

White Paper:

**An Authoritative Report on
Leadership Coaching in Nonprofits**

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Authors Note:

We are so grateful and appreciative for having had the opportunity to explore the coaching impact for global nonprofit leaders through the Coaches Care initiative. Our appreciation extends to inviteCHANGE for their boldness in choosing to offer an action-oriented coaching initiative following the inaugural BeChooseCause Conference; to the inviteCHANGE network of Global Delivery Coaches who volunteered their time and professional skills to support global nonprofit leaders; and to the leadership of nine global nonprofit organizations and their leaders who became part of this collective to further their own development during this tumultuous period ushered in by the COVID pandemic.

We chose to use a qualitative research framework to write this article, which included participant interviews, surveys and analyzing the transcripts for themes, to better understand the benefits and challenges of providing pro bono leadership coaching to global nonprofit leaders. However, as we dug into our findings, our decision shifted from writing a traditional research article to writing an informational and authoritative document we hoped would stimulate new conversation between professional coaches, nonprofit leaders, and their organizations.

We acknowledge that our use of the term “white paper” may stimulate thoughts of systemic racism; it is not our intention to use white paper as a pejorative term, rather to convey our diligence in accurately portraying the experiences of leader-participants and consulting the existing coaching literature which helped to lead us to the article’s conclusions.

We hope you enjoy the article, and we look forward to furthering the discussion with you.

Kelley and Karen

How we got here.

COACHES CARE GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT 2020

inviteChange, a global coaching organization based in Seattle, Washington began planning for its inaugural BE. CHOOSE.CAUSE conference in 2019 unaware that the world would be mired in a global pandemic for the launch in September 2020. The conference organizers chose to focus on four global societal issues: Climate Emergency, Racial Equity, Healthy Communities and Human Trafficking.

Organizers hoped that conference attendees would gain greater insight into the challenges and working solutions of these four societal issues from subject matter experts, advocates, business, and community leaders that would inspire them to take greater interest and possibly supportive action.

Following months of conference planning, the leadership at inviteChange was further inspired to organize and manage a global coaching initiative aptly named, Coaches Care. The initiative would provide ICF certified coaches in inviteChange's global network an opportunity to provide pro bono coaching to local, national, and global nonprofit leaders working on the frontlines of these global issues and further the mission of the BE. CHOOSE.CAUSE conference. A secondary goal, to gain a fuller understanding of the benefits of coaching for nonprofit leaders and to inspire more coaching in the nonprofit sector.

This white paper examines in greater detail the Coaches Care global coaching initiative that served 48 nonprofit leaders from 9 nonprofit organizations between October 2020 and November 2021, during the COVID pandemic. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 participant-leaders and received 2 additional open-ended question surveys from unique participant-leaders following the completion of the initiative. Next, we reviewed the interview transcripts and survey results to better understand the usefulness and effectiveness of the initiative for nonprofit leaders and to identify themes that could inform future coaching initiatives and professional leadership development more broadly in nonprofit organizations.

Several of the participant-leaders we interviewed were Executive Directors and were able to provide feedback about the experiences of participant-leaders from their own organizations who also took part.

INITIATIVE DETAILS

Total Organizations	Leader Participants	Sessions Delivered
9	48	225

The suggested framework for Coaches Care was for coaches to provide 30-minute, pro-bono coaching sessions, every 2-3 weeks, for a total of 6 meetings. Several of the coaching engagements chose to meet beyond the initial 6 suggested sessions, meeting up to 12 times in total, with a few of the engagements meeting for less than the suggested 6 meetings. Two out of the 48 participant-leaders chose to continue with paid contracts with their chosen coach following the completion of the Coaches Care engagement.

OVERALL EXPERIENCE

The participant-leaders we interviewed and surveyed, following their completion in the coaching initiative, overwhelmingly reported that the initiative yielded positive results. However, one participant-leader we interviewed said she had noticed that participants from her organization who had no previous experience with professional coaching reported having less positive outcomes than those who had. She said, "I know one of the staff felt that they were a little lost because they didn't know. I think it might have been their first time engaging with a coach and they felt a little lost without a lot of direction and said that they would have appreciated more structure."

