Teaching Leaders to Coach Teams

Many senior team leaders … want their team members to take more responsibility, but don't fully realize that this first requires a major shift in their own style of leadership.

Peter Hawkins[i]

Coaching is increasingly recognized as a fundamental leadership skill, required across the board if organizations are to succeed in getting the most from their people, in encouraging people to collaborate effectively, and in creating the kind of environment needed to foster innovation and extraordinary performance. More and more organizations are teaching their leaders how to coach, but the focus tends to be on coaching individuals. What about training leaders to coach their teams?

Team coaching is important

Peter Hawkins suggests that team coaching is 30 years behind individual coaching in terms of common definitions, research and training. This resonates with our own experience. In a recent piece of research we found a wide range of different activities being practiced under the banner of team coaching [ii]. Few of the coaches we interviewed had undertaken formal training specific to coaching teams. However we define team coaching, external coaches tell us it's tough, and many choose not to coach teams, restricting their practice to coaching individuals. But while external coaches can choose whether or not to coach teams, the leader-as-coach doesn't have that option. If a leader has direct reports and she believes that she will need to coach them as a team in order to maximize their collective performance, then she must learn to be a team coach[iii]. The need for leaders to develop the capacity to coach teams is echoed in the literature. For example, Hunt & Weintraub[iv] suggest that the leader-as-coach, coaching individuals, often needs to adopt a two pronged approach that includes intervening at the team level. Peter Hawkins points out how tiring it is for the team leader being stuck in a pattern of being the one who sets the direction, being the channel through which all conversation is directed, and being the mediator whenever team members have issues with each other.

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Working with team dynamics

Talking to external coaches, we found their biggest challenge in transitioning from working with individuals to working with teams, was learning to work with team dynamics. Working with coachees 1-to-1, there is one relationship in the room – the relationship between coach and coachee. When the coach works with a team there will likely be more than 20 relationships in the room, each one impacting on what plays out, each one dynamic and evolving. Some writers suggest the external team coach should never work alone because of the complexity of working with teams. The team leader usually has no choice but to to work alone

Not all writers think that it's useful to focus on group dynamics. Hackman & Wageman[v], for example, suggest that team performance drives interpersonal relationships rather than the other way round. If you successfully manage motivation, alignment of tasks, and team member's knowledge and skills, then interpersonal relationships will look after themselves, goes the argument. This may be true some of the time, but even the authors acknowledge that serious interpersonal conflicts sometimes undermine team performance. The issue appears to be that Hackman & Wageman were unable to find approaches to working with interpersonal conflict proven to improve performance. What approaches *can* we then share with team leaders to help them work effectively with team dynamics?

Dialogue

David Clutterbuck[vi] writes about the importance of creating a 'safe psychological space' in which team members are able to offer each other honest and timely feedback, a space that enables dialogue. Peter Hawkins[i] writes of an environment in which the team leader is able to elicit open feedback on his strengths and weaknesses. The team coach, Hawkins says, encourages team members to sort their interpersonal and inter-functional issues out directly with each other. The effective team is self-managing and self-sustaining, learning together, even when the team leader is absent. All of this requires trust, and trust requires dialogue.

Isaacs[vii] defines dialogue as shared enquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. To engage in dialogue is to choose to suspend our pre-conceptions and strongly held beliefs. Dialogue, so defined, is not the same as conversation. Rather it is a particular form of conversation in which participants are open to new possibilties and ready to build on the contributions of others. Dialogue is less a skill and more of a mindset. Through a dialogic mindset I see myself as one player on a stage among many. I notice the multitude of perspectives held by

those with whom I interact and am curious as to the origin and nature of those multiple perspectives. The task of the team coach is to facilitate the creation of an environment in which dialogue is likely to take place.

This capacity to engage in dialogue appears to be a fundamental attribute of leaders able to lead others through change[viii][ix]. The curiosity that sits at the heart of effective listening yields new insights and encourages people to share their thoughts. The capacity to say what needs to be said (respectfully!) provides clarity and engenders trust.

Clutterbuck talks about the role of the team coach being to create a 'safe psychological space'. What does this mean, and how does one go about creating it? A space is 'safe' if I feel I can speak into it without fear of repercussion. The team leader therefore, has to want to hear what others are thinking. This isn't as easy as it seems. If I hold a point of view to which I am firmly attached, then I may not welcome being challenged. If I am in a hurry, keen to land an action, I may have little tolerance for hesitant poorly-formed thoughts. To create a safe space requires introspection, self-awareness, and careful contracting with everyone on the team.

Another metaphor is that of 'container building'. The container is the safe space, but the container also needs to be heated up sometimes. Some teams, particularly new teams, prize harmony above all things. A desire for harmony can get in the way of people saying what needs to be said, can obstruct constructive challenge, and lead to sub-optimal performance.

Isaacs suggests there are five levers for the team coach to pull in managing the container. These are:

Evoking the ideal – making the dialogue purposeful. What do we hope will emerge from this conversation?

Supporting dreaming out loud – thinking aloud without fear of being judged.

