

Insights

I'm a Coach, But You Have the Answers



Elaine Fitzgerald, DrPH, MIA: Project director, NICHQ

One of the contributions I am committed to making towards improving children's health is building the capacity and confidence of those working with families and children. Where others focus on delivering direct services to children, I focus on building systems that serve families and children by supporting providers that deliver care. I focus on helping providers to feel empowered and confident to improve the systems they are part of.

The importance of this role lies at the very heart of what a system is. As defined by W. Edwards Deming, one of the forefathers of improvement science, "a system is a network of interdependent components that work together to try to accomplish the aim of the system." Our shared aim is to improve children's health.

When it comes to leading NICHQ's flagship [infant mortality reduction project](#), I'm constantly thinking about how best to improve the system by coaching those who are dedicated toward delivering quality services so that families can optimize their child's health.

When speaking recently with various state leaders challenged to move their state efforts to reduce infant mortality in a focused manner, I helped them think about what their strengths are as a leader, a team and a state. From there, through empowering and open-ended questions,

we explored together their state's priorities and how existing resources and initiatives could be integrated into this important work to align and maximize their efforts.

A system's effectiveness in achieving their aim begins with individuals seeing themselves as integrated parts of a whole. Coaching individuals and teams to understand, feel confident and be empowered by their contributions to improving child-serving healthcare systems is truly a gift to be a part of.

Coaching isn't just ingrained in me, it's ingrained in NICHQ. As we work with partners and team members at every level, we aim to be a coach that provides guidance and builds confidence. We offer best practices and support teams to think about sustainable approaches for applying, adapting and testing those ideas within their own settings and communities.

One of the most powerful experiences I had coaching a team involved engaging a diverse group of home visitors and supervisors who shared a common purpose of improving breastfeeding services and supports for pregnant and postpartum women. Applying coaching techniques, such as active listening, values assessments and affirming statements, I was able to support front line staff working in the community to improve the systems and services they were part of. They felt empowered. As a result, they shared their recommendations, experience and expertise, all of which were then integrated into changes for improvement that were relevant and sustainable.

Being a coach isn't about providing answers, it's about supporting and empowering those you are coaching to discover the answers within themselves and the teams they've built. I have found nothing more rewarding than working with passionate people committed towards improving children's health.

Elaine Fitzgerald, DrPH, MIA is a project director at NICHQ.