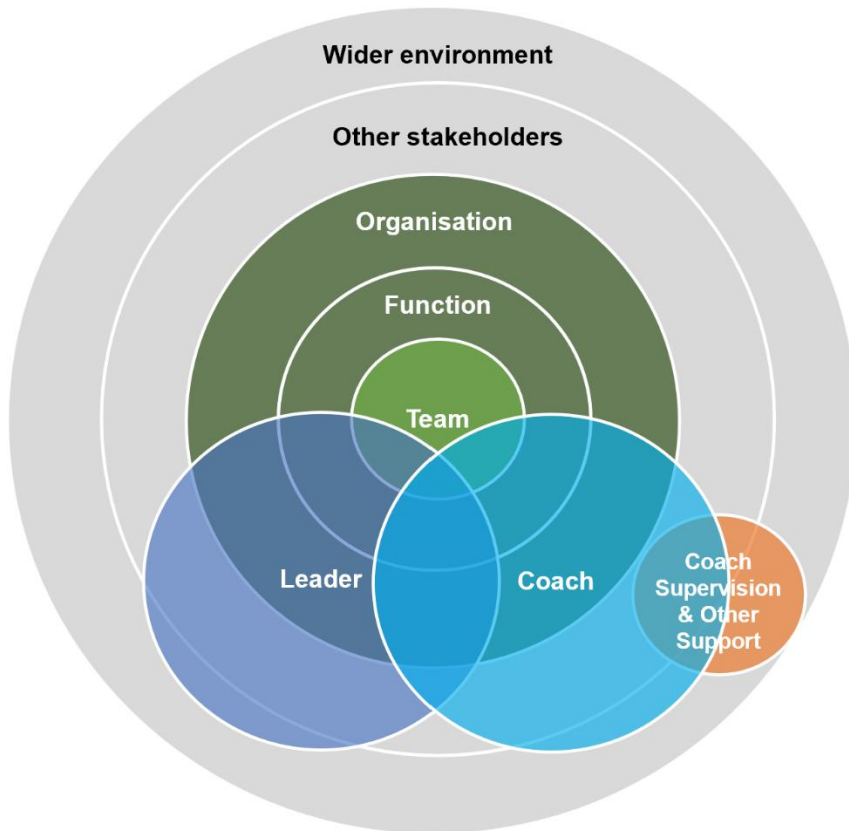


# A warning for all coaches...

We are part of the systems we work in whether we like it or not!



As coaches, we are part of our clients' systems, and we both influence and are influenced by those systems. Whether we realise it or not we bring our own ways of thinking, interpreting and communicating, and are biased in what we are studying, curious about or interested in. All of us use filters through which we see and influence everything we interact with, and these biases can have a positive or negative impact.

A long-running internal team coaching engagement I was involved in illustrates the impact I had – in both obvious and more subtle ways.

An obvious example was the selection of team coaching as an intervention in the first place. My role was to support the development of a team, and I had just begun team

coaching training at the time. I was keen to practise, so I suggested the approach. Michael, the team leader, said, "Although I was not familiar with the term (team coaching), how it differed from other types of team development, or what it would mean for us, I was happy to support it." No one, including me, questioned whether Michael, the team, or I were mature enough for such an intense development programme at that time.

Another obvious example was my close proximity to the team. In most situations, we are limited to working with our clients for a few hours a month. In this situation my influence was live and continuous. "The coach was experiencing the same things the team were experiencing, so it was easy for her to appreciate the context and environment in which we operated. It also facilitated plenty of opportunity for informal one-to-one coaching and advice, which we all found so valuable." However, it also meant I was emotionally connected to issues the team were facing, as they were also my issues, and I struggled with role clarity and independence.

A more subtle example was the leadership vacuum trap I was sucked into, something both internal and external coaches can experience. Michael was suffering from capacity and capability constraints, and in some situations, I stepped in and took over his leadership role. Michael commented that "filling gaps she saw seemed natural for her, and I think most of her actions were subconscious. I knew it was happening, and I let it, as I prioritised wider organisational deliverables and pressures." While my actions provided relief for Michael, they caused confusion in other parts of the system. A team member said, "While it was great that Michael was sharing leadership, we were confused and frustrated. It felt

like we had two bosses with different opinions, which caused even more angst at a time when we were already overloaded and stressed.”

An unexpected example was the tension the my role created within the team. One team member commented that “the coach was doing things that had always been my responsibility,” and, “She was closer to Michael than I was ever able to get.” Another team member said that she “had always been Michael’s go-to person, and now that seemed to be the coach”. Close relationships between the team leader and coach can impact on others.

Given our influence can be positive or negative, and is often unexpected, what can we do? Tatiana Bachkirova says “Self of the Coach” is the main instrument of change in a coaching engagement. We employ reflection to use that instrument effectively.

The engagement I refer to here involved extensive ongoing reflective practice:

- After each formal team coaching session, I spent time with the team and Michael, discussing events and what we had learned.
- I kept a journal to capture my thoughts and learning edges.
- I took part in both professional one-to-one team-focused supervision, and professional group team-focused supervision.
- I elicited ongoing informal support from peers, family, and friends.

Through deep reflective practice, I was able to consider and suggest activities for the team to work on that aligned with their and my own maturity. I was able to see the many complex roles I was taking on in the system, including the leadership vacuum trap, and manage those that were negatively impacting the team and me. I could see how my presence added tension in the system, and contract better outcomes with any impacted team members.

If I could do over, would I do anything differently? Maybe! However, one thing I would not change was the level of my reflective practice. It increases awareness and enables more conscious self-management of our biases, choices, and their potential impact. This helps “coaches develop their artistry and their unique signature as a practitioner... Reflective practice is not ... about ticking a box. It is about facilitating a deeper understanding of how we each work”. (Tammy Turner, Michelle Lucas & Carol Whitaker, 2018).

Although the events in the engagement I refer to will never repeat, this case highlights many challenges and learning areas for all team coaches, one-to-one coaches, internal, or external coaches. If you would like to know more, see *Team coaching for organisational development: team, leader, organisation, coach and supervision perspectives*, by Helen Zink, Routledge 2023.

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## Biography

Helen Zink is a growth coach, leadership coach and team coach, with significant hands-on business and leadership experience at a senior level. Helen draws from a large toolkit, including coaching, team coaching, applied positive psychology, change management and other strategic tools and methodologies. She holds many qualifications and certifications, including Senior Practitioner Team and Individual Coach with EMCC, Advanced Certification in Team Coaching and Professional Certified Coach with ICF, MSc (Coaching Psychology), MBA, BMS (hons), and others. Helen published *Team coaching for organisational development: team, leader, organisation, coach and supervision perspectives* in 2023.