Mapping the dynamics of team coaching

Dr Alison Hodge

A new book edited by Jo Birch and Peter Welch, *Coaching Supervision: Advancing Practice, Changing Landscapes*, makes it clear that we have an ever-increasing awareness of the complexity of the practice of supervision. The book's chapters (including my own, written with David Clutterbuck) uncover the complexity and uncertainty of what can emerge during any supervision session, when supervisor and supervisee delve into what may be happening for themselves and their clients. This complexity is compounded by the VUCA conditions (volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous) that now appear to be the norm, especially in organisations.

Following a scoping research study we conducted in 2017, David Clutterbuck and I continued our inquiry to identify the issues that arise in team coaching, and out of this wrote our chapter, 'Guidelines for team coaching supervision'. Based on the findings from this online global survey, several key elements emerged that form the basis for effective team coaching. These include:

- goal, clarity and purpose
- contracting
- multi-stakeholder engagement
- group and team learning
- group development

- impact of the wider organizational system
- interpersonal dynamics within the team, and between team members and coach

What has become evident to both team coaches and supervisors alike is that the practice of team coaching presents challenges that may be significantly more demanding and complex than those which emerge in one-to-one executive coaching. Team coaches readily acknowledge their need and appreciation for supervision of their practice in this arena.

Following our investigation, I wanted to find some way of representing the multiple layers team coaches need to be aware of and manage during an assignment. I also sought to provide a framework or container for the supervisor and supervisee. Out of this, I developed a map entitled, 'Factors to consider in team coaching' (see next page), which is also reproduced in the book. The map aims to demonstrate the many diverse elements the practitioner may need to attend to during an assignment.

What is difficult to capture and communicate in a static, two-dimensional map is the complexity, fluidity and at times chaos of how the factors interconnect and interact in a living, relational process. This is resonant with what Nora Bateson describes as 'alive inbetweenness' in liminal leadership.
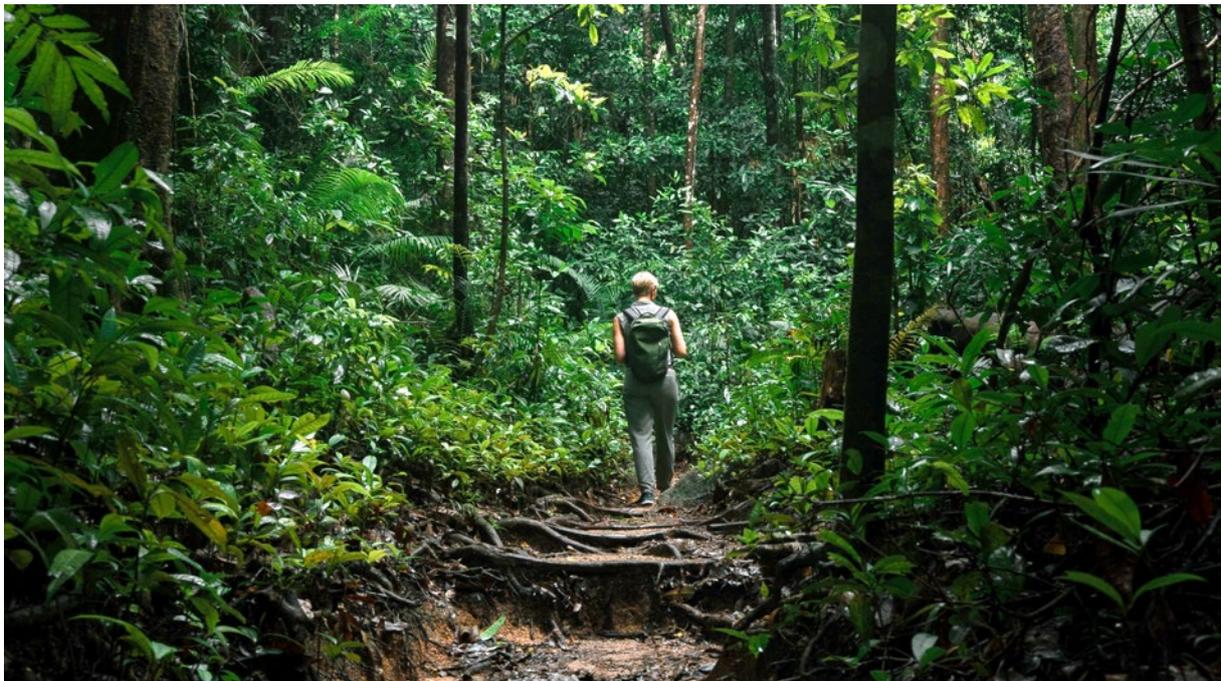
I invite the reader to imagine this map as if the factors are like the living system of the rainforest, where plants, trees, animals and insects all cohabit, interact and share the space. The whole system is interconnected, interdependent, in constant motion, and never still. Imagine then the team coach, or coaches, together with their supervisor, starting to explore this forest of relationships, including the dynamics of all the parts of the system, and the impact they have on each other.

