



The state of team coaching in Aotearoa

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September 2025

The All Blacks invest heavily in coaching. Without it, players risk losing structure, collapsing scrums, conceding penalties, receiving red cards, getting injured more often, clashing with teammates under pressure, spending more time in the sin bin, and ultimately losing games. Instead, a deliberate investment in team coaching has created one of the highest-performing sports teams in the world!

High-performing teams like the All Blacks understand that success is not about individual talent or effort – it is about shared direction, making the most of each player's unique strengths, trying different positions and plays, building trust and connection, collaborating, supporting one another, understanding the competition, committing to practice, developing muscle memory and resilience, and learning together.

We fully embrace sports coaches in Aotearoa – but when it comes to investing in teams within organisations, we are not even near the try line let alone converting.

What are we missing? Why is Aotearoa lagging behind the rest of the world when it comes to investing in organisations greatest assets – their teams?

What is team coaching?

In an organisational context, team coaching involves a coach working with a collective as if they are a single intertwined entity – similar to coaching a rugby team. While individual training and learning takes place, the real energy comes from working together. In contrast, one-to-one coaching, is like tennis coaching - focusing on one person.

The main difference between one-to-one and team coaching is the level of complexity and the systemic nature of the work. Each member of a team is: connected with every other member, multiple sub-groups within the team, and with individuals and teams across the wider organisation. Add in external stakeholders, and a complex web of interactions emerges. These connections, and resulting dynamics, are what team coaching focuses on.

In practice it is a combination of many disciplines including: high performance sport, strategic planning, consultancy, one-to-one coaching, organisational psychology, family systems, change management and more.

Team coaching is not the same as facilitation. Facilitation typically follows a structured process, with clear agendas and defined outcomes in mind. Team coaching is more fluid and emergent. Content adapts with what is happening in the moment, responding to the team's needs, energy, and priorities. While facilitation guides a team toward a pre-determined goal, coaching focuses on helping the team notice patterns, explore options, take ownership, and embed outcomes that matter most to them. Ultimately learning to coach themselves.

A formal definition of team coaching describes it as an opportunity for a team to “experience how to learn together through honest dialogue and consistent reflection to enhance themselves and their system” (Clutterbuck et al., 2019).

It is also important to note that team coaching is not a one-off team-building exercise. To embed lasting change, time and energy must be invested. A typical programme might run for six months or more, and often includes formal team coaching sessions, day-to-day collaboration, and individual coaching for both the leader and members.

Why focus on teams?

In her book *Teaming*, Amy Edmondson (2013) argues that organisations thrive or fail based on how well small groups within them work collectively. A study by Wiley in 2020 also found that 76% of us work in two or more teams, and 73% of us work in more than one type of team (departmental, project, cross-functional, etc).

We know most work in organisations happens in collectives, and when connections between people are strong, these collectives have the potential to be more effective than individuals alone – As Aristotle (1984) says “The whole (can be) greater than the sum of its parts.” The opposite is also true - if connections are weak or dysfunctional, the team may perform less effectively than individuals would on their own.

More recently Hawkins (2021) argues that teamwork is critical in our current complex and uncertain environment “No leader can any longer meet the demands placed on them by themselves... Teams have so much more potential to rise to the current and future challenges.”

Many organisations invest in individual development and one-to-one coaching. While one-to-one coaching can be extremely beneficial, even the most highly experienced and systemically aware coaches are limited by this approach, as they can only work with one person at a time. This approach overlooks a key reality - no one works in isolation.

Wageman et al (2008) take this further by saying, “Individual coaching can help executives become better leaders in their own right, but the team does not necessarily improve. Team development is not an additive function of individuals becoming team players, but rather an entirely different capability.”

We know teams matter. By shifting focus from individuals to teams as a whole, organisations open up new possibilities for performance, learning, and resilience, and that is where team coaching comes in.

What is happening globally?

Around the world, organisations have turned to team coaching as part of their development toolkit, alongside training, facilitation, and one-to-one coaching. The choice of intervention depends on the context and the type of change being pursued.

In parallel, thousands of one-to-one coaches have expanded their skill sets through formal training, with numerous team coaching schools - and even some tertiary institutions, particularly in the United Kingdom - offering qualifications. Graduates of these programs include coaches based in Aotearoa.

Over the past five years, the leading global coaching bodies - International Coaching Federation, European Mentoring and Coaching Council, Association for Coaching, and the International Coaching Community - have all developed formal team coaching competencies and professional accreditations. The accreditation process is rigorous, requiring candidates to meet high standards in study, practical experience, examinations, and supervision.

Thanks to these advances, team coaching has become firmly established worldwide.

What is happening in Aotearoa?

Why does this trend seem to have bypassed Aotearoa—a country normally known for early adoption and world-class innovation?

