



A Coaching Guide for Farm to School Action Planning

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Welcome! If you are a new or returning coach in the Farm to School Institute, this guide will help you to navigate the coaching process, access tools and techniques, and understand the impact of coaching for developing robust and long lasting integrated farm to school programs.

Farm to school (FTS) is a comprehensive strategy that connects student learning and experiences in the Classroom, Cafeteria, and the Community, which Vermont FEED refers to as our “3C” model of change. The goal is to help students establish lifelong positive relationships with food while supporting a more just food system. The strategies used to achieve this shift are: serving healthy local food in schools, improving student nutrition, providing hands-on food systems learning opportunities, and developing meaningful relationships between community partners, schools and students. Farm to school supports youth in connecting the dots of where their food comes from and how their food choices impact their bodies, the environment, and their communities at large.

The Farm to School Institute, started in 2010, is a unique, whole-school professional development model that builds capacity in school communities to create and sustain integrated FTS programs. Using a proven model of team-building, action planning, and coaching, we work with school teams to unite individuals from across a school's community to leverage and accelerate change. Change in one area of the school, such as a classroom, is reinforced through change in other areas, like the cafeteria. The Farm to School Institute builds school leadership, skills, and capacity to tie isolated activities into robust, sustainable programs. What may start as one individual's passion is shaped into a system to support an enduring Farm to School Program.

Working with past participants, we've evaluated the outcomes of the Institute since its beginning. Across the board, we've found that change lasts. Institute teams report that the program leaves them with stronger relationships, more skills, and a clear roadmap for action.

- 100% of participating school administrators indicated that they planned to integrate FTS into the curriculum and had more confidence doing so.
- 84% of school nutrition staff were committed to expanding Farm to School programming.
- 90% of participants reported progress in creating a culture of Farm to School.
- 90% of participants said they now have the capacity to solve problems and connect with resources.

"Spending time with my team has been incredible. It's bringing us together, helping us discover each other's strengths, and bonding us into a committed team."

"The focus on agriculture, local food, and nutrition is paying off in the classroom. Kids are interested, and teachers are given more diversity in the curriculum."

"Sometimes this work can get discouraging but the energy of the other schools keeps me motivated!"

Farm to school action planning is a step-by-step process that begins with assembling a FTS team, identifying shared values and goals, then planning and conducting strategic activities. A robust, long-lasting, and integrated farm to school program should be able to:

- Maximize equitable student access to fresh, nutritious, locally grown foods,
- Educate students about food systems, food justice, and healthy eating habits through hands-on and community-based experiences,
- Support and grow market opportunities for local producers and processors.

The following diagram illustrates the Action Cycle for Farm to School programs:



Coaching Matters

A Coaching Model for Farm to School Programming in Early Childhood and PK-12 Schools

Broadly, in educational settings, coaching is a strategy that nurtures and supports individuals or teams to reach professional and personal goals. These goals are often tied to student outcomes and learning community goals and can be defined by internal and external vision and values. Used in adult learning (or professional learning), coaching can help specifically with implementing new practices or applying values across a system.

Why do we use a coaching model for the Northeast Farm to School Institute? Simply put, coaching works! When we began the Institute, we knew we needed to prepare teams to develop, implement, evaluate, adapt, and sustain their farm to school programs. We'd already seen the power of coaches working with schools, early childhood centers, and individuals.

Within the Farm to School Institute, the coach guides the team's discussion and planning process, working to maximize their effort and effect. Your role as a coach is to help the team achieve its goals in a way that includes everyone's perspective. You will work explicitly to engage all team members, ensure equity of voice, and hold the space for vibrant sharing of ideas.

According to the National Gender & Equity Campaign, "A good facilitator [coach] excels in four key areas:

- Communication skills, such as the ability to stimulate thinking, manage a group dynamic, listen, and summarize,
- Familiarity with techniques or activities to enhance participation, creativity, and trust within the group,
- Analytical skills to be able to reframe, capture essence, identify interests, or separate content work from process work,
- Cultural competence to adopt sensitivity and a multi-lens approach in order to work effectively with a given community."

Learn more by reading the National Gender & Equity Campaign [Facilitation Guide](#) and check out [Racial Equity Tools](#) and [National Equity Project](#) for more on coaching with an equity lens.

