Chapter: Team Coaching

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Team coaching as a discipline is somewhat behind its individual coaching counterpart. This may be so but, that said, Team Coaching is catching up fast.

This is due in part to business recognizing that in an increasingly VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) effective teams are a key point of leverage within the organisation, with the agility to exploit any perceived strategic advantage in fast moving markets.

Since the 2008-09 financial crisis many teams in a wide variety of business sectors are being expected to both keep business as usual running, whilst at the same time building the platforms for growth and the change necessary to keep organisations relevant and fleet of foot. This can represent a considerable demand on the players who make up the team.

Additionally, post crisis, there is a growing acceleration in the move away from the notion of the heroic leader, where the individual leader is expected to be the font of all wisdom. There is now an increasing movement towards the idea of an ‘ecosystem’ where leadership is distributed across the organization – popularized under the title of leadership-exchange theory. This still requires leaders who are able to truly empower teams, (not always as common as one might hope), and team members who are able to lead from any chair. Given the complex dynamics that can exist in teamwork, team coaching has a very important role to play in supporting effective distributed leadership, through enabling highly effective team performance.

The Three Key Levels within Team Coaching

Team coaching needs to work at three levels to be effective. These are the individual level, the collective team level and the team’s wider organisational relationship level.

In essence, teams are all about relationship. Relationship is one of the key units of measure, if you like, by which tasks do or don’t happen. To reduce relationship to the notion of a unit of measure is of course entirely wrong, but it does help to make the point that in essence this is what organisations are. They are the sum total of the relationships that exist within them and it is the overall tone and quality of those relationships that make up the culture of the organisation.

This does not, at all, mean that everyone has to be friends and get on all the time! Conflict is human and can result in organizational benefits. The ability to manage
productive conflict is a key component in effective robust relationships. As humans we function in relationship and the more relationship insightful and competent we are the more effective the organisation will be. What goes on in teams and the way those teams interact with the whole in terms of relational insight and competence drives a significant element of task success or failure.

Good team coaching supports insight into and skill in building relationship at all these three levels. Firstly at the individual level enabling team members to gain personal understanding of their own emotional and psychological patterns and how these show up at work – the Self. Secondly, team coaching works to enable the relationships and dynamics at the collective level to be well understood, healthy and integrated, developing the behavioural habits that will keep them that way. Thirdly, team coaching works to support the team to have highly effective relationships with key parts of their organisational system and beyond.

These relationships are the means by which the team is able to deliver on its task in the most efficient, enjoyable and sustainable way possible. People who feel good about themselves do their best work.

Thus my own definition of team coaching reflects this three part approach.

**Team coaching defined**

“Working with a whole team to support the development of healthy integrated relationships within the individual, between team members and key organisational stakeholders to support the delivery of the team task in the most efficient, enjoyable and sustainable way possible. The quality of relationships enables the team to get to true clarity of purpose, develop effective use of resources and focus on delivering the task.”

Again I must stress this is not about seeking harmony. Too much harmony can be bad for teams. Irving Janis’ (1982) work on Group Think also highlights the dangers of teams becoming over reliant on agreeing with each other. The flawed decision of President Kennedy and his advisors to authorize the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba demonstrates the phenomenon of groupthink. Group-think is characterized by excessive efforts to get to agreement, and a strong need for consensus that can override the team's ability to make the most appropriate decision. Symptoms of groupthink include group members' tendency to: believe the team to be more invulnerable than it is; to rationalize the team’s decisions and believe stereotypes about its enemies/others; and also to feel increasing pressure to agree with others in the group.

It is about promoting overall relational health and competence. A large part of this is the ability to hold conflict and tension in a productive way. Good team coaching
includes supporting team members to appropriately create and handle the conflict at the three levels.