The remainder of this article explores that question. To shape it, I invited 20 colleagues from across Aotearoa – human resource specialists, consultants, practising team coaches, and thought leaders - to share their perspectives. What follows are the five questions I posed, a selection of their responses, and my own reflections.

1. *Is team coaching understood here?*

“No, I don’t think is well-known or understood. I have worked to build coaching capability in leaders across multiple sectors since for a long time and have seen faces glaze over at the concept of coaching more than one person at a time.”

“Most people in New Zealand still tend to conflate team coaching with a one-off workshop or team-building day. But team coaching, like coaching in sport, is not a one-off event — it’s a structured, ongoing process.”

“When it comes to professional skills, large and medium organisations focus on their high value employees, with the hope that the impact trickles to the teams that they manage. Coaching the individuals in the team is considered to be the manager’s role – the same with team coaching. (i.e. collective is more than sum of parts is not well understood).”

“I don’t feel team coaching is widely understood... In my experience it is only once you are on the journey that clients start to appreciate and understand the difference to other training interventions.”

“Understanding is patchy. Many still see it as an extension of team building or facilitation, rather than a sustained developmental process. HR leaders often know what isn’t working in a team but aren’t always sure how team coaching differs from training or workshops, or when it’s the most effective lever.”

General consensus from contributors is “no.” While there is some recognition of the value in developing teams collectively, there is far less clarity about what team coaching actually is, how it differs from other development options, and when it might be beneficial.

From my own experience, I find that people often think they know what team coaching is, but they do not. Or they believe they are already doing it, when they are not. The same is true for one-to-one coaching.

2. Why is uptake so slow?

“We’re a relatively small and relational business environment, often pragmatic and cost-conscious. There’s also a strong DIY culture here: many leaders feel they should be able to ‘fix’ team issues internally, or that having tough conversations is just part of the job.”

“A large part of our economy is comprised of small and medium sized businesses, who have concerns about trying new things due to the complexity, the cost, and the difficulty of changing.”

“Human resource professionals here are generalists and their time is spread between a whole range of important and urgent issues to be addressed. Large organisations in other countries often have a range of specialists who are dedicated to implementing important topics such as team coaching.”

“Team coaching requires a post-conventional understanding - it’s not about fixing individual parts, more about enabling a team’s collective capacity to navigate complexity together. Many organisations are still thinking from a mechanical paradigm rather than a living systems perspective.”

“Team coaching requires a reasonable level of psychological safety to be truly effective. Being vulnerable in your team, especially if there are ‘challenges’ or ‘issues’ within the team, is difficult. Is there something about our national psyche at play here – the “she’ll be right mate” approach, and our tendency to avoid conflict?”

In summary, Aotearoa’s slow uptake of team coaching reflects characteristics of the economy and budget constraints. Kiwi personalities may also play a role. Risk aversion, and avoiding difficult conversations, conflict, emotions, and vulnerability. These factors, combined with a “Number 8-Wire - I’ll fix it myself” mentality, may mean that even if it was understood, team coaching might be dismissed or avoided.

In addition to the comments above, I see organisations investing in one-to-one coaching and team development when things are going wrong, and team coaching is seen the same way - a remedial fix. Due to the depth of learning involved, team coaching is often perceived as slower and more expensive than other remedial options. More on this below.

3. Looking ahead, what are the potential contributions of team coaching?

“I think there are a set of principles and frameworks that we could teach teams to run themselves - empowering teams to improve their own performance.”

“Silos are the enemy of productivity and team coaching can have a dramatic effect on developing understanding and clarifying performance standards between different teams inside organisations.”

“We should be investing in team coaching before things go wrong.”

“The biggest opportunities are in small to medium enterprises, where if this is positioned as best bang for your buck, there could be some uptake.”

“It’s particularly valuable in settings where cross-cultural respect, distributed decision-making, and collective accountability matter – all of which are increasingly important here. Also, change resilience, post-restructure alignment, and culture shifts, not just at the senior level, but within operational and delivery teams too.”

Opinion varied widely on where the greatest potential for team coaching lies, but all contributors agreed opportunities are plentiful. I share these perspectives and also struggle to narrow benefits down to one area. To dive deeper, I posed an additional question about diversity, discussed next.

4. Are there implications of Aotearoa’s hyper-diversity?

“In many ways, we haven’t yet fully seized the richness that diversity brings to team dynamics, problem-solving, and performance. Team coaching can bridge differences, surface hidden strengths, and create a shared sense of purpose — particularly powerful in teams made up of people from different cultural, professional, and generational backgrounds.”

“Diversity is a huge strength, but it also means teams need to be even more intentional about how they collaborate. Different cultures bring different assumptions about teamwork-some value direct debate, others prioritise harmony or consensus.”

“Opportunities, offered by our diverse cultural groups and interweaving, start with potent tāonga - the way we relate to time, and the way ‘we’ think and make decisions together.”

