

# A CONVERSATION AROUND TEAM COACHING – IS IT REALLY “NEW”?

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## INTRODUCTION

As a coaching supervisor, I am increasingly finding that clients are bringing not only their one to one coaching practice to our sessions, but also their team interventions. The coaches refer to these projects as “team coaching” but from closer scrutiny, there seem to be significant similarities with what have often previously been called “team building”, “team development”, “team facilitation”, “an OD initiative” or something similar.

As yet, there is a paucity of research-based evidence and literature to inform our understanding and appreciation of the complex range of skills required to facilitate this fascinating, challenging and apparently *new* practice for executive coaches. At the same time, we now have a fine platform for reference in the APECS Team Coaching Accreditation Criteria and Guidelines, co-developed by member practitioners who certainly appeared to model the practice of team coaching to achieve the current result (<http://apecs.org/MembershipCategories.aspx>).

## MY BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE

Before exploring the issues and themes that arise in supervision, let me share some aspects of my own background that inspire me to add to the dialogue around team coaching. Aside from the many years’ experience working with teams throughout my career as a line manager, trainer, facilitator and group supervisor, I also have extensive experience of executive coaching and facilitating individual change.

At the same time, I find myself drawing from a broad range of learning and experience beyond pure coaching as my clients and I explore and reflect on their team coaching assignments.

I spent two years during my MSc in Change Agent Skills (2000) sitting in group process and facilitating group process either in the large student group or in action learning sets. From this period, I am aware that my approach is underpinned by theory from psychotherapy (individual, group and family), OD, adult learning, process consulting and group facilitation. Then there are the

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many hours over the eight years I spent in group therapy where I discovered the impact groups have on me and the impact I may have on others. As I learned how engage with this, I discovered and had to confront my own demons that trigger how I may react in both individual and group settings.

My awareness and insight has developed further during the more recent phase of my doctoral journey (2008-2014) when, with two action research groups of executive coaches and coach supervisors, we explored participants' experience of what goes on in coaching supervision (Hodge 2014). One of the most significant findings here was the importance of the relationship between coach and supervisor (both individual and group) that enables coaches to learn to share themselves and how this can inform and impact on their client work.

Given this context, let me now return to what arises in supervision, and here I generalise in the interests of anonymity and confidentiality for my clients.

## EXPLORING ISSUES AND THEMES IN SUPERVISION

Currently, "team coaching" initiatives often involve the coach being invited to work with a (senior) management team either because the team is apparently not as effective or productive as the CEO (who may or may not assume they are the sponsor) would like/hope, and/or the organisation is perhaps not achieving the desired results. The term "dysfunctional relationships" often creeps into their and our dialogue. For the sake of this paper, I'm not entering a discussion about definitions of what constitutes a team and what constitutes a group, as this element seldom arises during supervision.

The purpose or intention of these interventions is frequently unclear either with or between the sponsor and the coach, and indeed with the team members also, as they may have slipped into accepting this catch-all phrase of "team coaching" with neither party wishing to appear ignorant of or wishing to probe what this "team coaching" activity actually is and will involve. Arguably this is one of the most vital elements in the whole engagement, as it sets the scene and it may be here where coach and client have the discussion around teams and groups.

However, once the project starts, here are some further themes that arise in supervision:

- The messiness, the complexity, the unpredictability of the project, particularly the relationships within the team/group and/or the relationship between team members, the sponsor (usually CEO) and then the relationships with the coach
- The nominated team's individual and collective commitment and capacity to engage with the declared and/or intended changes
- Finding the delicate balance between creating the appropriate conditions that enable personal disclosure and at the same time, engaging in such a way that the client/s can see results from the intervention and changes for the better over time
- The power of the wider systems within which the team is working (e.g. large organisations, global locations, market sectors, organizational cultures) that may inhibit or sabotage the changes being sought for the participating team
- The coach and/or the participants' doubts around whether they are making any progress at all either during or between "coaching" sessions.

- The subsequent sense of impotence and frustration the coach holds as they attempt to affect the team or contribute and add value to the group and the work
- The impact this work is having on the coach both personally and professionally

Bearing these themes in mind, the questions I am holding are:

- What is it about “team coaching” that may be *new* or different from OD, process consultation and group facilitation?
- What knowledge and skills do executive coaches need to adapt and transfer from their foundation of one to one executive coaching? What else do they need?
- What part can supervision play to support team coaches in this complex work?

From the issues that we explore in supervision, it is clear to me that the coach needs an extensive range of knowledge and skills, particularly in co-creating and facilitating multiple relationships in a group setting. In addition, they also need significant self awareness that includes their personal patterns of behaviour and how they themselves show up in groups, as well as the impact that groups have on them personally. They must also have an appreciation of the context in which the work is taking place.

Again based on my own experience and learning, one of the most vital and fundamental ingredients for this work to be effective is how we create what I describe as “core conditions”. As yet, there is little in the team coaching literature about how the coach engages in and co-creates the set up, the contracting and the re-contracting with each and all members of the client group. It is here that the coach needs to be able to build the safety and trust that I believe is fundamental for team participants to learn to be vulnerable and to share more of themselves. The coach’s capacity to model the behaviours and ways of being can contribute significantly to the group’s sense of safety, engagement and participation. This in turn enables team members to build better relationships with each other, engaging in generative dialogues that enable them to achieve the task.

## WHAT NEXT

At the risk of being provocative, I am wondering whether we have been seduced into accepting that “team coaching” is *new*, at the apparent risk of dismissing or ignoring the wealth of knowledge and wisdom already developed and established in the fields of executive coaching, OD, process consulting, organisational change, adult learning and group facilitation, and that we already have many of the ingredients and skills and we are now baking a new cake (see suggested reading at the end of the paper). Another way of looking at this might be that “team coaching” (as executive coaching before it) is actually a hybrid of all the aforementioned domains.

What has become clear to me is that there are some key differences from what may seem to be the relatively straightforward phenomena that arise in one to one coaching, while at the same time, many of the interpersonal skills are transferable.

Given the demands of this work, I would propose that as team coaches, we need to have a team or group context for our own development. So what kind of group would be best? Options might include: group therapy, action learning sets, group analysis or group supervision. Whatever we choose to engage with here, it’s helpful to have a group that has as its goal to help us take up our leadership role effectively when acting as team coach/facilitator. We need a context that enables us

to explore what happens to us and explore our own process in a group, as well as the complexity and messiness that may be emerging in the client's process. These needs are significantly different from one to one supervision or therapy.

In conclusion, perhaps calling what is becoming accepted as “team coaching” – Hawkins (2011/12), Clutterbuck (2007), Thornton (2012) – invites us to acknowledge and capture the diverse range of skills, processes and personal awareness that the coach can and needs to draw on to enable/facilitate whatever the changes the client group is seeking.

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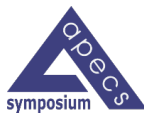
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