“Coaching is an essential component of an effective professional development program. Coaching can build will, skill, knowledge, and capacity because it can go where no other professional development has gone before: into the intellect, behaviors, practices, beliefs, values, and feelings of an educator.” –Elena Aguilar

Evaluation Confirms Value of Coaching Model

Vermont FEED describes coaching as an indispensable component of the Institute model. As such, we have been evaluating its role in supporting teams since the start of the Northeast Farm to School Institute. Participant surveys and feedback confirm the many pivotal roles that you, as a coach, will play. We outline some here.

- Develop and deepen relationships across a variety of stakeholders.
- Motivate and support the team in communication and effective meetings.
- Build internal capacity to continue a capable and functioning FTS team.
- Work collaboratively to articulate a shared values statement.
- Develop an integrative FTS action plan by aligning goals and prioritizing ideas, site planning, and assessing assets and needs.
- Build understanding of a school food system, make connections to food sources, and support local procurement.
- Adapt goals, strategies, and action steps to address opportunities and challenges in real time.
- Weave a FTS network both within and outside the school, connecting team members, key stakeholders and community resources.
- Build the capacity to implement a FTS action plan and to sustain efforts beyond the Institute or any one champion.

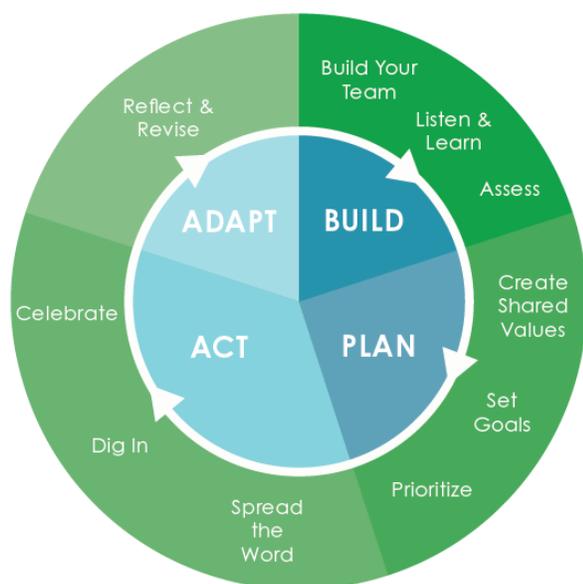
“Knowing that someone truly believes in what you are doing and is there to guide you is a beautiful thing.”—NE FTS Institute participant

“Our coach has been a great resource and ally. She helps ground our thinking and keeps us focused on the task at hand. We couldn’t have asked for a better partner.”—NE FTS Institute participant

Coaching a Team for the Northeast Farm to School Institute

In the context of the four phases of Vermont FEED's FTS action planning model (see diagram), your role as a coach is to be a facilitator, guide, cheerleader, and sounding board. You may provide technical support based on your

expertise, or connect teams with resource experts in the community. However, it is not your role to take the lead.



During the BUILD phase, the coach specifically supports the team by:

- Communicating with the team, building relationships between yourself and your team, and among team members;
- Engaging with the [FTS Rubric](#) to assess the school's FTS development, understand assets, and determine where the team would like to build capacities;
- Listening to and learning from

your team to discover where they are in their FTS journey. This includes reviewing the team application and individual pre-survey responses, and having a preliminary team meeting.

See the **ACTION PLANNING: Step 1** section in [Connecting Classrooms, Cafeterias, Communities: A Guide to Building Integrated Farm to School Programs](#)

During the **PLAN phase, the coach and team collaborate to:**

- Create a FTS Values Statement that reflects the school community's values related to their FTS program and integrates the wider community's values, priorities, and identities;
- Develop a year-long action plan with two to three goals in the four key areas: Cafeteria, Community, Classroom, and Integration & Staying Power
- Identify long-term goals and activities (beyond one year);
- Prioritize goals and activities to move the FTS program forward based on the rubric, assets, values statement and the broader context (funding, leadership priorities, team interest and energy, etc.);
- Plan communications efforts to ensure broad community engagement with FTS efforts (see [FTS Communications & Outreach Planning](#) and [FTS Institute Communications Planning Template](#)).

See ACTION PLANNING: Step 2 in [Connecting Classrooms, Cafeterias, Communities: A Guide to Building Integrated Farm to School Programs](#)

During the **ACT phase, the coach supports the team to:**

- Engage the whole community in understanding how FTS fits within their culture and values and how it integrates with other initiatives;
- Seek allies for FTS programming by engaging a broader audience, including students who may not have participated in the Northeast Farm to School Institute summer retreat;
- Communicate with their community about their FTS plans and successes and seek input to adapt the plan and goals as needed (see [Media Kit](#));
- Implement their action plan;
- Establish team meetings, adapt plans, and connect with resources;
- Celebrate successes, appreciate team members, and plan for next steps.