Factors to consider in team coaching
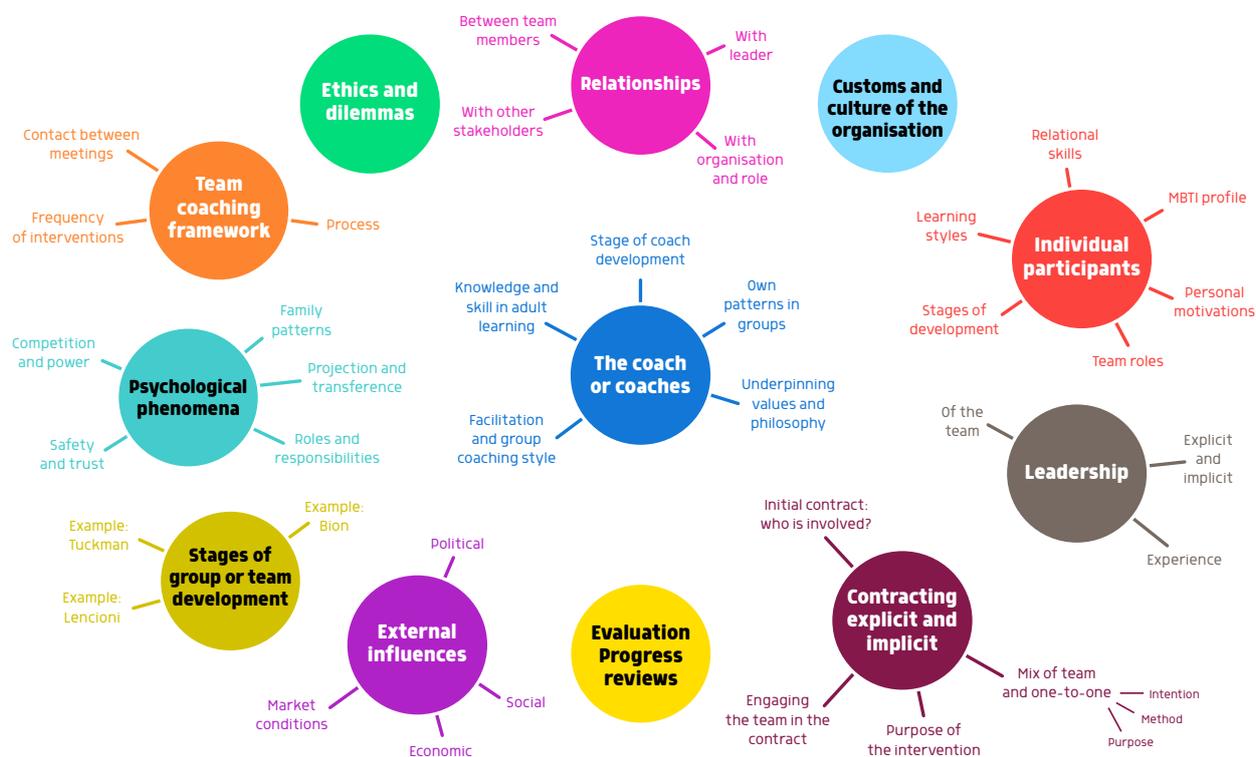
For a larger version of this map, see page 7

Each perspective within the overall framework includes a number of elements:

Individual participants – Here the coach may be sensitive to the individual members of the team, with their personality preferences, their behavioural patterns and their approach to learning. It is also important to notice individuals' personal motivation and preferred aptitude and methods of participating in the team – if indeed they actually want to be a member of the team.

Leadership – There is often an ostensible leader (by title or function) whose effectiveness depends on their experience and understanding of their role and responsibilities. Whether they also hold the psychological leadership of the team is sometimes doubtful, and may only show up when everyone comes together.

Contracting, explicit and implicit – From our study, it became clear that there is a perpetual and recurring need for the coach/es to contract and re-contract at every stage of the assignment. While practical details may appear straightforward, individual needs, assumptions and expectations may be in constant flux. This in turn impacts on the coach's engagement with and commitment to the team coaching. The coach may also attend to how individual members contract with each other and the leader.

