

Module 1

Handout: Team coaching vs other types of intervention

The context of team coaching is significantly different from that of one-to-one coaching. Among the principal differences are:

- **Confidentiality:** even with a high degree of psychological safety, team members may be reluctant to disclose to a group of colleagues, or to admit weaknesses to their boss.
- **Pace of thinking and deciding:** some members of the team may reach a conclusion faster than others. Where the coach in a one-to-one relationship can adjust pace to the speed of the coachee's mental processing, the team coach needs to be able to hold the attention and interest of the vanguard, while ensuring the rear-guard are able to catch up at their own pace.
- **Scope of topic:** team coaching can only deal effectively with issues in which all the team members have a stake. Sometimes this involves helping team members recognize the mutual benefits and value of supporting a colleague.
- **Building trust within the coaching relationship:** while team members will vary in the level of trust they place in the coach, progress can normally only be made when the team as a whole is ready to trust both the coach and the process. And, of course, trust between team members is essential for both learning and performance.
- **While individuals may be internally conflicted** (for example, in applying opposing values), teams may have conflict both within and between members.

Consider:

- What other issues can you identify, from your experience, that a team coach or a coach supporting a leader with their team would be likely to encounter?
- What resultant challenges do you see for a team coach?

Facilitation vs team coaching

The Association of Facilitators' description of team facilitation has many overlaps with team coaching and the experienced team coaches I have interviewed and shared notes with all talk about using facilitation skills within their portfolio of approaches. There are, however, significant differences between team coaching and facilitation (although these are not universally agreed). In particular:

- The focus of facilitation is to solve a specific, current or near future problem; team coaching aims to build the team's capability to solve its own problems
- Facilitation places greater emphasis on process; team coaching on generating questions that stimulate insight
- The facilitator steers (manages) the conversation; the team coach assists the team to manage the conversation
- Facilitation typically aims to achieve a solution within the session; coaching (when done well) lays down the foundations, from which the team can find its own solutions in its own time.

What both have in common is the recognition that the team needs to step outside its normal routines and perspectives to achieve significant change. Both facilitators and coaches bring models, tools and techniques that allow structured conversations that get much deeper into issues than the normal exchanges of information that typify team meetings. And both follow the pattern of first creating awareness, then deciding what you want to do about that new knowledge.

Team coaching vs team building

Attribute	Team Coaching	Team Building
Purpose	Effectiveness of task delivery and collaborative behaviors	Improving collaborative behavior
Focus	Internal and external	Primarily internal
Learning process	Activities related to the work task	Activities unrelated to the work task
Reflective practice	How do we get things done together? How do we learn together?	How do we understand ourselves and each other? How do we get on together?
Role focus	Task roles and learning roles in the team	Task roles in the team
Learning conversation	“Open dialogue” – structure generated from within	“Directed dialogue” -structure emerges both from within and from a facilitator’s observations
Typical time horizon	Over the period of a task or growth phase of the team – multiple small interventions	Fewer (often one) more intensive intervention over a few days
Outcomes	Applying appreciation and valuing of each other’s contribution to work tasks	Appreciation and valuing of each other’s contribution

When not to coach a team

Just as happened with coaching individuals, as team coaching becomes more mainstream, the assumption emerges that it is some kind of cure-all for team problems. Of course it's not, but team coaches increasingly bring to supervision issues relating to how they manage client team and sponsor expectations about what can and can't be delivered.

It all starts with getting to know the team and its situation before contracting with them. Experienced team coaches know the danger signs to look for and when they should say no to an assignment. Here are some of those signs:

1. When there is no compelling rationale for being a team – for example, when members of a group have little interdependence
2. When it is too large to be a real team – above eight, it will become harder to gel as a team; above 12, social loafing and other dynamics will be a major impediment to performance
3. When only the leader wants team coaching to happen
4. When the team leader is weak – for example, unable to deal with dissension. In such circumstances, the team coach can easily find themselves in the role of surrogate leader
5. When the team expects you to rescue them, or for you to find the solutions to their problems instead of working things out themselves. If they won't take responsibility for the process or the outcomes, you are liable to become the scapegoat when things don't work out
6. When the team has no prospect of acquiring the resources it needs to succeed
7. When you are a stakeholder in the team – any real or potential conflict of interest can undermine your effectiveness
8. When you have close relationships with some members of the team, but not with others
9. When the team's problems are pathological – deeply unhealthy teams will find it impossible to engage with the team coaching process.

The initial scoping interviews with members of the team provide the opportunity to identify potential red flags. Interviews with key stakeholders and observers of the team provide another, valuable perspective.

If you find a red flag, explore your concerns first with the team leader and the assignment sponsor. If they are not prepared to acknowledge the issue(s) and work with you on them before the formal coaching begins, then walk away. If they will not let you take the issue to the rest of the team, individually or collectively, walk away. If you feel that the complexity of the problem is beyond your competence, walk away. In each case, if you explain clearly the reasons for your concern, you are likely to emerge with greater respect and self-respect than if you take on an assignment that has failure built-in!