See ACTION PLANNING: Step 3 in [Connecting Classrooms, Cafeterias, Communities: A Guide to Building Integrated Farm to School Programs](#)

In the **ADAPT phase, the team and coach:**

- Reflect on the action plan, consider successes and what worked, and revisit challenges and how the team overcame them;

- Review and update the FTS rubric and discuss what progress has been made to further the FTS program, who else might get involved (or play a role) and where you might go deeper in the next year;
- Adapt action plan and goals for another year.

See *ACTION PLANNING: Step 4* in [Connecting Classrooms, Cafeterias, Communities: A Guide to Building Integrated Farm to School Programs](#)

Helpful Documents for Coaching

- The [Coach-Team Roles](#) document helps to communicate the coach role versus the team role in ensuring staying power of FTS programs.
- [FTS Rubric](#)
- [Action Planning Template](#)
- [Impact & Feasibility Analysis Tool](#)
- [FTS Communications & Outreach Planning](#)
- [FTS Institute Communications Planning Template](#)
- [Media Kit Information & Examples](#)

Coach Community of Practice

Just as we support school teams using a coaching model, we support coaches using a community of practice model. Within this community of practice, you'll have the opportunity to reflect with other coaches to deepen everyone's practice. This will also help spread promising FTS practices to other school districts. A Vermont FEED staff member experienced in adult professional learning and whole systems coaching facilitates the community of practice, providing year-long support to coaches and helping you adapt your efforts based on evaluations and feedback.

How to Build an Equity Lens & Support Farm to School Teams

What is an Equity Lens

An equity lens is a fluid set of reflective questions, principles, and processes that can be applied to any program to help make it more equitable. Within the Northeast Farm to School Institute, an equity lens can be applied to all phases: building a team, action planning, communication, decision making, prioritizing goals, procurement, and engaging the community. The purpose of an equity lens in coaching for the Institute is to be deliberately anti-racist.

An equity lens often starts with an inquiry mindset. Susan Santone, educator and author of “Changing the Story: Rewriting Our Collective Social Narrative” offers two provocative questions for FTS in particular:

- “Does the way we obtain our food, design our community, and run our economy provide opportunities **for all** while simultaneously sustaining the shared environmental and social systems our well-being depends upon?”
- “Who is disproportionately impacted? (Spoiler alert: marginalized communities...)”

“Equity lenses can be customized for different organizations and decisions. The standard elements, however, ask for the decision makers to consider equity dimensions of involvement, process, values and assumptions, and outcomes, from a perspective that highlights how practices hold potential to shift power toward inclusion and equity.”

–[Santa Cruz County's Youth Violence Prevention Network](#)

What is the Connection Between Farm to School and Equity?

Disparities in our global food system are not only alarming, but increasing. These disparities exist between people within a community, across the country, and around the globe. They even reach beyond the human world. In order to build

a more just and healthy food system for all, FTS must address issues of inequity, power, and privilege. The National Farm to School Network says, “Farm to school is a strategy that provides opportunities to address these racial and social disparities in the existing food system.”

[Read more from NFSN on racial and social equity in FTS](#)

The staff and partners in the Northeast Farm to School Institute are continually learning about and advancing equity efforts within FTS. The coaching model is a key area for building an equity lens to strengthen FTS.

Coaching with an Equity Lens

“It isn’t an option for coaches to be neutral on issues of justice — and there are injustices occurring in almost every school, every day. It’s our moral and professional obligation to lead and coach in a way that surfaces and interrupts these inequities.”—Elena Aguilar

As a coach in the Northeast Farm to School Institute, working across diverse roles, it is important that you pay special attention to and apply an equity lens in your work. You also can support your team to do the same, ensuring a more just and healthy FTS program. Here are some examples of what applying an equity lens can look like.

- Build relationships amongst and across the Farm to School team. Start with and deepening relationships helps build trust.
- Take the time to fully understand the context and the work of those who came before you.
- Actively seek out and lift up marginalized voices and ensure diverse perspectives in all phases of the FTS action planning process.
- Attend to and address power differentials in your FTS decision making process.
- Consider who is not “at the table” and be sure to meaningfully engage those voices throughout the process. Don’t forget students!

