Module 1

Handout: Finding teams to practice with

A guide for the inexperienced team coach

Just as new 1-2-1 coaches typically cut their teeth on pro bono volunteer clients, new team coaches can also build their confidence and competence working pro bono for teams. They may do this by:

- Finding an experienced team coach to shadow and support
- Finding teams that can't afford team coaching and agreeing to experiment and learn together

The latter teams tend to fall into two main groups:

- Leadership teams and Boards of not-for-profits – charities and NGOs; schools; sports bodies etc
- Small business leadership teams – particularly start-ups

Practical ways to connect with these include:

- Networking through your existing clients and connections. Many of them will either be connected with senior levels in charities; or non-executive directors of small companies.
- Professional associations you are a member of. Here you have the advantage that the leadership teams will put more trust into someone, who understands their business.
- Associations representing sectors. For example, bodies for charities or charity chief executives; trade associations. These are always looking to add value to their members.
- Your local bank branch, accountants or legal firm. They will know a wide range of small businesses and other organisations locally and their relationship managers may be willing to establish connections for you.

Contracting with the pro bono client

It is important for both parties to recognise that this is a learning experience for each other as well as themselves. The contract should make it clear that:

- The coach is there to help the team achieve understanding about its internal and external dynamics; not to act as a consultant
- The team is responsible for its own decisions
- The team coach is receiving supervision and make seek confidential guidance from their supervisor and / or a more experienced team coach
- While there is no fee chargeable for the coaching, reasonable expenses, such as travel, will be covered by the client
- The assignment is for an agreed number of sessions; after which the client and the team coach may enter into a commercial arrangement
- Any individual coaching of team members will also be a commercial arrangement

Confidentiality issues in team coaching

Coaches working with teams or with individual clients within teams receive a great deal of information shared only between them and those individuals. The simple distinction below allows the coach to clarify what permissions they have to use that information.

- Private/Confidential
- Private that should be discussed publicly
- Public

Issues that are private or confidential fall into two categories: those that the individual prefers not to share and those that they feel unable to share. The former is driven by internally-generated motivations, such as being a generally private person; the latter by externally-generated motivations, such as the fear of speaking up that characterises environments of low psychological safety.

Issues that are currently private but should be public also fall into two categories: those that affect people individually and those that affect the team collectively. So, for example, someone's unwillingness to ask for help, versus the “elephant in the room” – something everyone knows is a problem but is reluctant to bring into the open.

Public issues are ones everyone is aware of and talks about. However, talk doesn’t always lead to action. The problem may be acknowledged but “too difficult to deal with”. Or the conversations may happen within sub-groups of the team (often in whinge sessions) but not with the team as a whole; or within the team but not with key stakeholders, whose cooperation is needed to resolve the issue.

The role of the team coach is different in each of these circumstances.

In the first situation (private/confidential), we can start by exploring the person’s thinking and motivations. When someone shares something deeply personal, they are usually responding to a sense that they can trust you. That trust comes from a mixture of the personal qualities they see in you, along with the authority that people instinctively place in a skilled professional. A question I often use is: “What has happened for you that makes it OK to talk about this painful issue now?” We might eventually also reach the question: “What benefit, if any, would there be, if other people understood this issue from your perspective?” Many times, we discover together that even a small amount of greater transparency can help the person feel less alone. Moreover, expanding the conversation to how the team might benefit from supporting the individual through the issue opens up a new perspective that strengthens collegiality.

In the second situation, we can build on the nature of the relationship between the individual and the team. Useful questions include: “What would it take for you to feel confident in asking for help?” “What would it take for you to approach a colleague and offer help?” “When does an issue for one person, become an issue for the team as a whole?” “What is it that everyone knows, but no-one voices?” “What would create the collective courage to address this issue openly?” “What are your personal responsibilities here and what are the collective responsibilities of the team?”

In the third situation, the blocker is not whether people will talk about the issue, but inability or reluctance to do anything about it. A key question here is: “If the conversations we are having about this aren’t leading to resolution, what conversations should we be having?” Also: “What is happening in the team’s systems that are preventing these conversations happening?

A phrase I use to describe these approaches is “progressive transparency”. By thinking of privacy and openness as a spectrum, both we as coaches and the team itself have multiple options about how we intervene.

The business case for team coaching

The three most common reasons for using team coaching are :

1. To improve some specific aspect of performance
    - Sales
    - Production
    - KPI's or OKR's
    - Budget optimization
    - Process improvement
    - Financial goals
    - Stockholders results
    - Reputation
2. To make things happen faster
    - Change management
    - Mergers/ Takeovers
    - New culture
    - Adaptation to new conditions
    - Role ownership
    - New teams
    - Project teams
3. To make things happen differently
    - Creating a coaching culture
    - Communication problems
    - Leadership direction
    - Hidden leaders
    - Trust and fix expectations