“Team coaching is a brilliant way to surface and advance diversity and inclusion especially and ideally equity as well... While most organisations talk about it, we know that’s not always followed through on or bought to life.”

“Discussing and clarifying how team members perceive and react/respond to other ‘culturally different’ team members would contribute to a more ‘culturally and psychologically safe’ team.”

There is broad agreement that Aotearoa’s unique cultural make-up offers powerful opportunity to harness the richness and creativity of diverse worldviews.

Hawkins (2021) reiterates says diversity - identity, cognition, personality, team working style, vertical development stage - is a huge strength. Teams should “have a level of diversity that is equal to, or greater than, the diversity of the stakeholder world they engage with.”

Hawkins also says, that having the right ingredients is only part of the opportunity – a “cook” is needed for ingredients to come together. Team coaching is a natural fit in this context. Organisations are just beginning to consider the full potential that diversity can offer, and Aotearoa has a significant opportunity to lead the world.

5. What needs to happen to improve uptake?

“Education for human resources and business leaders on the benefit of team coaching - using cases to illustrate how it differs to other approaches.”

“It’s an education exercise, through human resource professional bodies, coaching professional bodies and individual coaches, to help get team coaching on leaders’ radars.”

“By sharing success stories - especially hearing success stories from the participants, the businesses and organisations who have gained advantage from investing in team coaching.”

“We need to share more stories. We need to, and our clients need to, share what the impact was of having a team coach. We need to challenge the idea that collaboration just happens by default. Collaboration is a core skill, and like any skill, it needs to be learned and practiced.”

“Experienced team coaches need to provide more information in the form of articles, social media posts, webinars and podcasts. I’m sure if there was more promotion, demand would rise rapidly.”

There is consensus that educating human resource professionals, leaders, and decision-makers is crucial. Coaching bodies and coaches should be more proactive by sharing information and case studies. While clients themselves can add support by promoting the benefits of team coaching within their own networks – and coaches should not be shy about asking them to do that.

I agree with the sentiments above and add two additional threads of thought. Universities and other training organisations could play a vital role in educating future leaders and decision-makers by integrating team coaching into curricula for leadership, human resources, change management, and psychology. After all, the approach is evidence-based - not marketing hype. I have personally explored partnering with tertiary institutions on this, and while overseas universities have been very receptive, in Aotearoa only Massey University has shown interest so far.

Returning to the earlier comment about a mindset of investing in remedial development - this needs to change! Team coaching - and other forms of development - are powerful investments in areas where performance is already strong. Research shows it creates a ripple effect across organisations (O’Conner & Cavanagh, 2013), spreading influence far-and-wide. The payoff is significant, a result much harder to achieve when development budget is only used for remedial purposes.

What is next for team coaching in Aotearoa?

It seems that those who understand team coaching also recognise the benefits and potential. Those who do not either fail to see why they should or are risk-averse and hesitant to try something new - especially in a challenging economic climate.

Hawkins (2021) says that globally, the field of team coaching suffered “many of the same difficulties that existed in the early days of individual coaching.” Including: client confusion around what it is, lack of consistent terminology, and limited readily available research and literature.

Uptake in Aotearoa will take time, just as the adoption of one-to-one coaching here lagged behind the rest of the world.

A contributor to this article said “When I first arrived 20 years ago... I googled “Coaching in Auckland”. I got zero results. Zero! I was shocked, as coaching had been around in the northern hemisphere for around a decade. However, it did seem to become mainstream quite quickly after that. I am hopeful that in the same way team coaching will catch on quickly over the next couple of years.”

What can be done to accelerate uptake? Coaches and their professional bodies need to be more proactive in educating organisations, leaders, human resource professionals and other decision makers of the benefits of focusing on teams.

Clients who have experienced the value of team coaching can support wider adoption by sharing their stories within their networks and agreeing to the publication of case studies, providing real-world examples of the impact.

In parallel, leaders, human resources professional and other decision makers must stay curious, consider alternative approaches, and recognise the business case for professional team development is strong.

In short, those in the know need to push - sharing stories, insights, and case studies. And potential buyers need to pull - staying curious, open, and willing to explore how team coaching can make a difference.

Once team coaching does gain traction in Aotearoa, it will most likely follow current global trends: more leaders and human resource professionals trained to deliver it internally, a shift toward systemic development, and even coaching multiple teams within organisations simultaneously - referred to as “teams of teams” coaching. And just like the All Blacks, in time, team coaches across Aotearoa will be recognised as critical components of team and organisational success.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to colleagues across Aotearoa – human resource specialists, consultants, practising team coaches, and thought leaders – who generously shared their perspectives on this topic: Mary Britton, Peta Brown, Barbara Dazenburger, Suzanne Cross, Raechel Ford, Graham Hart, Kavita Khanna, Alyson Keller, Karen Meredith, Iain McCormick, Ursula Oxnam, Dean Paotama, Gil Sewell, Belinda Thomas, and others.

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