Stages of group or team development – Many readers will be familiar with Tuckman's (1965) 'forming, storming, norming, performing' model of team development. What becomes clear in team coaching assignments is that the group, as it evolves into a team – and possibly into a high-performing team – does not flow in a straight trajectory of 'improvement' towards effectiveness. The team members may change, and their individual circumstances and relationships may also change. Team coach/es need to be alert to this evolving and sometimes bumpy progression.

Psychological phenomena – These elements are both fascinating and complex. Each participant comes to the group/team with a personal history of being in previous groups. Either consciously or unconsciously, they may associate their experience in the team with that of their family of origin, sibling and parental relationships, or former school experiences, and may thus repeat learned behaviours and reactions that are well embedded. Here too each participant will bring their personal needs for power or control, and the coach/es need to consider what impact authority and competition may be playing in how team members engage with each other. Contributing to creating the safety and trust that will enable the participants to learn and grow together is a significant task for the team coach/es.

Relationships – Closely linked with the psychological phenomena that occur (often at an unconscious level) are the multiple relationships not only with and between team members, but also with other stakeholders outside the team, and their relationship with the organisation itself.

Customs and culture of the organisation – Another way of informing what might be happening during an assignment is to explore the customs and culture that may form the bedrock on which the work takes place. The team coach/es need to be alert to assumptions and patterns that 'this is how we do things around here', and which make learning new ways of working as a team challenging.

External influences – At any given time during an assignment, the team and the coach/es cannot predict what may be happening in the wider context in which the work is happening. Political, economic and social conditions are in constant flux, and any of these influences are outside the control of the coach/es, and yet may have a huge impact on the team's capacity to engage in the coaching and their overall intentions.

Ethical issues and dilemmas – These may arise during any individual or team coaching assignment and the team coach/es benefit hugely from taking these to regular supervision, where they can explore what may be arising in the safety of 'not knowing' to gain clarity.

Evaluation and progress reviews – Again, fundamental to a team coaching assignment and integral to the contracting process is determining and agreeing how each stakeholder, and the team as a whole, will review and evaluate the work. In supervision, team coaches

often share their fears or frustrations with the speed of progress and change in the team. They are then able, in supervision, to consider the team's expectations for what change is realistic, and resist the urge to take full responsibility for reaching the team's collective outcomes.

There are many elements we might attend to, but the challenge for team coaches and supervisors is where to focus our attention within one supervision session, or over the period of an assignment. However, I have deliberately placed the coach/es at the centre of the map. Increasingly, because of the complexity of the work, coaches are working as a mini-team themselves, where they share the task and the process. If, as supervisor, we hold the coach/es at the centre of the work, we can avoid the risk of getting overly involved in the team coaching itself.

This article is just a preview of what David Clutterbuck and I have written in the chapter, and a preview of the whole book, too. The book offers a rich cornucopia of diverse perspectives on the changing landscape of coaching supervision, and David and I were delighted to contribute our research findings to it.

If you would like to explore the practice of team coaching supervision, with all its complexities (and machinations!), please get in touch via my website:

Contact: alisonhodge.com

About the book and chapter

Birch, Jo & Welch, Peter, Eds (2019) *Coaching Supervision: Advancing Practice, Changing Landscapes*, Routledge, Abingdon

Hodge, Alison & Clutterbuck, David (2019) 'Guidelines for team coach supervision' in Birch & Welch (2019), Chapter 10, pp. 161-175

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Picture credits

Photo of group discussion by You X Ventures on Unsplash.com

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Factors to consider in team coaching

Individual participants
- MBTI profile
- Personal motivations
- Team roles
- Relational skills
- Learning styles
- Stages of development

Leadership
- Explicit and implicit
- Experience
- Of the team

Customs and culture of the organisation

Contracting explicit and implicit
- Mix of team and one-to-one
  - Intention
  - Method
  - Purpose
- Purpose of the intervention
- Engaging the team in the contract
- Initial contract: who is involved?

Relationships
- With leader
- With organisation and role
- Between team members
- With other stakeholders

The coach or coaches
- Own patterns in groups
- Underpinning values and philosophy
- Stage of coach development
- Knowledge and skill in adult learning
- Facilitation and group coaching style

Evaluation Progress reviews

External influences
- Social
- Economic
- Political
- Market conditions

Ethics and dilemmas

Team coaching framework
- Process
- Contact between meetings
- Frequency of interventions

Psychological phenomena
- Family patterns
- Projection and transference
- Roles and responsibilities
- Competition and power
- Safety and trust

Stages of group or team development
- Example: Bion
- Example: Tuckman
- Example: Lencioni

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