

Team & group coaching – summary report

Industry sources suggest that about a third of organisations use team and group coaching yet there is little agreement as to what team coaching is, how effective it is or how it differs from group coaching and other interventions such as facilitation and process consultation. Hawkins (2011) suggests that team coaching is 20 years behind individual coaching in terms of common definitions, research and established training programs or accreditations. The purpose of this study was to throw more light upon this area of practice by seeking to understand what team and group coaches in Australia/New Zealand actually do. In this summary report we present only the key findings of the full study. The full version provides an overview of some of the most well known team and group coaching theories (Hackman & Wageman, 2005; Clutterbuck, 2007; Thornton, 2010; Hawkins, 2011) as well as a full account of the how forty experienced team and group coaches working in Australia go about their practice. In this summary paper we report key findings as they relate to:

- › The distinction between team and group coaching
- › Different approaches to team and group coaching
- › Planning an intervention

Team and group coaching

The views of coaches interviewed in this study broadly reflected distinctions between teams and groups in the literature, with an emphasis on teams having a common purpose and set of objectives, and an agreement as to how team members will work together in pursuit of that purpose. Some coaches referred also to a less common differentiator; that teams are stable and work together for a “meaningful length of time.” (Thompson, 2000). As in the literature we also found some coaches make clear distinctions between team and group coaching while others used the terms interchangeably. Coaches with a primary focus on team appeared to regard groups as a team-to-be. For example, one coach said: “I always try to get the group to decide on a collective task, otherwise there’s no point.” Others spoke of group coaching as a distinct intervention with its own purpose.

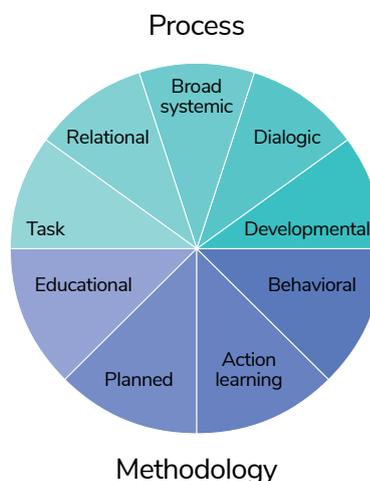
For example: “I see the group as a controlled laboratory for consolidating individual themes, a collaborative learning environment.”

Given that group coaching may be used as a discrete discipline to meet specific needs, team coaching may be best defined as an intervention designed to help groups or teams to become effective teams. Group coaching may be best defined as a process through which a coach helps people to support each other in attainment of individual goals.

Different approaches to team and group coaching

Interviews with 40 team and group coaches revealed the same diversity of approach as may be found in the literature. What all the team coaches had in common was a focus on *process* rather than *content*. In other words they all talked about the need to pay attention to *how* the team is working together as well as *what* the team is talking about. However, different coaches use the words ‘process’ and ‘team dynamics’ to mean different things, and different coaches adopt different methodologies in their practice. Nine dimensions of coaching practice emerged from this study; five that relate to process and four to methodology (figure 1).

Figure 1: Different approaches to team coaching



Process

1. Task

To focus on task is to attend to individual roles and responsibilities and to processes such as team meetings and decision making. Schein (1999) suggested that task should be the consultant's primary focus. The consultant should intervene on interpersonal process only when the team has explicitly agreed to work on interpersonal issues.

2. Relational

Some coaches in this study echoed Schein's (1999) views, but about half emphasised the importance of paying attention to interpersonal relationships. Slobodnik & Wile (1999) suggested that the only way to change a team's behaviour is to identify and modify the team social system, and Kets de Vries (2005) defined the practitioner's main concern as being a focus on "*what is really going on in the intrapsychic and interpersonal world of the key players, below the surface of their day-to-day routines.*" Thornton's (2010) approach to group dynamics is highly relational and Martin (2006) suggested that Hackman & Wageman's (2005) model be amended to include relationship factors.

3. Developmental

There are several developmental models, the best known of which is Tuckman's *storming-forming-norming-performing* model. A squarely developmental approach entails designing an intervention to match the team's stage of development. Although many of the coaches interviewed in this study said their practice was in some way developmental, none of them went so far as to explicitly designing an intervention based on such a diagnostic. Coaches in this study spoke more about helping the team to identify their developmental state and to decide for themselves how to develop further.

4. Dialogic

A dialogic approach entails helping a team or group listen deeply to each other and respond accordingly. Clutterbuck's (2007) earlier definition of team coaching included explicit reference to dialogue: "*Helping the team improve performance, and the processes by which performance is achieved, through reflection and dialogue.*" This focus on dialogue is echoed by other workers many of whom make reference to the work of Bohm (1996) and Isaacs (1999).

5. Broad systemic

Twenty percent of coaches spoke explicitly of the need to attend to what happens outside the team as well as within the team, consistent with the work of both Hawkins (2011) and Thornton (2010). Though Hawkins (2011) suggests Clutterbuck doesn't place sufficient emphasis on relationships outside the team, Clutterbuck (2007) does suggest that the coach needs to engage in 'systemic thinking', mapping out the various factors of presenting issues including an analysis of all the people who have an influence on that issue. Stoffels (2015) cites the value of bringing the wider system into the room, for example inviting other members of the system into team coaching sessions.