**Three Core Lenses for looking at Team Coaching effectiveness**

There are 3 lenses that need to be applied to each of the 3 levels (individual/collective/systemic) as one both designs and carries out the work. These are:

- Relationship
- Dynamics (arising from the relationships)
- Business imperatives

What do I mean by this? When you are designing your intervention look for methods and techniques that are likely to enhance the quality of the relationship in question, enable greater insight and appreciation of the relational dynamics in play and that link directly to the business imperative of that situation. This keeps the team coaching work relevant, drives real learning related to task and work context and moves the action forward in terms of results within the actual business.

An example in practice would be to get team members giving each other feedback in pairs on behaviours that are working/not working in relation to a real team task with which they are each involved and requesting a change of behaviour to drive a different business outcome. A very simple way of doing this is to get each team member to share:

“*One thing I really appreciate about you is... and the way it showed up in relation to task X was....*”

and

“*One thing I would like you to change is... and how this would help in task X...*”

This is a simple exercise, which tackles all three lenses and two of the layers. You can get team members to do the same with all members of the team thus building feedback capacity at the individual level and the collective team level. The exercise can be debriefed at the collective level and with that team you can start to develop a vocabulary for their behavioural dynamics and develop effective feedback habits that build (rather than disrupt) relationship.

At this point the exercise still remains only inwardly focused on the internal team dynamic so needs framing up a level and repeating to get the team members applying the thinking and action to the wider system.

This overly inward focus is a very common pitfall in Team Coaching. Team coaches often lose sight of the fact that the team can only be truly successful in relation to the systemic whole. This perspective is supported by the ideas of Henrik Bresman.
(Bresman & Ancona, 2007), who has argued that the most successful teams reach out to stakeholders, develop extensive ties, work across tiers of their organization, and operate using flexible membership.

**The Six Principles of Team Coaching – The How of Team Coaching**

There are six key principles that are helpful guiding principles when designing and delivering team coaching. Over the years these are the ones that I have found consistently support the best results in team coaching.

These are:

1. Create and hold the space; make the team do the work.
2. Create a strong sense of emotional and psychological safety. People can only change when they feel safe enough emotionally. This does not mean “play it safe”.
3. Reveal the non-conscious dynamics that are playing out and help the team create their own vocabulary to describe them.
4. Uncover and understand the power dynamics within the team and in the system. Do this in a way that does not leave people feeling too exposed (remember principle two). This also supports the team in maintaining enough of an outwardly focused view. Add this to the team’s new vocabulary.
5. Always be embedding behavioural habits that support effective relationship insight and competence. People don’t change easily; repetition and habit and a felt sense of the shifts are vitally important to success.
6. Have fun – people remember more and change more when they are enjoying themselves, although this does not mean that there are no tense moments!

Let’s look at these Principles in more detail.

**1: The Coach creates and holds the space and the team does the work.**

Usually a team will come into coaching when something is not working already. Some smart teams will come into team coaching as a matter of course before anything has derailed. This is not common – yet. So normally there is a level of anxiety in the air already when the coach gets to meet the team for the first time. There are two primary ways this anxiety can manifest. The first is the “Fix us coach” projection where team members become slightly helpless and passive and are waiting for the coach to work their magic on them and solve the problem. The second is a defiant stance which is more along the lines of “show us what you’ve got coach and we’ll see if we are willing to play” a more aggressive approach. Whatever the coach gets coming their way the important thing is to recognize the form the anxiety is taking and carefully position in the contracting phase the responsibility for what happens in the work lies with the team not with the coach. This has to be done clearly, gently and firmly so as not to make the anxiety worse. At the first actual
team coaching occasion this message needs to be followed quickly with some benign and encouraging exercises early in the process to make people feel relaxed and confident.

*Example from practice:* Contract with the whole team about what they want to get from the work and be very clear that they are the ones responsible for the outputs. You will hold the space; they will do the work. You can build on the diagnostic interviews that you may have already done pre meeting the team. This personal contact before the team coaching starts is a really good idea. Then get team members thinking about their most positive experience in a team setting (at or outside work) get them bringing this personal team best to life through sharing the story with their team colleagues. This will get them in touch with their own competence, enjoyment and get them focused on what works right up front.