"I have a direct report and never really had a lot of managerial training, it's kind of been on the job..."

This same participant-leader wondered whether participant-leaders from her organization would have gained additional benefit from the coaching engagement if she had been more intentional about taking time to periodically discuss their experiences as a group. Another participant-leader speculated during their interview that the participant-leaders from their organization who reported

having a less positive coaching experience may possibly have had a poor coach-client fit, even though the participant-leaders were able to choose their coach from a large, international directory of more than eighty coaches.

The participant-leaders we interviewed provided a variety of reasons for participating in the Coaches Care initiative but most agreed that the timing of the initiative was immensely supportive, several months into a global pandemic, when their organizations were struggling with remote work and were experiencing a sudden and unexpected downturn in fundraising. Another common theme amongst these leaders that emerged was that quite a few lacked backgrounds in business and that they were now immensely aware that this was an important area for their development as leaders, in the business of business.

A newly emerging leader who is employed at a local chapter of a national nonprofit shared, “I have a direct report and never really had a lot of managerial training, it’s kind of been on the job and so I was really looking forward to speaking with a coach on how to handle that relationship since we work so closely together, and we tend to do a lot of the same work.”

Another benefit we heard from several participant-leaders was related to well-being, which again seemed on the minds of these leaders, serving in a sector known to be affected by burnout. Each of the participant-leaders we interviewed expressed that the initiative provided much needed support during a difficult time. Other benefits conveyed by these participant-leaders mirrored those most frequently reported by nonprofit leaders in the research literature and included improved confidence in decision-making, strengthened communication skills, increased self-knowledge and additional time spent in reflection and planning.

One participant-leader who works for an international nonprofit shared, “So one [reason to participate] is professional development and I think finding answers or finding solutions to either leadership questions of how to navigate this organization. A lot having to do with being a new manager, how do I know what it means to be a new manager and/or aspects of having a hard time working with my manager, or with the team. What are good ways to engage efficiently?”

COACHING RESEARCH ON NONPROFIT LEADERS

The participant-leaders we interviewed conveyed another theme that has been previously reported in the coaching research, nonprofit leaders need to know more about the business of business to satisfy a more diverse array of stakeholders and to manage technologies that now facilitate fundraising, marketing, and communication. More broadly, other reasons these participant-leaders gave for participating in the Coaches Care initiative also aligned with some of the most common reasons cited in the coaching research, to develop their leadership, to better understand their strengths and to identify possible gaps, and to improve day-to-day organizational operations.

In addition, most of the participant-leaders we interviewed communicated their need to improve their own agility and that of the organization, to gain confidence in their own leadership especially during highly uncertain and increasingly complex times, and their desire for a consistent, external source of professional support. According to our interviews and survey results, most of the 48 participant-leaders who took part in Coaches Care reported receiving at least some of these benefits.

The business of leadership development.

In this article we use the term leadership development to represent efforts that provide current and emerging leaders with the opportunity to learn, grow and alter their behaviors, to acquire new skillsets and function more effectively, better able to navigate organizational challenges and to plan for the future. Global organizations increasingly emphasize the importance of investing in leadership development to develop skills that allow leaders to better achieve future organizational goals. Leadership characteristics such as high emotional intelligence, strategic vision, agility, and executive presence are essential in our increasingly complex world.

According to a 2020 Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) survey of 300 HR leaders from both national and international corporations, leadership development remains a top priority. Those surveyed stated that leadership development provided their organizations with a competitive edge, helped leaders to achieve their business strategies and successfully meet goals despite economic uncertainty. The authors of the CCL report also stated that neglecting leadership development during uncertain economic periods can result in negative organizational consequences over the long-term.