Methodology

1. Educational

Thirty percent of coaches interviewed in this study said that one of their roles was to bring new theory and insights to the team. Various authors position learning as an important element of team development and indeed most writers ascribe an educational role to the team coach (Farmer, 2016). Thornton (2010), on the other hand, implies that skills development is more the realm of training, that team coaching is more appropriate for training follow-up, helping people to embed skills and reflect with each other on progress.

2. Behavioural

Hackman & Wageman (2005) cite the approaches of Schwarz and Komaki as examples of team coaching based on theories of individual behaviour. Schwarz' approach, for example, consisted of three stages; i) observing behaviour, ii) providing feedback, iii) helping the team to decide whether or not they want to change their behaviours based on feedback received. None of the coaches interviewed in this study described such a structured behavioural approach at the heart of their practice, though most said they spent at least some time observing the team in action and providing feedback.

3. Planned

Clutterbuck (2008) suggests that team coaching is different to team facilitation in that the facilitator leads a team through a 'directed' dialogue, whereas the team coach more often involves an emergent dialogue. Coaches in this study showed up somewhere on a spectrum from 'planned' to 'emergent'. A coach adopting a highly planned approach will decide in advance a detailed agenda for a team or group coaching session. A coach adopting an emergent approach may go into a session with no preconception as to what will happen. Many coaches seemed adaptable, having a planned approach to hand if required, but often making decisions in-the-moment to go with the energy of the team.

4. Action learning

Reg Revans defined action learning as a social process in which a group of people learn from each other's experiences. Action learning is often defined specifically as a group intervention rather than a team intervention (e.g. Clutterbuck, 2007; Thornton, 2010), but some of the coaches interviewed spoke about adapting the process for team use.

All these dimensions of coaching practice showed up in team coaching, and all showed up among the four group-only coaches as well, except *broad systemic*.

Planning an intervention

There exists a bewildering variety of approaches to team and group coaching and still there is much debate as to the differences between team and group coaching, facilitation and process consulting. While academics and practitioners work to resolve some of these arguments the onus is on each of us to define our own frameworks, distinguishing between different types of intervention and matching the right intervention to the right scenario. With respect to team coaching we suggest:

1. **Establishing as clearly as possible the purpose of an intervention.** For team coaching this will often include seeking the views of people outside the team as well as members of the team. Establishing a clear purpose upfront is an important element of an evaluation strategy (see below).
2. **Forming an initial hypothesis as to where a coach is likely to be most useful.** Hawkins (2011), for example, invites us to look at the extent to which the team has a clear mandate; to which it has a clear mission, goals and objectives; to which members of the team are clear as to how they want to work together, how well they are connecting with external stakeholders, and how much time they spend reflecting on their performance and process. In which of these areas might the team most value coaching?
3. **Identifying the right coach.** For example, if the main area of focus is likely to be interpersonal relationships the client may choose to select a coach who appears strongest in this domain. Good team coaching is not necessarily a 'natural' extension of individual coaching (though many clients think it is) and so an outstanding individual coach may not be an effective team coach. Effective team coaches may be expected to be able to articulate their own team coaching models with respect to process and methodology.
4. **Contracting clearly with the team coach upfront, and revisiting that contract on a regular basis,** recognising that the coaching agenda is likely to be dynamic and emergent.

5. **Agreeing an evaluation strategy that measures progress against both the overall purpose of the assignment and with reference to the scope of the assignment.** For example, if the team is focussed on interpersonal relationships between team members then the team may monitor the extent to which team members believe they are engaged in good dialogue, or the extent to which people feel safe speaking up. Or if the team is focussed on improving relationships with external stakeholders it may choose to survey those stakeholders on a regular basis.

With respect to group coaching a framework may include a focus on:

1. **The relative merits of individual and group coaching.** Various writers suggest that group coaching is more powerful than individual coaching and critique individual coaching on the basis that it fails to position systemic factors at the heart of the coaching process. Schein (2003), Senge (2006) and Scharma (2007) all point to value of working with group's and team's microcosms of the organisational environment. However, individual coaching may still be the most appropriate intervention when the coachee is unlikely to consent to working in a group, or where the level of personal disclosure required may be inappropriate (Brown & Grant, 2009). Group and individual coaching therefore have their relative strengths and weaknesses that may steer the practitioner to choose one the other, or a combination of both (Cox, 2012).
2. **The extent to which a particular group intervention is likely to be process oriented.** Some group coaches attend to process and some don't. Coaches whose primary vocation is working with individuals may bring individual ways of working to the group format, sometimes with great effect. Other coaches bring a broad systemic perspective and an ability to work with process that offers different dimensions to the learning experience of the group.

The full version of this study includes a full list of references.

Notes on author

Paul Lawrence is a former member of WhyteCo's Sydney Guild now known as the W Coaching Group. Paul Lawrence teaches coaching at Sydney Business School (University of Wollongong) and is Director of the Centre for Coaching in Organisations (CCO).



Edited by Paul Lawrence and Ann Whyte.
Contact Paul at paul@ccorgs.com.au



If you, or someone you know, would like to be added to our distribution list, please email admin@wcoaching.com.au

W Coaching Group Pty Limited ABN 37 164 575 311

Suite 304, 15 Lime St Sydney NSW 2000 | T: +61 2 9299 2077 | E: admin@wcoaching.com.au | wcoaching.com.au