2: Create a strong sense of emotional and psychological safety.

This is critical if the team coaching is to be successful and comes down in large part to the skill and confidence of the coach. It is in essence the trust that each of the team members feels individually with the coach and the trust that the team collectively feels with the coach and amongst each other. The sense of emotional safety will (hopefully) build steadily over the process of the coaching and the coach needs to hold this in mind as a guiding principle at each point of the design.

It is very important to say that this is not the same as playing it safe with the coaching work – risks must be taken with the team in order to move the action forward. And if the risks are taken based upon a sufficient level of emotional safety at each stage they are more likely to be successful in outcome.

It is important to start this process during the initial contracting phase, before actually starting work with the whole team and inquiring at each of the three levels; individual, team/collective and systemic.

This inquiry also gets a view of the team by the team and from the wider system. This is best done through personal interviews and meetings so that the felt sense of emotional safety with the coach can begin to be built up.

*Example from practice:* If you have made a good connection on the phone or in person beforehand this will already help a lot to establish the sense of emotional safety. Contract carefully that what comes up in the team coaching will remain confidential unless the team agree that it is information they want to share more widely. Personal information that gets revealed is the property of the person and is NOT for any other member of the team to share outside the room. Get everyone’s voice in the room in agreement with this ground rule.
3: Reveal the Team’s non-conscious dynamics

Much of what inhibits a team’s performance sits in the area of the non conscious emotional dynamics or the conscious but unspoken emotional dynamics. The team coach needs to create the opportunity for the team to begin to see, understand and describe these dynamics in a way that feels sufficiently safe and that develops a vocabulary that the team can own themselves to describe them along with ways of dealing with the dynamics productively.

Revealing these dynamics is best done working with here and now examples of the behaviours that play out amongst team members. This can be done through calling short time outs while a team is performing an exercise or team task and reflecting back what you are experiencing and observing as the coach and getting the team’s response to that. It can also be done by asking the team an incisive question about something that just happened and finding out what team members noticed about it (or not). It is good to develop the vocabulary using the team’s own language so that they feel a sense of ownership and that language that might smack to them of psychological jargon is avoided.

This is a central part of the work. It is especially useful to get the team working on their real business issues to do the here and now work. It works well to pick hot topics where there will be some tension between team members.

Example from practice: Carry out live coaching of one team member on a particular challenge they were facing and asking the rest of the team to observe and playback what they are noticing and picking up about the person, their situation, their verbal and non verbal signals. Then asking them how they could help the individual. Develop some concrete and specific actions from the coaching session that involve team members helping each other. Use this data to facilitate the team talking about the non-conscious or not spoken about dynamics within the team. Use the exercise to flush out other non-conscious dynamics, name them and build a vocabulary. In one particular instance for example, it emerged that the individual was very isolated. Even he had not realised this. This prompted some team members to think about how they could support him and it also flagged up others who felt isolated and struggled to reach out and ask for help for fear of looking weak. This led to a conversation about the things that represented weakness in the wider system and within this team. It was a very rich exchange and exposed in a productive way many of the things that were blocking team performance.

4: Uncover and understand the power dynamics within the team and the organisational system.

I once worked with a team who described themselves (in our metaphor exercise) as the “janitors – cleaning up everyone else’s mess” no wonder they felt pretty powerless within the wider system. This powerlessness was reflected in the way they were pretty passive with each other and low on stakeholder engagement. We
worked on reframing their view of themselves and their role so that they could engage in an entirely different way.

