples:
 - "Tell me about how your core organizing committee reacted to the proposed timeline."
 - "Explain the reasoning behind selecting this specific demand."
 - "Describe what a successful turnout would look like in your building."

2. Probing & Funneling Questions

A multi-step sequence that limits the scope first and then asks an open question within that specific frame. Funneling helps narrow down broad or vague complaints into actionable details (who, what, where, when, why).

- Sequence Structure:
 1. Limit Scope: "Let's focus specifically on your building reps' attendance at the last action."
 2. Open Probe: "What factors contributed to the low turnout among that specific group?"

3. Appreciative Inquiry Questions

Ground the coachee in their own strengths, past successes, and internal sources of resilience.

- Examples:
 - "What have you experienced in previous campaigns that worked well in a similar situation?"
 - "If you were to give yourself advice based on your past wins, what would it be?"
 - "From where do you draw the courage and patience to keep organizing under these conditions?"

4. Reality Check Questions

Help evaluate a situation accurately and quantify perceived problems so coachees aren't overwhelmed by isolated bad incidents.

- Examples:
 - Quantifying the Challenge: "You're describing pushback on the campaign—how many people are actively objecting out of the total membership?"
 - Seeing Strengths: "While you've highlighted the challenges with district communication, what parts of your current messaging are working well?"

5. "What If" Questions

Open up possibilities beyond immediate obstacles, helping coachees bypass mental roadblocks and envision creative choices.

- Examples:
 - "What if everything were possible—what decision would you make?"
 - "What if that administrative constraint weren't in the way, how would you structure the campaign escalation?"

6. Closed Questions (Use Sparingly)

Reduce options to receive a short, factual answer. Best avoided when a conversation is in full flow, but helpful for checking understanding, concluding a discussion, or setting a frame.

- Examples: "Did the superintendent agree to the meeting?" or "Do we have consensus on this outcome?"

The 5-Step Coaching Cycle & Interventions

When working through campaign challenges, follow this structured, 5-step process: Inquire/Observe → Diagnose → Intervene → Action → Check-In/Debrief.

Step 1: Inquire & Observe

Gather information across three primary dimensions before jumping to conclusions:

- **Motivational (Heart):** Is effort hindered by fear, embarrassment, or isolation?
- **Strategic (Head):** Are goals unclear, or is resource allocation ineffective?
- **Skills-based / Educational (Hands):** Is there a lack of execution skill or a habit getting in the way?

Steps 2 & 3: Diagnose & Intervene

Select the intervention style that matches the underlying diagnosis:

1. Motivational Interventions (Heart)

Goal: Enhance effort, build courage, and address fear or setback.

- Actions: Encourage and affirm self-worth and persistence; model emotional maturity and confess your own past fears/learnings.
- Question: "From where do you draw the patience and courage to keep pushing on this?"

2. Strategic Interventions (Head)

Goal: Help coachees evaluate how to use resources to achieve outcomes and navigate systems.

- Actions: Offer observations and reframing; provide silent reflection time for self-diagnosis.
- Question: "Why did you choose this tactic over another? Based on where you are now, what hidden resources can you draw on?"

3. Educational / Skills-Based Interventions (Hands)

Goal: Acquire missing skills, practice behaviors, or gather missing information.

- Actions: Model the behavior, break it down into small parts, and practice/debrief.
- Question: "How would it feel to try a roleplay of this conversation right now?"

Step 4: Action (Centering Agency)

Avoid doing the work for the coachee. Let the coachee try the selected intervention in their local environment.

Step 5: Check-In & Debrief

Refocus on learning: "What went well? What challenged you? What are your next steps?"

Campaign Coaching Question Bank

Use these open-ended, probing, and agency-centered questions tailored for local union campaign leaders:

1. Power Analysis & Target Assessment

- "What does your target care about, and what do they rely on to maintain the status quo?"
- "Which decision-makers actually have the authority to grant your demands?"
- "What key institutions, community allies, or constituencies does your target count on whose support you could put in jeopardy?"
- "How has your target 'felt the heat' from your organizing so far? What evidence shows that?"

2. Strategy, Demands & Theory of Change

- "What do you think it will take to win this campaign?"
- "Does this demand hit the 'sweet spot'—is it deeply felt, widely felt, and winnable in the next 6–12 months?"
- "How many co-workers do you need to recruit 'off the fence' into active roles for the district to agree to your demand?"
- "If you think of your campaign as a series of dominoes, which dominoes have to fall in what order before the target yields?"

3. Tactic Sequencing & Escalation

- "What are three public actions you can sequence over 1–3 months that build pressure and demonstrate growing turnout?"
- "What posture matches your current support level—are you 'cheering on' potential champions, or confronting targets?"
- "What tactics inspire your team that you would be excited to invite members to participate in?"

4. Equity & Systemic Dynamics

- "How might power differences or identity dynamics be shaping what is easy or hard to talk about in your local today?"
- "What systemic dynamics in the district or union structure might be making this situation difficult?"
- "What has this specific behavior or habit helped you navigate or survive in this system?"

5. Prioritization & Reality Checks

- "Which of these challenges feels most urgent for us to figure out today?"
- "If you say 'yes' to this new organizing campaign tactic, what will you need to say 'no' to?"
- "What if everything were possible—what decision would you make?"

Coach's Session Prep & Checklist

Before every Campaign Lab coaching call, spend 15–20 minutes running through this preparation guide:

1. OVERALL ASSESSMENT & EQUITY CHECK

	What is 1 strength the group is demonstrating that I want to highlight?
	What power or identity dynamics might be influencing our interaction today?
	What assumptions about this coachee do I need to test rather than accept as true?

2. CAMPAIGN WINDOW & DASHBOARD

		Where is the local in their campaign rhythm (Planning, Launch, Pivot, Debrief)?
Y	N	Are they on track with key campaign ingredients (Team, Theory of Change, Demands, 3-Act Tactic Sequence)?
		What is my evidence of this:
		What data are they using to test their assumptions at each stage?

3. INQUIRY & QUESTION CRAFTING

	What are 2-3 agency-centered, open-ended questions I can ask to guide them today?
	1.
	2.
	3.
	What campaign story or experience can I draw upon if strategic reframing is needed?
	Story highlights:

4. BALANCE & ZONE CHECK

LZ	PZ	Am I in the 'Learning Zone' (focusing on the person and growth) or 'Performance Zone' (urgent problem-solving)?
Y	N	Am I listening with curiosity or preparing to give advice?
		How am I causing reflection about equity?

Sample Session Agenda (60–90 Minutes)

- 1. Warming Up & Checking In (5–10 min)
- 2. Reviewing Agenda & Outcomes (5 min)
- 3. Dashboard & Campaign Phase Review (5–10 min)
- 4. Key Questions or Core Challenges (30–60 min)
- 5. Next Steps & Action Commitments (5–10 min)
- 6. Closing Ritual & Evaluation (2–5 min)