Module 1

Handout: Team coaching: A complex adaptive systems approach

The advent of standards for team coaching from professional bodies, such as EMCC and APECS (with others in development) is a sign that the coaching profession is taking team coaching seriously – as are the corporate purchasers of coaching services. This movement arises from the juxtaposition of several trends, among them:

- The recognition that the traditional focus on individual development and recognition is unhelpful in an environment, where performance depends increasingly on collective endeavour.

- The redefinition of the role of leader from one of command and control to enabler – creating the conditions where people can manage themselves.

- In a VUCA world, the necessity to react to change with greater alacrity.

- Growing debate about the nature of "performance" – in particular, the recognition that an improvement in valued outputs from one part of the system may have deleterious effects on other parts of the system. As the fundamental structures within organisations, teams at all levels in an organization are where awareness of wider systems must begin – with those systems encompassing the organization overall, the key stakeholders and the wider eco-system.

We read much about the need for systemic thinking in business and in coaching (e.g Hawkins, 2014) . The difference between linear and systemic thinking is neatly summed up in the table below.

Linear v systemic thinking

Linear	Systemic
Fix the problem	Understand the context
Maintain control	Enable, liberate, empower
Discreet solutions	Interconnected solutions
Predicted outcomes	Emergent and evolving outcomes
Static processes and procedures	Evolving processes
Hierarchical communication	Unbounded communication
Seeking certainty	Living with uncertainty

Systemic thinking in a team context requires the team to be aware both of its own, internal systems (how they work together), but also of the external systems of their stakeholders and the boundary-crossing systems that relate to both the team and its stakeholders. Complex, adaptive systems thinking takes this approach further still, by incorporating the interdependencies between all the systems that affect or are influenced by the team. Take a simple example. A linear approach to planning future investment and resource allocation would assume that the team will continue to do what it has done thus far, with appropriate adjustments for predicted market change and new technology – and project into the future. A systemic approach would start in the future with an exploration of what the stakeholders, which the team services, will require of it. A complex, adaptive systems approach will take the additional perspective of mapping the future potential interactions between stakeholders and the potential to influence the whole system of systems. A key question is "What is our potential role in helping the entire system of stakeholders create greater collective value?"

An underlying truism here is that a collection of high performing individuals do not necessarily make a high performing team; a collection of high performing teams do not make a high preforming organization; and a collection of high performing organizations so not necessarily add value to the societies they inhabit.

The literature on teams tends to focus either on causes of dysfunction (e.g. Lencioni, 2002) or on traits observed in "high performing teams". In both cases, the evidence for cause and effect is generally poor and one reason for this may be that it represents linear thinking – if you cure this problem in a team or develop those behaviours, it will become more successful.

One of the core principles of complex, adaptive systems is that every part of the system influences every other part. So how can we represent the multiple elements of the team system in a way that allows the team to change the system as a whole, rather than single elements? The result of 20 years' study, extensive literature searches and focus group research in one of the world's top five technology companies was the refinement of relatively simple factors that interact with each other to influence every aspect of a team's functioning both internally and with its external environment. Like fractals or the patterns that emerge in a kaleidoscope, they are multi-dimensionally interdependent. (Clutterbuck, 2020)

These elements are:

- Purpose and motivation
- Externally facing processes
- Relationships
- Internally facing processes
- Learning processes
- Leadership processes

Purpose and motivation

Purpose is about what the team is there to do. It is the mission in Hawkins' commissioning. The team purpose may be a subset of a wider organisational purpose or one generated from within. From purpose flows the collective energy that makes "the whole greater than the sum of the parts". Indicators include clarity of shared vision, goals and priorities.

External processes, systems and structures

These are about how the team interrelates with its multiple stakeholders – customers, suppliers, shareholders, other teams within the organisation, more senior levels of management and so on. Indicators include reputation, performance against targets, environmental awareness (evolving markets, technology, competition etc). They also cover the team's access to resources, such as information and finance.

Relationships

These are about how people work together – whether they enjoy each other's company, respect each other's ability, are honest towards each other and so on. Indicators include the level of psychological safety.

Internal processes, systems and structures

This is the internal mirror to the external and includes how the team manages workflow, supports each other, and maintains high quality of communication (both task-related and affective). Indicators include role clarity and decision-making quality.

Learning

This relates to the team's ability to respond to its changing environment and maintain continuous improvement and growth. Indicators include whether it is ahead or behind the curve in terms of change in its environment and the clarity and relevance of members' learning objectives.

Leadership

Not to be confused with "being a leader", leadership is a role that can be exercised by any or all of the team members, depending on circumstance. One study identifies 15 functions of leadership (Morgeson et al, 2009). In many workshops with teams and with coaches, only two of these functions are not readily distributable within the team.

The diagram below illustrates ways in which these six interact to affect team performance (green) and dysfunction (red). The yellow boxes indicate the moderating effect of leadership qualities and behaviours (LQB).

PERILL: The interacting and interdependent determinants of team performance and dysfunction

LQB	Purpose & Motivation	Externally facing processes	Relationships	Internally facing processes	Learning
Purpose & Motivation	LQB	Alignment of values between the team and its key stakeholders	Working enthusiastically together towards shared goals	Clarity of priorities; putting collective priorities before personal	Actively seeking ways to leverage and expand team strengths
Externally facing processes	Stakeholders unclear what you stand for	LQB	Strong collaborative relationships with stakeholders	Rapid and effective response to quality issues	Rapid product and service innovation
Relationships	People pursue their own agendas	Conflict with stakeholders; disrespect for stakeholders	LQB	High level of psychological safety leads to constant questioning of what we do	People take active responsibility for supporting each other's development
Internally facing processes	Duplication and waste of effort	Quality issues not acknowledged or addressed	People avoid "interfering" in each other's territory. Large "elephants in the room".	LQB	Culture of continuous process improvement
Learning	Learning focused on the individual not the collective	Slow to innovate	People "hoard" knowledge and expertise	Resistance to change	LQB

The descriptions in the boxes are examples of the positive and negative outcomes that arise as a result of interactions between elements. For example, if the team is not aligned about its purpose, then it will be less able to share this with its key stakeholders, including those who provide it with the necessary resources to do the job. If these resources are not forthcoming, there may be competition in the team for the resources that are available. This in turn is likely to lead to conflict and sub-optimal working processes. Strong leadership can bring about positive change not by addressing each issue separately, but by engaging the whole team (and its stakeholders) in changing the system.

Bibliography

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