

BEING IN ACTION

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INSIDE

COACHING TEAMS

—Suzi Benoff

The joy of being a coach is the abundance of unique opportunities to apply coaching skills in a variety of settings. I've had two opportunities to coach corporate teams.

The first group was the legal department of a Fortune 100 chemical company steeped in tradition and hierarchy. The visionary leader of the group wanted to create an interdisciplinary team of 15 leaders that would essentially replace him in implementing their cutting-edge, transformational program that is revolutionizing the practice of law. My role was to "be the glue" that held this team together. I was to coach them on leadership, team-building, strategic planning, and most importantly, communication.

The second company was a national litigation support services firm that recently went public.

The CEO wanted to design a leadership retreat that would focus on creating a

stronger team for the senior executive committee, and produce strategic results to catapult the company profitably in the direction of achieving their vision.

When is a team a team? This question arose in both scenarios. I had set out first to have each team define its purpose—in Steven Covey's words: "to begin with the end in mind." While this is a



Suzi Benoff

relatively straightforward task with individual coaching clients, it translated with great confusion into the team coaching forum. Group dynamics add a very different element to coaching.

PART I

The chemical company

struggled the most with this question. We were a team, but we had no idea what we were to do, by when we were to have done it, and why. "Why are we suddenly a team?" they pondered. "How is this different from the way we've been working all along?"

We knew that what makes an effective team is when each team member is committed to a shared vision or purpose, for which he or she needs the strengths of the other team members.

We set out to identify our purpose. Part of the reason why this team was formed was to allow natural leaders to emerge. In order to facilitate this as the coach, I had to stifle my own urge to jump in and lead. In the end, we determined that the 15 leaders that had been brought together had no real need to be a team, and the ultimate purpose of the group was to serve as a vehicle for commu-

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nication between separate initiatives.

The challenge of coaching this transition was to create the space for the team to decide it wasn't really a team. I had to coach them to lead themselves. We were called a Vision Team, but the vision was already firmly established and shared. To implement their own separate initiatives, the team members didn't need each other, therefore, no team. As the coach whose job it was to be "the glue" that held this team together, I had some lessons to learn in terms of letting go of my attachment to how it should be. In fact, by allowing the space for the team to undo itself, the members felt liberated, revitalized, and they breathed new energy into their projects.

After three months of meetings, the team disbanded except for monthly updates communicated by each member to the team via e-mail. Part of the team formed a sub-team of members who had direct, in-house accountability for each of the initiatives. This smaller group still

meets regularly to share updates, problem-solve, and discuss issues, and I serve as the facilitator for these meetings. Independently, I coach each of these sub-team members.

From this team stemmed the need for yet a smaller sub-team of people who would hammer out more political and strategic issues with the organization leaders. I met with and coached them in the beginning phases to determine their structure, purpose, and goals, but they now function on their own.

PART II

The litigation support services firm had asked me to coach their senior executive team to create the leadership retreat I mentioned earlier. The challenge was that they'd recognized their need for coaching two weeks before the day they'd scheduled the retreat to begin! I sat down with the three of them (CEO, CFO, and COO) to determine their vision for the retreat. What became apparent was that this top-level team of executives had no idea how to function as a team themselves, let alone create a larger leadership

team with the other key stakeholders in the company.

The solution? We designed a staggered leadership retreat. Day 1 was a full-day, interactive, intensive team-building day where I coached these top leaders in identifying and removing barriers, strengthening their relationships, and creating a solid plan for how they would function together going forward. Day 2 brought in representatives from their offices across the country that they considered to be the brightest strategic thinkers in the firm nationwide. Day 3 included the elders of the company: the founders, the owners, and the ones who'd been around since the birth of the organization. The final day included the directors: the individuals who were in charge of each office around the country.

I coached and facilitated team-building, strategic planning sessions with each group except the elders, who met with the senior executive team to sort out other issues.

The end result was a high-energy breakthrough initiative that had a high percentage of buy-in. My role as the coach throughout was to manage the process while the groups focused on content and strategy and issues.

So, if you've been toying with the idea of coaching teams, or even if you haven't, my suggestion is to go for it! It involves different dynamics than coaching individuals, but is equally as rewarding. As you coach teams, keep in mind that your job is to be ever-conscious of the needs of the entire team in order to effectively coach the group. It's a great big juggling act, but the learnings are well worth the juggle!

Suzi Benoff, a leadership development consultant and owner of Innovative Leadership International in Maryland, coaches executives and teams in visioning, team communication, diversity education, strategic planning, powerful presentations, conflict resolution, and effective meeting facilitation.

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