Coordinated Coaching Increases Trust within Organizations; Accountability as a Trust-Building Framework

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[Note: Portions of this case study were published, with some editing, in *Forbes*. We believe that you, as a professional coach or consumer of coaching services, will find this fuller account of an exceptional team-based coaching process to be of even greater value—though the publication of a fragment of this case study in a widely read and highly-regarded publication such as *Forbes* speaks convincingly to the importance and credibility of this case study. You will also note that several additional comments (*in italics*) have been provided by another member of the coaching team (Team Coach), providing even greater opportunity for the reader to derive insights and inspiration from this case study.]

If you find accountability, collaboration, and communication to be issues in your organization, the underlying cause may be a culture of distrust. Trust is the missing ingredient for true employee engagement within an organization. According to Tolero Solutions, 45% of employees say lack of trust in leadership is the biggest issue impacting work performance.

"To me, trust is sort of a symptom of whether or not employee engagement exists," said Bob Tobias, director of the Institute for the Study of Public Policy Implementation at The American University. "It's not possible... to have employee engagement without trust."

Trust allows employees and management to resolve disagreements, have lower turnover rates, take smarter risks, contribute innovative ideas, and more. All of which can impact a company's growth and bottom line.

Trust can be fragile. Once broken, it can create breakdowns in communication, disgruntled emotions, and can really slow down projects and therefore results within an organization. A company without trust cannot successfully collaborate when the players may not be on civil speaking terms.

Distrust can be vile in nature. Once established, it can grow quickly within an organization, instantly infecting new employees as they assimilate into a culture devoid of trust. The problem with trust is that is actually easier to destroy than it is to maintain.

Traditional application of one to one coaching can be effective on a small scale within companies, but what do you do when distrust has become entrenched throughout an entire organization? 1:1 coaching can become cost prohibitive when 60 or more people need it, and there is the logistical issue of how you would coordinate the effectiveness and consistency of that many individual coaches, especially if they are external to your organization.

Group coaching and consulting is not a new concept, but there is a hybrid that is now being utilized with great success. It includes the individual attention of 1:1 coaching paired with layers of group and team coaching within a system that synchronizes them across both the horizontals and verticals of your organization for maximum results in an accelerated timeframe.

Team Coach: From a practical perspective, this blended approach gains considerable leverage. Some subjects can be addressed in groups because they are most effective in group formats (for example, group norms, some conversations about trust, etc.) or because they are most efficient (in other words, having 1:1 conversations doesn't add significant impact (for example, some teaching of principles, conversations about common questions). Then individuals can opt to address subjects in more depth and specific context if it serves them to gain support for applying ideas in particularly challenging situations. When done well, it can be like building a foundation faster and better. While pouring the foundation, the blended approach simultaneously strengthens individual pillars. The organization and the individuals all gain strength together.

Case Study of Company X

Due to nondisclosure agreements, I cannot divulge the name of one organization we recently had the privilege to work with, so I will refer to it as Company X. Three years ago a representative of Company X approached us about coaching the executives in their top three tiers of leadership. This issue was that there was a breakdown of trust and communication within the company, and the executive level wanted help with accountability and engagement amongst the workforce. There was a massive, enterprise-wide project that needed multiple levels of management to work

together to produce results, and there was an obvious disconnect occurring between and amongst key leaders, which was negatively impacting the whole project.

In the article *The Enemies of Trust,* authors Robert Galford and Anne Seibold Drapeau (Harvard Business Review) break trust down into three components:

- Strategic: Employees trust those in charge to set the right course
- Personal: People trust managers to treat them fairly and put employees' and the company's needs ahead of their own.
- Organizational: Employees view the company's processes as fair and consistent.

Providing individual coaching to select executives would only scratch the surface of the trust issue within the organization. This was a systemic problem that involved all levels of management, and impacted accountability, collaboration, and effective communication. In order to elicit real change, we needed to provide coaching on multiple levels at once.

It would not have been cost effective for the organization to provide private coaching for everyone, so we developed a strategy that both addressed their need for coaching at all levels of management while still providing some more individual contact for those executives and managers that needed it.