Deepening the listening – listening curiously, again without judgment.

Daring people to suspend – noticing when people seek to close down an alternative perspective versus seeking to understand it.

Making it safe to oppose – legitimising respectful challenge.

This last point brings us to …

Languaging team dynamics

Hackman & Wageman's aversion to working with interpersonal relationships seems partly based on being unable to identify an approach linking process with outcomes, and from noticing that some of the methodologies they found

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appeared to 'clinical'. As the field of team coaching continues to mature, so we can expect to find more appropriate methodologies emerge. One such approach is 'structural dynamics' pioneered by David Kantor[x]. Structural dynamics comprises several lenses on group dynamics, the most popular of which is the 'Four Player' model. The Four Player Model suggests that everything we say can be categorized into one of four 'action modes'. When we '*Move*' we initiate something. When we '*Follow*' we support someone else's move, not just nodding silently, but validating the idea and moving it forward to completion. When we '*Oppose*' we challenge and correct the 'Move'. When we '*Bystand*' we provide a perspective on, for example, the content of the conversation, or the quality of the interaction. The task of the team coach is to help the team notice its own patterns of interaction using this language and equip them to change the nature of their discourse when they get stuck in certain patterns. The coach enables the team to call out the way it is operating (bystand) allowing the team to take steps to enhance the quality of dialogue. And the team coach normalizes the 'oppose', enabling the team to reflect upon its collective comfort with challenge. This model is an example of a relatively simple construct that enables the team to talk about the way it is operating in a way that invites discussion and review. It is purposeful in that this discussion is always in the context of the team's ability to achieve desired outcomes.

Learning how

Learning how to coach teams is, for many, a daunting challenge. Here are some principles that may prove useful in developing internal capability.

1. **Recognise what leaders are already good at**
   Team coaching is not the same as faciliation, nor is it the same as coaching individuals, but both coaching and facilitation skills may form a solid foundation upon which to build the ability to work purposefully with team dynamics. Teaching leaders to coach teams may be best positioned as following on from learning individual coaching and facilitation skills.

2. **Impart knowledge**
   Learning to become a better team coach isn't only about learning new skills and competencies. There exist many different approaches to team coaching - multiple perspectives and philosophies. Some work best in particular contexts and some will resonate more with some people than with others. Whilst learning to coach teams isn't all about learning new models and theories, offering up a few frameworks from which to

choose may be very helpful.

3. **Make it experiential**
    David Clutterbuck suggests that effective team coaches are comfortable with being uncomfortable. Peter Hawkins says that team coaches learn to become more confident and capable through watching others and giving it a go. There may be an adult development perspective lurking in here somewhere[x]. If I am to be at ease working with complexity and uncertainty while others are watching, then I may need to think differently. If I am to operate from a 'dialogic mindset', noticing the multitude of perspectives held by those with whom I interact, then I may need to think differently again. All of which points to theories of adult development and factors that stimulate a shift from one way of thinking to another. Basically, I will only shift from one way of thinking to another when my current way of thinking is not serving me well. Which suggests that the best way to learn team coaching is to step outside your comfort zone and give it a go.

4. **Opportunities to reflect**
    Few external coaches would attempt to undertake team coaching without the help of a supervisor. In the coaching world, a supervisor is not someone who stands over the coach telling them if they are doing a good job. The team coach supervisor will certainly have experience coaching teams, but their primary function is to provide a reflective space in which the team coach is able to learn from their experiences.

5. **Time**
    Team coaching takes time to learn. Knowledge is important, but knowledge by itself won't carry the developing coach through those sticky moments when everything is going wrong and people are looking to the coach to provide guidance on what to do next. To learn to become a better team coach requires giving it a go, and reflecting on that experience. Teaching team coaching within an organisation may be best done with cohorts of leaders learning together over a period of time. Don't just send people on a three-day course.

The challenge for organizations, seeking to facilitate the emergence of effective team coaching, is that coaching isn't simply a skill. Coaching and team coaching entail working with people in a particular way. The effective coach is self-aware and commits to coaching based on a set of personal values and experiences. In this sense coaching is cultural, for if the leaders of an organization are operating from different values and belief-based systems,

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then leaders are unlikely to support and commend each other's behaviours, and the people working in that organization are likely to become confused and uncertain as to how they are supposed to behave themselves. Teaching leaders to behave differently may therefore be best regarded as a culture change program and designed accordingly. Not surprisingly we commend a dialogic approach to managing change in this context rather than a conventional top down approach. A dialogic approach emphasises the importance of dialogue and the provision of space for collective meaning making [ix][x].

As organizations seek to do more with less, to adapt faster to the demands of an ever more complex and dynamic world, and to align their collective efforts in the same direction, so we believe leaders will need to develop their capacity to coach. Leaders will need to enhance their capacity to coach, not only individuals, but teams and groups. Teaching leaders how to coach their teams may be the next 'big thing' in the coaching world, and the organizations that do this best are likely to be those who recognize the importance of adopting a longitudinal systemic approach to facilitating the emergence of new capacity.

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Notes & Acknowledgments

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