It is vital to uncover, understand and discuss the power dynamics within the team and the wider system with which this team interacts. Without this understanding the team cannot be highly effective. The areas to explore with team members are to what extent the internal power dynamics support the team’s task delivery and to what extent they block it. This is where it can get hot and uncomfortable. If some team members inappropriately wield too much power this will have to change and the team, with the coaches help, will have to work this out between them. This can be tough. Where some team members are revealed as lacking power or are weak this can be embarrassing and result in a potential loss of face. These are the moments where some of the work might need to take place off line in one to one work or helping the team leader to support a particular individual. These are judgement calls to be made in the moment depending upon what one is uncovering. However, it is not OK to leave these dynamics unspoken or unattended to if they are genuinely in the way of the team stepping up to high performance.

Example from practice: A team where one team member considered himself smarter and more politically powerful than other team members. This was actually a reflection of the power structure at a company/systemic level. We invited the CEO into a portion of the event to set out how he saw the market changing and what this meant for the way the company needed to change. The CEO’s view of the market shifts was a challenge to the old power structures. This clearly seeded the message that the game was changing. This was not a power shift that was going to change in one conversation and the team member’s boss was one of the big holders of power on the operating board. This particular shift was going to take some time. It was felt from a team coaching perspective that bringing in higher authority early in the team coaching process to seed the changes in team members minds would work well on a number of levels. Firstly, the changes were strategic and linked strongly to the business imperative, secondly it gave other team members confidence in their own positions vis-a-vis the powerful member of the team, thirdly it legitimized some of the mindset shifts the team would have to make in order to keep themselves relevant.

5: Always be embedding behavioural habits that support effective relational insight and competence.

People find it hard to change. There are solid scientific reasons as to why which are beyond the scope of this short chapter! What this means for the team coach is that you need to keep layering in (as soon after the moments of insight) practice of the positive behaviours and replacements for the negative behaviours. More on layering as a team coaching technique later.

Give the team members lots of opportunities to practice in different groupings the types of behavioural habits that will support them. This work needs doing in duos,
trios and within the whole team. It also needs doing with key stakeholders on whom the team depends for its success – likewise in different groupings. There may be some skills input that is required and the work may move momentarily into teach mode and then back into coaching. In my experience there are two key behavioural areas which are vital if a team is to make a sustainable step up to high performance where the behavioural habits have to be highly embedded before the coaching work stops. These are giving and receiving feedback between team members and holding other team members – laterally – accountable. The exercise mentioned earlier in the chapter is a good start. And these two behaviours need practicing, practicing and practicing throughout the work.

This will give team members a felt sense of what this is like and start to build the habit. If this is done enough times within the safe environment of the team coaching then it will be easier to do in the more scary environment of life back in the day to day.

**Example from practice:** Make sure that whatever the behavioural changes are that you identify together with the team, you practice them in different and engaging ways every time you work with the team. Focus on giving and receiving feedback. Use many different groupings (one on one, trios, the whole team) to model feedback giving. Talk about the experience of giving and receiving feedback at a whole team level so that this becomes a normal experience for team members. Use the team leader in particular to role model feedback behaviours especially at the beginning. This helps to build confidence quickly in the rest of the team.

**6: Have Fun!**

Positive psychology have plenty to say and evidence to support the fact that people do good thinking when they are enjoying themselves (Fredrickson, 2001). This does not mean that the work has to feel frivolous or lightweight, on the contrary. Oscar Wilde said “life is too important to be taken seriously” the same could be said of high performance team coaching. Fun connects and builds relationship and will happen if there is enough of a basic sense of emotional safety in the mix.

If one can create the fun whilst working on an actual team task the positive impact on the team dynamic is even greater.

**Example from practice:** We ran one team event at a football stadium and had a talk on teamwork from one of the marketing directors at the stadium followed by a tour. Working in an unusual location and where there is a connection with the topic of and taking a close up view of a different model of teamwork can stimulate new thinking. Mark de Rond (2012) shares a lot of lessons that can be learned from sport that translate to teamwork in business. Changing it up and translating and having some fun doing that can shake people’s brains out of the normal ways of thinking and provide some enjoyable moments of insight. Even the folk who hate football
were fascinated by some of the learning from football for their own team performance.