The LEAP Solution

We created the Leadership Excellence & Alignment Program (LEAP) which is a tiered coaching program that provides coordinated, customized group and team and executive coaching solution for the top three tiers of leadership within the organization.

Each group had one or more dedicated coaches working with them.

- 6 C-level executive/ senior-most decision-makers (1 coach)
- 15 Director-level senior leaders (1 coach)
- 44 Team Leaders (2 coaches the first year was expanded to 5 coaches the second)

In addition to the coaches that met directly with the leaders, there was a coach that provided remote 1:1 coaching over the telephone. This provided participants a means to talk through issues away from the group in a more personal one on one interaction. The coaches that met

directly with the leaders did so in a group setting, and upon request, when needed, provided some one on one coaching. This gave the executives many options to match their comfort level.

As the CEO, I served multiple roles, as the relationship and account manager, the coordination coach who was in direct contact with the company's point of contact about progress, and a bigger role as a project manager, coordinating meetings between the coaches to be able to strategize between tiers. Since I was never directly involved with the participants, like the coaches, I was able to remain objective and provide support and coaching to the coaches, coordinating our strategic efforts across the three tiers of leadership on behalf of the organization.

This coaching of the coaches added another layer of service to the client. At all times, the coaches respected the confidentiality of their particular group. If there was a specific issue that was to be brought before the coaching team, the coach would ask their clients if the information was cleared to share. The coaches met on a regular basis, and discussed trends and concerns within their groups. The coaches had their own perspectives with their own groups, and patterns of distrust among and between the levels were quickly revealed and we implemented strategies to improve those relations.

Team Coach: As a member of the team, I provided 1:1 executive coaching by phone. Any leader involved in the program could request 1:1 phone coaching on a first-come, first-serve basis from a recurring number of hours that were allocated monthly.   Requests were coordinated by Company X but the content of all conversations remained confidential.

Demand for phone coaching varied across the first and second year of the program, occasionally coming close to the maximum monthly hours allotted, but there was always sufficient time to serve leaders who requested coaching. The highest numbers of requests came in the first five months of the program, but there was steady usage throughout most of the first year. Interestingly, there were leaders who requested phone coaching multiple times—even one leader who was granted 9 sessions. In the impact survey discussed later in this article, we even found that some of the leaders would have requested even more 1:1 coaching. They were trying to be careful of coaching hours because they were told the coaching hours were a limited

resource and they wanted to conserve it for their teammates. This care for others demonstrates one of the bases of trust that LEAP helped to create.

Baseline Assessments

Data collected over several years from annual employee engagement surveys confirmed that while employees loved the mission of the organization, leadership skills such as communication, employee motivation and employee development needed improvement. The majority of the 65-leader management team had been promoted to their leadership roles because of their technical expertise and technical leadership, but they consistently scored low in interpersonal leadership skills.

To kick off the executive coaching program, all managers and leaders were invited to a session with a dynamic executive coaching speaker who introduced the coaching program and inspired the leaders to opt in. There were other surveys and assessments that were presented to the leaders to identify where there were gaps and concerns. Try it in your organization with the assessment below:

1. Describe a work relationship where trust is low. What happened that caused trust to be damaged or broken? What was your contribution?
2. Is your mistrust an issue of sincerity, reliability, or competence?
3. Check for promises vs. expectations: What promise was made to you that was not fulfilled? (Who promised you and what was promised?) If no explicit promise, what expectation did you have? For whom? To do what? Did the other know about that expectation? What clarifying conversations, if any, are needed – whether this was a promise broken or an expectation unfulfilled?
4. How can you reframe the situation to find opportunities to rebuild trust? Be sure to focus on future possibilities rather than past wrongdoings.
   What trust building conversations/actions could you initiate?

