

The Coaching Case: A Matter of Trust

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As coaches, we have many of the tools of effective facilitation in our toolboxes. Curiosity, openness, and the ability to listen both for what is and is not being explicitly said are all essential for working successfully with groups. Being genuinely empathetic to the issues the team is grappling with and providing direct yet respectful feedback is as useful with a group as it is in our individual coaching work. I have found that working with teams once every quarter or so complements my individual coaching work and allows me to feel temporarily part of a tribe—probably the only aspect of my past corporate life that I sometimes miss.

Recently, I had the opportunity to do exactly that when one of the sales leaders I coach wanted to bring her leadership team together in order to enhance their collaboration and overall effectiveness in a year of dramatic change.

The situation: A strong and charismatic leader who needs to implement deep strategic, executive and organizational changes. A leadership team dispersed across Russia, where ongoing tension between Moscow and the other regions fuels the lack of trust quietly growing within the team. A two-day off-site workshop intended to create a different mindset within the team.

As my client and I explored the key issues preventing the team from operating at its best, the theme of trust—or, rather, the lack of trust—arose again and again. This was exacerbated by the fact that only half the team was based in Moscow. The further a team member worked from the city, the likelier that his or her trust in the team had given way to defiance and frustration. We agreed that she had to bring all of the leaders on her team together to address the situation, and scheduled a two-day off-site workshop in Moscow.

My client recognized that she could be biased in her own assessment and welcomed my offer to interview the 20 participants in advance to get a complete, unbiased picture of the situation. Those interviews revealed critical information that guided the agenda and contributed to the overall success of the workshop. I learned that the regional teams felt the challenges they were faced with were not appreciated by the central team; as a result, they felt less valued. The Moscow team, on the other hand, believed their regional counterparts weren't sufficiently transparent about the issues they faced. Their constant probing and requests for weekly meetings and reports fueled the regional teams' belief that they were treated as "less-than." Every communication glitch, however minor or unintentional, fed into these beliefs and perpetuated the cycle of distrust.

In addition to providing valuable insights, these interviews helped me create a connection with each participant. They also signaled that their leader valued their perspective.

Insight: Pre-workshop efforts played an essential role in the success of the workshop. Never underestimate the power of understanding and connecting.

I began the workshop by asking each participant to share a piece of information that their colleagues did not know about them. It was incredible to watch them become more open to one another as they discovered that the person they talked to on the phone every week was also a flutist, sang in a choir, had founded a professional dancing school or was passionate about baroque music. Suddenly, these colleagues were also people—people who had interests, hobbies and talents that they shared or could relate to.

I also consciously ensured that the breaks during the workshops would promote deeper connections. Because food is the ultimate connector, we all went to a cooking class at the end of day one. I enjoyed watching the participants build trust and enjoy themselves as they prepared salads, whisked eggs and made jokes about their creativity and cooking skills. In addition, each time we broke for lunch, I asked participants to sit with a colleague they did not know well and leverage the opportunity to create or deepen their connection.

Insight: The need for connection is powerful, and it's anchored in each one of us. We will naturally seize any meaningful opportunity to connect with our fellow humans.

During the pre-workshop interviews, I had uncovered an essential piece of information: Most of the team members were not aware that the frustration they felt with their current dynamic was shared by their peers.

When I projected slides summarizing themes that had emerged from the interviews, the team members realized that in addition to sharing hobbies and interests, they also shared the frustration generated by their common challenges and issues. (I also let attendees know that, for a topic to be included on the slides, I needed to have heard it from at least three interviewees.) This realization was so comforting and relieving that it caused a shift in the room: Suddenly, it felt natural for the attendees to engage in the difficult conversations that they had been avoiding.

I invited attendees to take a quick vote on the top five challenges their team was facing and form self-selected breakout groups to address each challenge. During the morning on day two, each group shared its findings and proposed a course of action. From there, we mapped out a “resolution path” for each challenge with an identified owner, action items and a timeline.

The participants agreed to review the action items in each staff meeting, and I enlisted their human resources business partner, who was invited to the workshop, to be their “conscience” and hold them accountable for the commitments they made during their two days together.

Two key decisions that emerged from the workshop had the potential to address multiple challenges. First, participants agreed that the regional leaders would each make plans to spend several days in Moscow shadowing organizational leaders and participating in customer and staff meetings. They also

agreed that, moving forward, the agenda for staff meetings would include a space for each leader to share a top-of-mind subject or concern and ask for support and advice.

At the end of the workshop, I asked all participants to complete a formal survey regarding the experience. They revealed that they had increased their understanding of their peers and their leader and they all said they felt more confident about tackling the business challenges at hand. They reported that they were leaving with an increased level of trust in their collective capabilities. In doing so, they took meaningful steps on their journey to becoming a high-performing team.

Trust is multilayered, and its cultivation requires relentless focus. After the workshop, the team members continued to build on the foundation they had laid. In the five months since the workshop, they have increased their commitment to sharing top-of-mind concerns and expectations on a regular basis, representing a huge shift from how they'd communicated previously.

The leaders are taking their newfound sense of collaboration and team spirit into their own teams, creating a ripple effect that's changing the organization for the better. They have even created an anonymous mailbox employees can use to voice questions to the leadership teams. The mailbox has evolved into an important tool for collecting feedback and staff suggestions, and the process of managing it and responding to questions and concerns taps into every team member's wisdom and experience.

As humans, we fear what we do not understand. However, we can overcome this instinctive perceived threat when provided the opportunity to do so in a safe environment. As Marie Curie said so eloquently, "Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less."

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