**Six Core Practices for Team Coaching**

The overarching aim of team coaching is to support the team’s ability to learn and keep learning. This is the whole point of the work. There are six key practices that I have found useful over time and, within each practice, tools, techniques and exercises from which a coach can choose to build up the design of their team coaching work. I have included one type of tool or technique here. There are of course many tools to choose from and too many to include in a single chapter!

These practices are:

1: **Clear Contracting** – at each phase of the work. What do you agree with the team that they want to achieve and how will they know when they have achieved it?

*Tools and Techniques:* Personal interviews prior to beginning the team coaching are an excellent way to build the relationship with you as coach as well as to gain important information about what the team needs. You can use one to one meetings or calls to gain insight at an individual level and of the team as a collective as well as interviewing other stakeholders to get the systemic view. Using the output from these interviews will support you to contract with the team as to what the objectives for the team coaching are. You can begin the work playing back what you have heard and using this information to help you contract clearly with the team.

2: **Mirroring** – What do the Team see in the mirror about the way they are? What do they see when the mirror is held up to them by others? Bring fresh data to the team coaching that reflects back how the team is doing from a variety of perspectives.

*Tools and techniques:* There are a variety of processes to help coaches achieve this. One way is to use a 360 degree questionnaire, examples include a team 360 by Patrick Lencioni (see www.tablegroup.com ), or the TLQ, Transform and BGC. By encouraging the team and their wider network to reflect on their own and other behaviours can be a useful starting point for a coaching conversation.

3: **Layering** – Continuously building up the team’s connections within the system. Start with the team looking at themselves and their internal dynamics. Learn and improve here. Then create activities that extend the team’s reach into the organisational system a layer at a time. The further you can help the team extend the higher the positive impact of the work.

*Tools and Techniques:* It can be very powerful to work with the team leader to identify real team tasks that the team has to achieve and to coach the team live. This
can also include bringing in other stakeholders that are connected with the team. This provides really clear data about how the team connect outside themselves and builds real relationship across the organisational system.

4: Heat Mapping – in order to facilitate learning the team coach has to be able to dial the heat up and down depending upon what you think the team can cope with. The temperature gauge is your sense of the degree of emotional and psychological safety you think the team individually and collectively are feeling. If you keep the teamwork too safe, the heat too low, the team won’t learn.

*Tools and Techniques:* A personal favourite is the hot seat exercise where a team member has to sit and take feedback from the team on one thing they do especially well that contributes to team effectiveness and one thing that the team member giving feedback wants the hot seat person to change to help the team be more effective (Lencioni, 2007). You can do this with the whole team listening and taking part or you can take the heat out by doing it in pairs or trios. It is good to get the Team Leader to really take the hot seat early on.

5: Practicing – it takes new habits for us to create a change of behaviour. Practice, practice, practice, the new behaviours as the team identify what they need to do differently.

*Tools and techniques:* Get the team to create their Team Charter. Ask them to develop ways that they can review how well they are doing. Get them engaged in designing ways and means of practicing. Then just do it!

6: Reflection – It helps us to learn faster if we can step onto the balcony outside ourselves and look in at what we are learning from a higher perspective. This reflection combined with practice and habit building makes the learning impact bigger. The habit of reflection from a helicopter viewpoint is an important practice to leave the team able to do this effectively.

*Tools and Techniques:* A check in at the end of a team interaction (be it the whole or part of the team). Take a few minutes to review how the interaction went. What worked? One thing that could be improved? How reflective of the Team Charter was it?
Summary

Businesses will only truly solve the challenges facing them by using distributed leadership and effective teamwork. Teams are a huge source of power and a resource that effective leaders must harness. They must truly empower their teams. As leadership and executive coaches we have an important role to play and team coaching offers a useful additional tool to help and support this change.
References