As professional coaches who have coached with a number of nonprofit leaders over the years, we are familiar with the challenges nonprofit leaders can face due to budgetary constraints and organizational belief systems that are prone to prioritize the needs of constituents over professional development. We were curious to learn how these participant-leaders went about meeting their need for professional development for themselves and for their staff. We were also curious to learn whether professional coaching had effectively supported their leadership development during the global pandemic and whether their goals and experiences would mirror what had previously been reported in the coaching research.

Lastly, we were curious to know whether professional coaching would be a resource these nonprofit leaders would want to engage with in the future.

Seven of the eight participant-leaders we surveyed and interviewed said that their organizations did not have professional development budgets although a few of the participant-leaders said it was possible to request funding to attend a specified training from time-to-time. When fundraising fluctuated, such as during a global pandemic, funding that may have been allocated for professional development was reduced or eliminated. In one survey, a participant-leader shared that the main barriers to professional development for leaders in their organization were "budget and occasionally time but right now it is budget."

"Actually, I would love to continue with my current coach. Of course, there are some barriers like finances."

Another participant-leader said, "We do not have any budget allocated to professional development as such. [However] we ask all our employees to identify one professional development goal at least at the beginning of each year...". Interestingly, another participant-leader recounted a similar development expectation. She said, "pre-pandemic my goal was to improve my public speaking and my manager worked with me to find opportunities where I could practice." It was clear from our interviews that these participant-leaders well-understood the value of setting professional development goals, however, they were also tasked with meeting their own goals without financial or professional resources that may better support professional outcomes, especially for new and emerging leaders.

A female participant-leader shared, "We have created a very, very lean budget for next year...we don't even have professional development included in the budget that we have so

far.” According to this participant-leader, many non-profit organizations were in financial positions that required them to remove non-essential line items from their annual budgets due to the fundraising constraints resulting from the pandemic.

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One of the two participant-leaders who completed the open-ended question survey wrote, "Typically we have professional training and development. Unfortunately, the budget for that is on hold right now until post-COVID but we are finding ways to connect and using mentorship to impart new skills and recognize talent and ability in others."

Although all six of the participant-leaders we interviewed voiced their interest to engage with a professional coach in the future, most acknowledged that any future coaching engagements would need to be provided by pro

bono opportunities. One of the participant-leaders expressed their hope that they would be able to locate coaches who would find a professional coaching arrangement to be a mutually beneficial exchange.

CONCLUSIONS

THEMES THAT EMERGED FROM INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS

1. Professional development isn't included in annual budgets for many nonprofits
2. Underprepared employees are promoted to leadership without adequate resources
3. Underprepared leaders are more challenged by uncertainty and complexity, e.g. Covid

Time for a change?

According to the coaching literature, an overreliance on pro bono professional development opportunities by nonprofits can result in such opportunities being undervalued and underutilized by staff and are sometimes a poor substitute for meeting the true needs of nonprofit leaders. The participant-leaders we surveyed and interviewed acknowledged that their organizations receive much of their professional development from pro bono opportunities and that they were less consistently able to locate funds for select training to address their individual leadership development. Given the lack of professional resources available at any given time to these nonprofit leaders, we pondered the importance of

autonomy, independence and self-direction which has been shown to mitigate burnout. Several of the participant-leaders we spoke with sounded thirsty for professional development amidst a pandemic-induced desert of pro bono offerings during this global crisis.

Designing for success

AGILITY

Only one of the participant-leaders we surveyed said that their organization annually budgeted for professional development but now more than a year into the global pandemic, that line-item had been suspended due to the reduction in fundraising opportunities. With much written today about the topic of ‘leadership gaps’, we wondered if an inconsistent and non-specific approach to professional and leadership development would directly disadvantage nonprofit leaders who were now expected to lead at a time of extreme complexity to keep their organizations afloat.

To serve the vision and mission of nonprofit organizations, in an increasingly complex world, agility is key, and consistent leadership development can help to identify and address leadership gaps at the individual and organizational level. All the participant-leaders we interviewed were hoping to address gaps in leadership, their own and others, while also attempting to effectively respond to the ever-changing organizational environment, which was a bit like building a bridge while walking on it.