Team Coach: During the first month of the program, Company X emailed all participants about the availability of phone coaching several times. All the LEAP group coaches reminded participants, too. In the inaugural month, sign-ups were low, but they rapidly increased in the following months. I attribute the increase to the trust built by the team coaches. Early requests for coaching ran the spectrum from leadership applications to conflict management, from influencing organizational culture to shifting self-limiting beliefs. This variable focus continued throughout the program, though in most sessions it was clear that the larger LEAP project generated many new opportunities for growth, either by sparking the thought that something could change or by requiring changes in the way leadership happened. It was interesting, too, to see the perspective on senior leadership evolve over two years, growing in confidence about the leadership and their commitment to the LEAP program.

Results: The LEAP program was in place for two years in Company X. Each year showed substantial progress for all of the tiers, so much so, a third year is being considered. The coaches working with the company are all master coaches, because a certain level of coordination, skill and experience is needed to make this type of group coaching venture a success.

Senior C-Suite Team

During our engagement with Company X, the master coach assigned to the upper level executive team helped shift the team from being a group of separate individual leaders operating in separate silos to being an effective, aligned, accountable, collaborative and transparent leadership team.

There was obvious tension between team members and with the other tiers below them. They had difficulty being forthcoming or honest with one another during meetings. There was little or no trust. They were used to being managed in a 1:1 setting (i.e., in their silos). There was a strong obvious commitment to become more of a team but no declared aligned purpose.

Results:

- The group now functions as a working team that handles crises and breakdowns together.
- The executives were able to have very frank and tough discussions in the team setting.
- The executives were able to take on changing the culture of the company as a priority and took on more accountability to engage the organization to participate and lead the management priorities.
- They listened to each other more and are able to think and create together.
- They have an aligned commitment to become better leaders and transform their organization.
- They were able to see their progress and were committed to continue it.

Director Level Team

This team was comprised of leaders who were sandwiched between the executives and the team leaders. They had some outstanding changes occur, even from the beginning. Their first meeting, they informed the coach that they had never met as a "team" to discuss issues. They peripherally knew one another and had sat in other meetings, but sitting down as a group was new concept.

The coach helped them collaborate to resolve emergent issues, solve common challenges together and address the challenges unique to being the middle leadership tier; including accountability and leadership communication competencies.

Results:

1. The directors routinely shared work-related information among themselves that they have not received through formal communication channels.
2. Group members seemed to enjoy getting to know one another better, especially across divisions, and have developed collaborative working relationships, often working across silos to get things done.
3. They were able to demonstrate a high level of compassion towards others, which greatly improved trust across the tiers.

One of the most significant changes occurred after the first year. After learning new leadership distinctions and practices, the group developed their own Vision statement, identified improvement/change areas where they could make a difference, and self-organized into working sub-groups. They began working on projects including data gathering, writing, analyzing, and creating/implementing new ideas for better work products and better working relationships, improved communication, clearer career path/development opportunities, and increased morale.

The executives were very impressed by their initiative, and with the help of their coach was able to communicate with the directors more effectively, and even apologize when they stepped over boundaries.

Team Coach: Participants in phone coaching came from director and team leader levels. In my experience, this is somewhat typical: often the most-senior leaders want (and often need) unique development experience. They often value, too, the ability to meet in person. The senior leaders requested individual phone sessions as needed from their team coach, so I was not involved in those conversations.

Team Leader Level

During the first year, Team Leaders worked with two coaches in curriculum-based group coaching customized to enhance leadership skills and address pervasive cultural challenges of distrust, blame, and lack of communication. Over the course of the program, this group shifted from apathy to commitment, from victimized-thinking to ownership and accountability. By the second year, it was obvious that the teams needed more coaching than curriculum, and so five groups were formed, each with their own master coach.

Similar to the other tiers, the team leaders lacked both trust and their morale was very low. Coaching provided members with strong rules for engagement based on respect, and emphasized accountability as a trust-building framework. Coaching illuminated what is required to repair relationships and empowered group members to recognize they were culpable if not working toward removing the obstacles to trust and improving the culture.

Results: Changing technical systems and business processes resulted in the transformation leaders being pitted against the legacy leaders. In order to create trust and collaboration, coaching provided a facilitated opportunity for representatives from each side to sit down together from the perspective of Team Leaders having an enterprise-wide leadership responsibility rather than responsibility for single silos.