- Check your assumptions about cultural norms, especially in regards to food traditions and values.
- Value each team member's unique contributions and perspective, and leverage them to improve the FTS program.
- Attend to emotions. As Aguilar says, "Conversations about equity will raise emotions in you and in [your] coaches." And let's remember that people have emotional connections with food and food systems as well. Food can be celebratory and joyful, but it can also bring up other emotions related to food insecurity or access to culturally sustaining foods. We often remind students, "Don't yuck my yum!" In the same way, we must support each team member by learning about and attending to our emotions around food and nutrition.
- Help teammates deeply listen to each other. [The School Reform Initiative](#) has many useful protocols that can help school community members build their listening muscles.

To learn more about coaching with an equity lens read [Elena Aguilar's article](#) in *the Learning Professional: The Learning Forward Journal*

Facilitating Discussions with an Equity Lens

As a coach, you often find yourself in the role of a facilitator, assisting in the sharing and planning process. As your team members test their ideas and bounce them off each other, they will refine and develop those ideas. An idea that started out plain and simple may become vibrant and creative with discussion and input from the full group. Seek and welcome multiple and divergent perspectives. Some of the best ideas come when two seemingly opposite concepts come together to form a new idea. Help the group to come to an agreement and find common ground when possible. Being clear ahead of time on how decisions will get made can head off potential tension in the group. The Impact and Feasibility Analysis tool can be a good framework for objectively weighing options.

As a facilitator, respond with equanimity—do not praise or criticize any particular idea; remain neutral about the material. Let the group know your job is to moderate and guide the discussion, not to lead them to any pre-established conclusion.

Recognize the validity of different points of view and involve everyone in order to balance group participation. Avoid referring to concepts as belonging to the person who suggested them. Keep the focus on the exchange of ideas and not on individuals. Make sure that all conclusions truly reflect the consensus of the group, not simply the majority or the most vocal portion of the group. As a reminder, consider whose voice is missing and be sure to address this as a team.

Setting the Tone

The coach sets the tone and watches group energy, reading non-verbal cues to determine just how to guide and moderate discussion. You are very visible! Your facial expressions and body posture tell a story, so keep an open, positive expression and pose, and connect with each individual participant. Like a good party host, be warm, positive, and enthusiastic. Help people to feel welcome and included. Always act with respect toward all members of the group. Actively listen with genuine interest and openness to others' ideas, even if you personally do not agree with those ideas. Be curious if you find a team member struggling to participate. Only speak as much as is absolutely necessary. A facilitator is not a performer, but acts in service to the group. Enjoy the people and the process.

The Facilitator as Role Model

One of the implicit ways in which the facilitator works is by being a role model. When you are relaxed, enthusiastic, respectful, and dedicated to the process (not the outcome), you're modeling what participants should expect from each other.

Make sure you are prepared. Familiarize yourself with the material in advance, read and reflect on the team's pre-evaluations, review their rubric and applications and/or websites, and review the [Vermont FEED Farm to School Institute Toolkit](#) and Vermont FEED's [Connecting Classrooms, Cafeterias, Communities: A Guide to Building Integrated Farm to School Programs](#). This will help you have a greater understanding and context of the discussion and action planning process.

Coach & Institute Practices

An essential outcome of the Northeast Farm to School Institute is that every team has an action plan that nurtures and sustains a thriving FTS program. This requires a strong FTS team! As a coach, you play a vital role in guiding your team and building its capacity to continue the work without coaching in the future. Elena Aguilar offers practical suggestions and reminders on how to build a resilient team, many of which are applied at the Institute. Here are some of Aguilar's points, and how they show up in our coach and Institute practices:

- "Get outside of the usual haunts and get around tables."
- "Create structures for connection."
- "Organize opportunities for vulnerability."
- "Offer community agreements" in order to "Communicate and hold expectations."
- "Give people something meaningful to chew on."
- "Your emotions as a coach are contagious."

Read more about ["How to Build Resilient Teams" by Elena Aguilar](#). Created by [Bright Morning Consulting](#).

Institute Practices:

Summer Retreat: "Get outside of the usual haunts and get around tables"

Vermont FEED has developed the Northeast Farm to School Institute to engage, build, and strengthen healthy FTS teams. We typically start the Institute with a retreat away from the school and the team's usual work space. We share meals, learn, reflect, and enjoy some informal time together around tables and in a unique landscape. Team members have commented that the retreat-like nature of the gathering allows them to more deeply connect with others and be creative and open to new ideas. When they return to their schools or centers, these relationships allow them to better adapt to and address challenges.

