DR DEC'S TEAM COACHING CONUNDRUMS

This second article in our Team Coaching series explores what is meant by team coaching, the market demand for it and the skills required to coach teams effectively.

Team coaching is on the rise. It is widely seen as a growing trend in organisations (Thornton, 2010 in Carr and Peters, 2013; Kets de Vries, 2005; Ridler 2012, 2014, 2016). This is not entirely surprising, since teams are the basic unit of organisation, with strong links to work performance. Put simply, if teams perform, so do organisations (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Sharma, Roychowdhury & Verma, 2009).

With this growing focus on teams at work, the means of supporting them are likely to follow. There is some evidence for this, with the latest Ridler Report telling us that 76% of organisations were expecting to see a rise in the use of team coaching in the last two years (Mann, 6th Ridler Report, 2016). Six years ago, firms predicted a 45-65% growth and so the ascendency of team coaching appears to be continuing (Mann, 5th Ridler Report, 2013).

This growth in team coaching is also evidenced by an increased spend by organisations, with the total revenue for coaching services globally estimated to be $2.35bn, and a potential market size for team coaching of $26,437,500 (Mann, 6th Ridler Report, 2016). With this magnitude of spend on team development, it is not surprising that coaches are moving in to meet this demand.

While this all bodes well, there is still widespread confusion about what team coaching is. As far back as 2009, David Clutterbuck pointed out, 'When people and organisations talk about team coaching, they may mean very different things.' Although there have been a few texts written on team coaching since, the literature that is available, while offering high face validity to practitioners, is not particularly informed by research, nor strongly evidence based (Thornton, 2010; Hawkins, 2011; Clutterbuck, 2009) leading Wotruba (2016) to describe the team coaching literature as 'messy'. Given this dearth of empirical evidence, many of the claims made about team coaching can only be considered to be speculative, personal opinions. With published team coaching research moving at glacial speed, it is not surprising that team coaching practice has moved ahead of the available literature. This has led to team coaches being

left largely to their own devices to determine what good team coaching looks like.

There is neither a widely agreed or accepted definition of team coaching, nor a single or common set of standards for team coaching practice (Thornton, 2010; Hawkins, 2011; Clutterbuck, 2009; Lawrence & Whyte, 2017). This is about to change, however, with the professional coaching bodies (including the author) actively working on a set of industry coaching competencies to be completed in late 2019. Without the clarity this work will bring, 'team coaching' remains an umbrella concept covering a wide range of practices including team building, team facilitation, reflective practice groups and action learning sets and the like. The result: there is significant confusion among organisational buyers of team coaching and practitioners alike about what constitutes team coaching and good practice.

Why is this lack of clarity significant? It is important because it is generally accepted practice that coaching starts with the coach understanding a client's requirements, reaching agreement on how the coaching will meet these, and contracting for their role in this (see, for example, Woods & Cumberland, 2016). In turn, this matters because when coaches are not clear on their roles they can find themselves:

● Unintentionally taking on roles that belong to the team. Examples include note-taking, time-keeping, and charting and tracking progress against plans and towards goals.

● Moving out of coaching mode into consulting or advising. Examples here might include training the team on teaming skills or instructing them on how to go about their work.

● Taking on full responsibility for team performance including holding team members to account for actions and results. This rather leaves the team leader redundant!

Adopting some of these roles is not unexpected, as current literature actually points coaches in these directions. For example, some commonly cited definitions of team coaching include:

● 'Helping the team improve performance, and the processes by which performance is achieved, through reflection and dialogue.' (Clutterbuck, 2007)

● 'Coaching a team to achieve a common goal, paying attention both to individual performance and to group collaboration and performance.' (Thornton, 2010)

● 'A process of working with the whole team, together and apart. Coaching them to collaborate and develop their collective leadership in order to achieve their common purpose and performance objectives…' (Leary-Joyce & Lines, 2018).

None of these roles or activities is inherently bad or wrong – they are just not particularly team coaching! Core (individual)

coaching competencies, including contracting, listening, asking forward-moving questions and providing direct feedback and communication, can all too easily be forgotten or downplayed when working with a team. Let's bring more coaching back into our work with teams.

While the demand for team coaching has arrived, my own research interviewing experienced team coaches concluded that it is 'Not for the faint hearted' (Woods, 2014). Even highly trained, individually accredited and experienced team coaches can be fazed by teams. Those coaches interviewed considered their team coach training to be inadequate, leaving them ill prepared for the complicated task of working with teams.

Given the demand for team coaching, how can a practitioner prepare themselves to coach a team?

● Firstly, until the empirical research on team coaching catches up, it matters less perhaps what the texts say about team coaching. It is more important that a team coach is able to offer their own definition of team coaching and articulate their approach to a prospective client.

● Secondly, as well as having a definition of 'team' and 'team coaching', coaches would benefit from having a view about what constitutes an effective team – and how to go about gauging this. It is important to use a research-based tool to do this.

● Thirdly, using the core principles of (individual) coaching when working with a team. These are often neglected and include careful and on-going contracting, active listening, asking powerful questions and providing direct communication to raise a team's awareness.

What additional skills and competencies are needed to coach teams? While work to determine these is still emerging, the following seem to be particularly relevant in my own team coaching practice:

● Creating and building psychological safety and protection between coach and team, and across the team.

● Actively building relationships (with individual team members and the whole team) and forming a working alliance.

● Encouraging reflection, dialogue and exchange between team members.

If a team is truly to become more than the sum of its parts, it would benefit from strengthening the connectivity between members. The medium for this is dialogue and team relationships – and this starts with the team coach modelling this. If you wish to capitalise on the rise of team coaching, practise effective relating. Go to it!

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The next column will look at the process of team coaching – the journey a client team progresses through.
To prepare for this, reflect on the following questions:

- What is your team coaching 'offer' – your process of team coaching?

- Which elements of this process are core and compulsory, and which optional?

- What are your critical conditions (as Coach) for successful team coaching outcomes?

Let us know your answers and thoughts by emailing **editor@associationforcoaching.com** or the author: **declan.woods@zpdconsulting.co.uk**.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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