1. Team Leaders were able to speak more comfortably and directly
2. They learned to hold their assessments as assessments rather than the truth, this improved problem solving as they began making requests of each other for the broader good of the enterprise. This ignited new actions and reduced feelings of powerlessness.
3. This groups greatest challenge was that they were unwilling to speak "their truth" to executive leaders, primarily due to organizational history of public bullying/humiliation. As the group coalesced, shared experiences, clarified their interpersonal rights, and learned the tenets of boundary management they began reporting evidence of taking more risks individually and collectively. They also took on the question of how they might be silencing their direct reports or one another. With an agreement to stop silencing one another trust and courage rose.

Individual Coaching

Individuals in any of the groups could request through their coach a 1:1 coaching session with a master coach by phone. These were confidential calls that provided an outside perspective. Most of the callers only called once, but a few others called a couple of times, usually about unrelated issues.

Results:

1. One client felt a coaching conversation was the best 60 minutes of development in her career.
2. Clients all reported that they were "satisfied" with the executive coaching call; in all

cases, they commented that they had new perspectives and/or actions they could take.

3. Several clients noted a shift in the strategic focus of the organization, which they viewed as potentially positive.

The biggest result of adding phone coaching to the tiered team and group coaching program was that it allowed for the organization to save significant money on the cost of executive coaching while best meeting the needs of the leaders.

Team Coach: In practice, first-come, first-serve phone coaching turned out to be an excellent support tool for clients applying leadership lessons or creating initial awareness of a need for change. I found we could address individual, interpersonal, or organizational questions with relative ease—as long as we were very careful in the first 5-10 minutes to set up the conditions of satisfaction for the client for each call as a stand-alone offering. In each session, I would introduce myself, set up a few ground rules/guiding principles (including confidentiality), then ask what the client wanted to achieve. The client and I would have a short conversation for context (What's going on? What do you want to be different?), then discuss what we could complete in our call together (Knowing that we have less than an hour, what would you like to walk away with? If we could do XX, would you be satisfied?) Once the client agreed to the conditions of satisfaction, we would start coaching. In several cases, this "contracting" phase took almost 15 minutes by itself. The contracting, however, allowed us to create and then achieve clear goals—and, as is often the case, the more involved contracting conversations often helped create a clearer picture of an emotional or complex situation for a client.

Cost Assessment

Company X, like many large corporations did not have a limitless budget for coaching and training. In the case of Company X, the cost of providing 1:1 coaching for 65 leaders would have been well over $3M for the year at approximately $25K per leader for a 6-month program. The cost of a coordinated, tiered, multi-layered group, team, and individual approach for all 65 leaders during the first year equaled about what it would have cost for about three executives to have individual 1:1 coaching and they also had the benefit of individual phone coaching office

hours if they needed it. Due to the unprecedented impact the first year, the company doubled their investment and expanded the program for the second year.

The Bottom Line

While the case study presented here is not in the hospitality industry, there was a recent study conduced by Tony Simons, Associate Professor of Management at Cornell University Hotel School, that found that of 76 hotels he and his research team surveyed, those whose employees strongly believed their managers followed through on promises and demonstrated the values they preached were substantially more profitable than those whose managers scored average or lower. In the executive summary of the study Simons notes, "Employee perceptions of their managers' integrity—both keeping promises and demonstrating espoused values—were strongly linked to hotel profitability. Employees' belief in managers' integrity, and their trust in managers, have a lot more impact on profits than more traditional issues like employee 'satisfaction' or even 'commitment.'" In those organizations where employees deem their managers to be trustworthy everyone was a beneficiary. *(The High Cost of Lost Trust, by Tony Simons in Harvard Business Review, September 2002. Also see http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/tls11/)*

The cost to a company to have trust issues can be great. If your organization is experiencing low morale, lack of employee engagement, issues with accountability, collaboration and communication, these could be the warning signs of a culture of distrust. While there are many leadership approaches, you can take to shift the culture and create trust, coordinating a masterful coaching solution across the horizontals as well as the verticals of your organization can accelerate the impact dramatically.