Protocols & Purposeful Activities: "Create structures for connection"

One of the unique aspects of the Institute's summer retreat is that it brings together a dozen teams from around the region. We gather as individuals, teams, and partners with unique perspectives on the food system, amazing

assets and prior experiences, and a desire to build FTS programs. This network is an essential component of the FTS movement and an outcome of the entire Institute.

Throughout the Institute, we've created purposeful moments for connection using a variety of practices. One that we almost always use is called [MicroLabs](#) from the School Reform Initiative. We create FTS-specific questions that are sequenced to build an individual's thinking. This protocol allows everyone to begin networking as individuals within and across teams, and reveals the many different perspectives as each person personally reflects on the meaning of our shared FTS work.

During the workshops, we engage participants in purposeful hands-on activities that connect them to each other, the content, and their practice. We break out by role, by team, and by area of interest over the three days of the summer retreat. Finding times throughout the experience for connection and reflection is essential to professional learning. We facilitate reflection on experiences by using a “plus/delta” process (plus: what worked, delta: what would I change) or other reflection prompts like, “One thing I’m taking away, one thing I’m still wondering, one thing I want to take action on.”

Coach Practices:

Storytelling: “Organize opportunities for vulnerability”

Aguillar talks about the power of storytelling to create connections. Coaches can tap into this power right away by encouraging team members to share personal and professional stories, especially at the start of each team meeting. Throughout the Institute, experienced coaches can nurture informal times for storytelling. Here are a few ideas for sharing stories:

- Lead your team in the [What's in a name?](#) Activity from School Reform Initiative
- Have each group member introduce themselves by sharing their name, role, and pronouns, and by answering the question, “If you were a fruit, vegetable or recipe, what would you be and why?”
- Have each group member introduce themselves by sharing an important cultural or family meal.
- Create a map of community assets together. Individuals can add FTS assets such as local producers or farms to the geographic map.

- While reviewing the FTS rubric, have group members “brag” about each other's work. For instance, when reviewing the cafeteria section of the rubric, group members might offer something that the school nutrition staff are doing to support local procurement.
- Perform a team check-in or survey how folks are feeling. Elena Aguilar offers a [team temperature checklist](#).
- Another way we can honor individuals and the team is to review and reflect on their Institute pre-surveys, team applications, and evaluations.

Establish Group Agreements: “Offer community agreements” in order to “Communicate and hold expectations”

While you will have been preparing in advance to support your team through the Northeast Farm to School Institute, many on your team will be encountering ideas and concepts for the first time. Remember this and let it help you to be patient. Give the time that is necessary to build understanding.

Start by being sure everyone is clear and in agreement about the group tasks you're all hoping to accomplish, the agenda and the priorities. This will help make everyone feel that they are working toward common ground.

In addition, your role as a coach is to ensure an equitable process for group discussions and decision-making. Group agreements can help you do this. You can create a set of group agreements from scratch, with our team's input, or start with some that the team may already use as part of their culture. If you use established agreements, however, it is always helpful to review them to make sure all participants understand and agree with them.

Once you have agreements, it's helpful to revisit and perhaps revise them from time to time to be sure they're still working for the group. Revisiting will be essential as new members join the group.

Here are some helpful tools for developing group agreements and some examples:

Developing and Learning more about Agreements

- [School Reform Initiative “Forming Ground Rules \(Agreements\)”](#)
- [ASCDs The Power of Team Norms](#)
- [Seeds for Change Group Agreements](#)

Sample Agreements

- [NE FTS Institute proposed group agreements](#)
- [National Farm to School Network Community Agreements](#)
- [School Reform Initiative "Community Agreements"](#)
- [Glenn Singleton's Courageous Conversations on Race Agreements](#)

FTS Values & Action Planning: "Give people something meaningful to chew on"

The process of creating the values statement and action plan is a great deal of work and meaningful to the team in a variety of ways. When people work on something that is connected to their passions and identity and is deeply embedded in their roles, they can find purpose or deeper meaning in their work. Sometimes, if a team is stuck or needs a boost in this effort, it is helpful to return to the "why" or purpose of your work, both as individuals and as a team. Start by watching [Simon Sinek's Start with Why](#), then do some reflective journaling individually, and perhaps follow with a reflective conversation.

Sharing and Co-creating a Process

Sometimes, to be open and creative, people find it helpful to know the plan or to be part of creating the plan. We share the outcomes and agenda with participants in advance of the Institute. As a coach, you can likewise support your team members by sharing or co-creating an agenda and process for team meetings both at the summer retreat and throughout the yearlong Institute. It also can be useful for individual participants to have distinct roles on the team, such as note-taker, process-watcher, and resource-tracker.

