



Mapping the complex territory of team coaching and supervision

A MAP FOR COACHES AND SUPERVISORS
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REVISED AUGUST 2020

In a number of recent dialogues with colleagues during the EMCC GPS Global Summit series, and again at a workshop at the EMCC Global Virtual Conference in June 2020, what is increasingly evident is the growing awareness of the complexity and uncertainty of what goes on in the practice of team coaching and thus in turn, supervising team coaching. Equally, based on what coaches are bringing to our supervision sessions, as supervisor and supervisee we are delving into a hugely diverse range of factors and phenomena that may be happening for the team coach and their clients.

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. 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

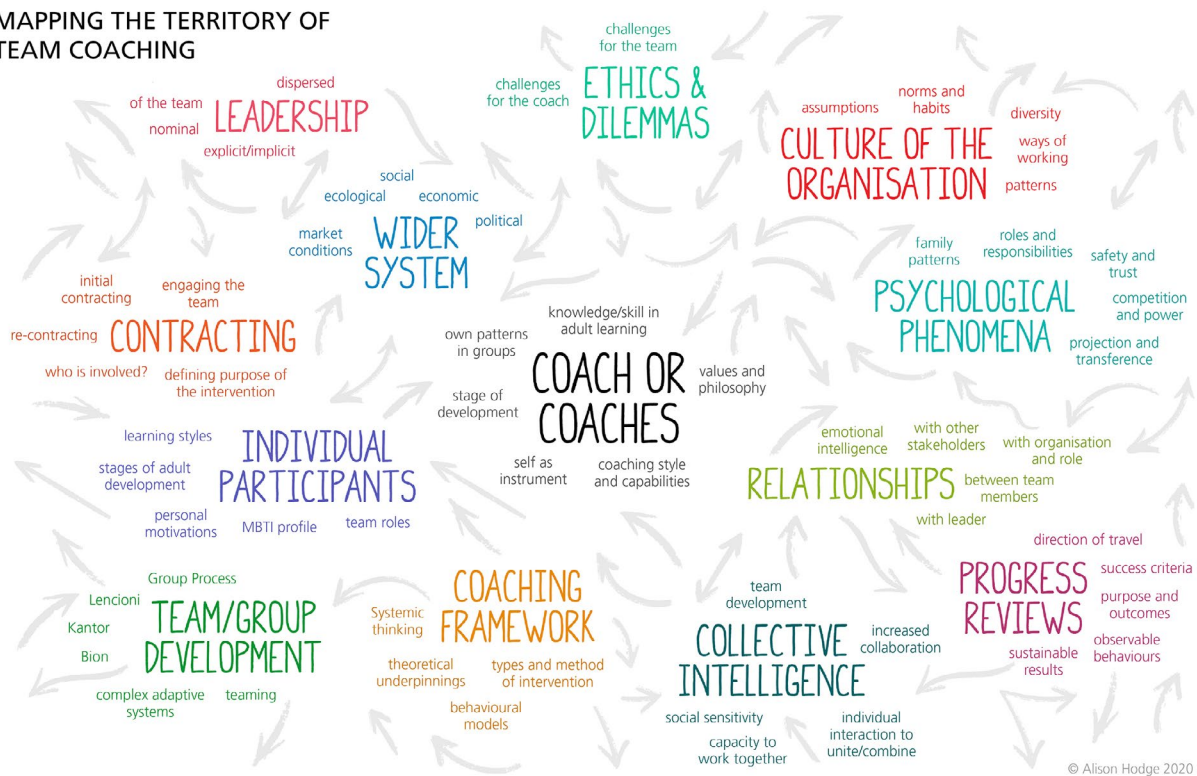
What has become evident to both team coaches and supervisors alike is that the practice of team coaching presents challenges that may be significantly more demanding and complex than those which emerge in one-to-one executive coaching. Team coaches readily acknowledge their need and appreciation for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

Following our investigation, I wanted to find some way of representing the multiple layers that 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.

