
COMMUNITY BUILDING PROMPTS

When Coaching Is the Wrong Solution

Episode 12: Reflection & Discussion Guide

How to Use These Prompts

These prompts invite honest conversation about diagnosis before intervention — about how easy it is to assign coaching to a person when the real problem lives in the group or the system around them. Use them in leadership circles, supervision, coalition planning, or anywhere people are deciding what kind of help a challenge actually needs.

Ways to engage:

- Team check-ins
- Leadership development cohorts
- Supervision sessions
- Coalition strategy meetings
- Organizational development planning
- Written reflection before assigning coaching or support

The Core Framework

The central claim of this episode:

Before trying to change a person, understand where the problem actually lives.

Coaching can be extraordinarily valuable, but coaching is an intervention — and an intervention is only as good as the diagnosis behind it. When we mistake a group or systems problem for an individual problem, we can unintentionally place the weight of a hard environment onto one person, and leave the real problem untouched.

The throughline: see the system, locate the challenge, match the intervention. Coaching is one tool among several — facilitation, organizational development, and ecosystem-level support are others. The work is choosing the right one.

Discussion Prompts

What changed — the person, or the environment around them?

Think of a time someone was labeled as needing coaching, and later thrived under different conditions — a new supervisor, a different team, clearer expectations. What does that tell you about where the original problem actually lived?

Where does this challenge actually live — in the person, in the group, or in the system?

Pick a challenge you're facing right now. Before deciding what kind of help it needs, sit with this question honestly. What patterns are you observing? What assumptions are you making about who or what needs to change?

What happens when every organization gets better individually, but the ecosystem doesn't get better collectively?

Imagine ten leaders each become stronger through coaching, but their organizations keep competing, protecting turf, and struggling to collaborate. What does that reveal about the difference between individual capacity and collective capacity?

If the answer isn't automatically 'coach the person,' how do I decide what kind of help is actually needed?

What would it look like to diagnose before you prescribe — to name what's actually happening, locate where it lives, and only then choose coaching, facilitation, or a broader intervention?

Guidelines for Dialogue

Diagnose before you prescribe

Naming a solution before understanding the problem is how a person ends up carrying a system's weight.

Separate individual from collective capacity

A stronger individual doesn't automatically produce a stronger group. They're related, but they're not the same work.

Name conditions, not just people

If someone thrives under different circumstances, the original problem may have been the circumstances, not the person.

Match the intervention to the challenge

Coaching, facilitation, and organizational development each solve different problems. Pick the tool for the diagnosis, not the other way around.

DEEPER REFLECTION

The Cost of Misdiagnosis

The episode names how easily responsibility for a system's conditions gets placed onto a single person — and what that costs, both to the person and to the real problem left untouched. Consider:

“Who ends up carrying the weight of a system's problem?”

When a coalition loses momentum, or a team stops functioning, it's often the most visible person — the leader, the coordinator, the one who spoke up — who gets sent to coaching. Meanwhile the conditions producing the problem, unclear roles, broken trust, misaligned incentives, remain untouched. Who in your world has quietly absorbed a system's problem as if it were their own?

“What does it cost an organization to keep treating symptoms instead of causes?”

Every cycle spent coaching an individual through a systemic problem is a cycle the actual conditions go unaddressed. What has your organization spent on individual fixes for problems that kept returning in a different person the next year?

BONUS

For Teams Deciding What Kind of Help You Need

If your team wants to practice diagnosing before prescribing, try these three questions together:

“What is actually happening?”

Slow down before naming a fix. Observe the patterns, and name the assumptions you're bringing into the room before you act on them.

“Where does the challenge primarily live?”

Sort honestly: is this a person problem, a group problem, or a system problem? The answer changes everything that follows.

“What intervention matches the challenge?”

Coaching is one option. Facilitation, organizational development, and broader ecosystem support are others. Choose based on the diagnosis, not on habit.

PRACTICE TOOL

Creating Shared Language for Diagnosing Before Prescribing

The episode recommends building shared language so groups can pause before assigning a fix. Try these phrases:

<i>“Is this a person problem or a system problem?”</i>	<i>“What conditions are producing this behavior?”</i>
<i>“Let’s diagnose before we prescribe”</i>	<i>“Which tool actually matches this challenge?”</i>
<i>“Where does this challenge actually live?”</i>	<i>“Coaching might help, but is it the right fix?”</i>

Group reflection:

Which of these phrases would help your team pause before prescribing a fix? What other phrases do you need? How would you normalize using them?

COMMITMENT TO ACTION

Commitment to Action

After engaging with these prompts, what will you actually do?

One assumption I'll question before assigning coaching:

One system-level condition I'll examine instead:

One question I'll ask before choosing an intervention:

The problem doesn't always live in the person you're trying to fix.

See the system. Locate the challenge. Match the intervention.