Team feedback has told us that the most powerful elements of the Institute are working together to complete the rubric, and leaving the summer retreat with a draft action plan. These elements also promote the staying power for FTS programs. As such, we have created a [Coach Agenda & Planning Tool](#) to help coaches keep focused and on track with action planning.

Practices that Can Support Group Process

Determining your decision making process

Are you coming to consensus, modified consensus, or majority rules? When you're working with the team on the action plan, it's helpful to have this conversation before you begin. The team may already have a decision-making

process in place that you'll want to use. If nothing exists or the team would like to identify a process together, it can be helpful to explore a consensus-based or modified consensus process. [Consensus Based Decision Making Process](#) is a helpful resource by the School Reform Initiative.

Recording Ideas

You may want to assign the role of note-taker to another person. Then you and the note-taker can support each other's efforts. Be sure that the note-taker records the key points of each person's contribution to the action plan, shared file, or posters. If you have any doubts about what's been said, clarify with the speaker so that the note-taker can write down the ideas accurately.

When issues arise that might be off track or something that can be addressed later, you might want to use a "parking lot," "compost pile," or "bike rack" to hold those ideas or topics. At the end of the meeting, address how and when the group will revisit these items.

Getting the group back on track

Sometimes groups can get off track or have difficulty functioning. These are two different issues. Let's start with a team that needs support getting back on track.

Depending on the situation, there are a few different "coach moves" that can be helpful to move a group forward:

Team issue:	Coach move:
The team is stuck trying to co-create a values statement.	Pause, have the team members take 5 minutes to journal "What is important to you about FTS?" or "What values come up for you with FTS programming?" Then have team members share out loud.
The team is having a hard time finding a regular meeting schedule.	Try short (30-minute), focused meetings more regularly. Offer virtual meetings in lieu of in-person meetings.

<p>It is hard to get a diversity of perspectives from the group members.</p>	<p>Notice and help to ensure all voices are being heard. Have a structured process in your back pocket if the conversation is dominated by a few. You can also change up the dynamic by asking everyone to reflect silently for a few minutes and then sharing across the group. Give time after meetings for folks to share on a group notes document. These notes may help people who are not able to attend or who are not comfortable sharing in a larger group.</p>
<p>They are looking to you to be the leader (note-taker, decision-maker, idea-generator, etc...).</p>	<p>Coaches can use a gradual release model: I do, you watch; we do together; you do, I support; you do on your own!</p>
<p>Team dynamics are tense.</p>	<p>Start team meetings with a ritual: maybe related to food, grounding, or try a breathing bubble. Establish group meeting agreements and post them during the meeting. It can be helpful to surface tensions in the moment. Depending on the group, this may be done collectively or individually.</p>
<p>The team says “The cafeteria won’t engage,” “Administration doesn’t support us,” or “Teachers won’t do FTS”</p>	<p>As a team, take time to respectfully and genuinely ask reluctant or unwilling participants what the barriers are to participation. Consider, or ask them directly, how the FTS program can help them reach their goals.</p>

When teams are having difficulty working together, it can be helpful to take a pause and consider what is causing the issue. Elena Aguilar, of Bright Morning Consulting, a leader in team coaching, has several strategies to help restore healthy relationships to a group and get it back to functioning at a high level. Check out her resource on [Stages of Team Development](#), which offers indicators

for how a team is functioning, along with suggested activities and leadership moves to lift a team to the next level. School Reform Initiative also has compiled [Considerations for Responsive Facilitators](#) which has helpful suggestions for coaches.

Show up: “Your emotions as a coach are contagious”

A team will often look to their coach as a leader. Because building their capacity and confidence is your goal, show up ready to work alongside team members. Offer suggestions and guidance, nurture caring relationships, affirm and accept them, and “believe in the capacity of team members” (Aguilar).

Additional Tools that Support Farm to School Coaching

- [Connecting Classrooms, Cafeterias, Communities: A Guide to Building Integrated Farm to School Programs](#)
- [Coach-Team Roles](#)
- [Sample Group Agreements](#)
- [FTS Rubric](#)
- [Action Planning Template](#)
- [Impact and Feasibility Analysis Tool](#)
- Communications Tools
 - [Sample Media Kit](#)
 - [FTS Communications & Outreach Planning](#)
 - [FTS Institute Communications Planning Template](#)

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