After developing [an initial map](#), in May this year I engaged in a virtual dialogue session through EMCC Global for team coaches, trainers and supervisors of team coaching. Our intention was to explore the relevance and usefulness of my map in representing the territory and dynamics involved in team coaching. The session was consciously presented as a dialogue, rather than a webinar, as I wanted a genuine forum to engage with people working in the field that would contribute to and advance our practice in this rapidly emerging practice.

Based on feedback from these conversations, I have now developed a new map entitled, 'Mapping the Territory of Team Coaching'. The map aims to represent visually the territory, with its many factors and elements, to which team coaches and supervisors need to attend during an assignment. The result of these dialogues is captured and represented in the following map.

MAPPING THE TERRITORY OF TEAM COACHING



For a larger version of this map, see page 8

I invite the reader to imagine the territory and all its factors being like the living system of the forest, where plants, trees, insects, fungi and animals all co-exist and interact in this shared space. All these factors and elements are interconnected, interdependent and in constant motion. 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 interact in a living, relational process. This is resonant with what Nora Bateson describes with her concept of 'warm data' (Bateson 2018).

With these thoughts in mind, imagine then the team coach, or coaches, together with their supervisor, starting to explore each of the factors in their own right, then in their inter-relationships and the impact they are having on each other. Each factor within the overall territory includes a number of elements that may be considered and that I now discuss. I have also discussed these areas in a [video with David Clutterbuck](#).

The coach/coaches at the centre – I have intentionally placed the coach/es at the centre of the map so the supervisor can avoid the risk or temptation of getting overly involved in the team coaching itself. Equally, it invites the coach to consider what part they are playing in the process and how the territory is impacting on them personally. This placement is by no means arbitrary. Another option could be to take the coach out of the map, which may provide coach and supervisor an opportunity to stand back from the territory and notice what factors may be taking precedence or attracting attention at any one time.

However, some of the questions the coach brings to supervision include: how do they manage their own anxiety or sense of control in a system that seems uncontrollable, unpredictable, and in constant change? Where might the coach place their attention and energy and with whom among the participants? How does the coach notice their own patterns and preferences of being in groups, and how does this impact on their capacity to sit with the participants? What does the coach need to be constantly mindful of in terms of their roles and responsibilities alongside those the client projects or expects of them?

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. Issues around diversity and inclusion often emerge as significant here. The coach needs to bring curiosity, creativity and compassion to the individual members 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 (some examples) – 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 and groups – 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 (Kantor 2012, Thornton 2016).

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. Norms, habits, team structures, mutual responsibility for outcomes, collaboration, and embracing diversity are just some of the contextual factors that may impact on the outcome.

Collective intelligence – Shared sense-making, and emergent collective knowledge may contribute significantly to the group’s performance and individuals’ capacity and ability to notice and engage with other group members and how they interact.

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.

Team coaching framework – There is currently no single, definitive, seminal model of team coaching. At the same time, team coaches are increasingly expected to be able to demonstrate their understanding of the field and their understanding of and capacity to facilitate in the realms of adult learning, adult development, team learning and team development.

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. For example, questions may arise around whether to focus exclusively on coaching the team all together, or also working with members individually (including the leader), and how to manage those boundaries effectively.

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 slow speed of progress and change in the team. They might also express their own fears around their potency or efficacy when the client team may not appear to meet agreed outcomes. The coach needs to manage this for themselves and with their client and explore what is realistic. It is very tempting for the coach to take full responsibility for reaching the team’s collective outcomes.

In concluding this review of the territory of team coaching, readers may find the map a useful guide or checklist for reviewing their work. I do not want to call this a model with the possible connotation that a model can sometimes be seen as linear (and/or static). At the same time, it would be unrealistic to work our way around the map methodically and address each factor in sequence. What I hope is self-evident is that no one factor is all-important at any given moment. Rather, all the factors may be seen to inform each other in a process that is in constant motion.

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

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Reading list

[Resources for group facilitation and supervision, team coaching and team coaching supervision](#)

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