The pandemic provided one massive case in point. There was a stark divide amongst nonprofit leaders who quickly moved their organization’s marketing and program delivery to social media and video platforms to meet their fundraising needs and those that did not. In one article that was featured in the Washington Post, it was estimated that one third of nonprofits were in danger of closing in the United States by August of 2020, only five months into the global pandemic.

CHOICE

The inviteCHANGE Coaches Care initiative gave participant-leaders the option to choose their own coach from a pool of eighty international coaches via an online coach directory that included both coaching bios and videos. Most of the participant-leaders we interviewed stated that the ability to choose their own coach added significant value to their coaching engagement.

Coach choice is important for coach-client fit which is believed to better support successful coaching outcomes. However, choice is not always a feature of pro bono coaching initiatives, according to those leaders we interviewed and may be a blind spot for coaching

organizations that offer pro bono coaching as well as for nonprofit recipients and their organizations.

EDUCATE

We gained additional insight from participant-leaders who noticed a gap in outcomes between participant-leaders who had previous experience with professional coaching and those who had not. It was most often participant leaders with little or no previous coaching experience who were less enthusiastic about taking part in the initiative and expressed less tangible outcomes. One participant-leader we interviewed commented that she could have done a better job explaining the Coaches Care initiative and provided more specifics about the benefits she had gained from professional coaching in the past.

Although professional coaches are hesitant to give direction, it may be helpful to provide an individual with no previous coaching experience with a bit of guidance on common coaching themes and to describe the overall coaching process. Large-scale initiatives like Coaches Care could also share coaching resources with participants, sponsor organizations and coaches alike prior to the engagement.

AWARENESS AND ACTION FOR NONPROFIT LEADERS AND COACHES

ADDRESSING GAPS

For leaders, engage organizational stakeholders in a conversation about prioritizing leadership development alongside if not ahead of the constituents it serves. Become aware of your own internal bias that may allow you to go along with the organizational norm even when it is not serving you as a leader. It is not an EITHER OR, challenge your own assumptions and look for opportunities for a YES AND.

Advocate and lobby to organizational stakeholders for professional development budgets. As professional coaches who coach nonprofit leaders, it is not only possible to incorporate professional development in your annual budget, but it may be more important than ever to achieve your organization's mission and vision in an increasingly complex world. When coaching is chosen as a tool for professional and leadership development, locate a coaching organization or an association that is willing to educate your organization on the value of coaching, what it is and what it isn't. Lastly, when possible, contract with a coaching organization that will provide your leaders with a selection of coaches to choose from for best fit.

For coaches interested in working in nonprofits, educate yourself on the coaching research and make use of data that suggests that like their for-profit counterparts, nonprofits need to invest in professional and leadership development to navigate an increasingly complex world and successfully achieve their organizational mission and vision for the long-term.

Furthermore, don't replicate the pro bono myth. Instead, take the lead in disabling the long-held belief that professional development in nonprofits should always be free of charge. Help educate nonprofit leaders and the organizations where they lead about the VUCA world of which they are also a part and support them in their attempts to secure and allocate funds.

QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE EXPLORATION

- Is there an organizational cost for nonprofits and their constituents by not prioritizing professional development?
- Would professional and leadership development in nonprofits lessen attrition and burnout?
- Would nonprofit coach training be beneficial for both coaches and their clients?
- What can we do (coaches and nonprofits) to debunk the myth that professional development can only occur if it is pro bono?

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Kelley is a Certified Positive Psychology Coach (CPPC) and Appreciative Inquiry Practitioner who partners with clients in a variety of sectors including Higher-Education, Healthcare, Technology, Government, and the Nonprofit Sector. Her clients are as varied as the sectors she works in, partnering with individual contributors, mid-to-senior level leaders as well as teams who work in both public and private organizations. Kelley is as dedicated to her professional coaching community as she is to her client-base, currently serving on the ICF Austin Chapter's Advisory Council following four years of board service. She is an experienced facilitator and presenter for local, regional, and global events and has most recently co-written an article on the topic of resilience for the Institute of Coaching at Harvard's Medical School.

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