How to bring team coaching to life

By Helen Zink 24 April, 2024

While one-on-one coaching can be effective when working with individuals, the issues that emerge at a team level often require a different approach.

HR professionals are often involved in supporting a coaching culture, training others to coach, and coaching employees themselves.

One-to-one coaching is a well-established practice, and can be very effective, but it often doesn't address challenges that occur at a team level. Team coaching is starting to gain traction in many organisations as a way to address more complex ways of working and relationships within a team, and boost team value and performance.

I previously worked intensively with a team as their coach over a three-year period. The team, team leader, wider stakeholders within the organisation, including HR professionals, and I, grew our team coaching experience and knowledge together.

The frameworks and tips below represent our collective advice for HR professionals wanting to bring team coaching approaches to life within their own organisations.

What is team coaching?

Before diving into the practical tips, it's worth defining what team coaching is.

Put simply, it's like one-to-one coaching, using many of the same techniques (open-ended questions, active listening and holding silence) but instead of working with one person, you work with a collective, treating them as one entity.

It's intentionally flexible and organic, tailored to the particular environment in which the team finds itself, and does not have a predetermined outcome. It's not the same as training, consulting, facilitating, teaching or team building. Although, in reality, there may be some overlap.

For example, when working with a team who aren't used to collective development, it might take time for them to warm up. In that instance, a team building approach might be a good place to start to build psychological safety, before moving on to coaching over time.

Topics covered in a team coaching conversations could include:
- Improved collaboration
- Prioritisation
- Delegation and accountability
- Problem-solving and decision-making
- Understanding stakeholder relationships and their needs

The aim is to unpack how the team is working together, encourage awareness of themselves and others they work with, and, ultimately, increase their value to the organisation.

Bringing team coaching to life

Now, on to the practical insights. The suggestions have been grouped into three important areas: the team, the team leader, and yourself as the team coach.
Content has come directly from lessons the team, team leader, stakeholders and I learnt while working together over three years.

Tips for coaching the team

1. Ensure the team's development goal and the approach used is aligned with your organisational strategy. For example, if coaching is not an identified strategic enablement tool, team coaching may not be appropriate.

2. If change anticipated is significant, manage the coaching program as a formal project along with other changes underway, with C-suite sponsorship, a steering committee and regular progress reporting.

3. Establish a formal measurement framework for tangible and intangible outcomes, and measure and report progress to stakeholders regularly.

4. Even if the team doesn't seem ready to start intensive coaching, start anyway. The process itself will get them to a place where they are more receptive. However, I suggest beginning with basic activities, such as meeting structures and team behaviour expectations.

5. Invest in regular team development sessions that differ from their business-as-usual activities, such as off-sites and meetings at stakeholder premises.

6. Involve stakeholders throughout, including prioritisation of development activity and when measuring progress and outcomes.

7. Spend as much time as needed agreeing on roles and expectations between:
    - The coach and team.
    - The coach and the leader.
    - Team members.
    - The team and stakeholders.

    Continually renegotiate all the above throughout your work together.

8. Team sessions themselves:
    - Ask the team to agree on the level of pre-work they will commit to and encourage them to hold each other to account for what is agreed.
    - Align content with the team maturity level – start with basics and work up.
    - Switch between facilitation, coaching and other delivery modes as needed, such as teaching and mentoring.
    - Focus on what serves the team best at the moment.
    - Continue to work on topics until team members feel they have said all they need to, rather than sticking to the agenda.
    - Finish with clear actions and accountability and encourage the team to hold each other to account for what is agreed.
    - Align frequency and timing of sessions with other commitments to ensure buy-in and minimise distraction.
    - Continually review these processes with the team and adjust along the way.

9. Review the impact of change on other individuals and teams across the organisation – as the team steps up, new gaps may emerge in other areas.

10. One-to-one coaching of individual team members in conjunction with team coaching helps embed change.

Tips for coaching the team leader

David Clutterbuck, a thought leader in leadership and team coaching, emphasises the critical role of team leaders. They usually approve spending on development and decide how much time to invest in particular activities. Also, as we discovered in this case, the leader's style significantly influences the team's progress.

- One-to-one support and coaching of the leader helps identify, support and embed change.
- Encourage conversations between team members and the leader to clarify the type of leadership the team needs to perform at their best.
- Don't assume the team leader's style is in line with the team's development direction, even if they are clearly articulating that direction. The leader may need to work on themselves first.
- Support leaders to shift their mindset from delivery focus to an EQ-based leadership approach. This is the best way to deal with increased volatility and change, and to meet stakeholders' needs.

- Encourage the leader to create their own bespoke, flexible [leadership style](#), allowing them to be effective in different situations. For example, when does it make sense for them to be directive versus facilitate [autonomy](#).
- If the leader is working on changing their leadership style and/or sharing leadership responsibilities, communicate this with stakeholders to mitigate confusion.
- The leader is in the best position to support change, reinforcing what the team is working on in one-to-one conversations with team members.

Tips for self-coaching

[Tatiana Bachkirova,](#) emphasises the importance of the coach themselves being the most effective tool in coaching. What you bring, the way you behave and your ability to role model all make an impact in team coaching.

To ensure you remain the sharpest tool in your own toolbox, looking after yourself, reflective practice, self-awareness and [self-care](#) are critical.

- Consider whether you are the right person for the job – team coaching is not for everyone.
- Have the right mindset – team coaches need a positive attitude, appreciation of complexity and the unknown, willingness to experiment and learn, and to be agile and flexible.
- Partner up – team coaching in pairs helps you share the load and provides more opportunity for insight via diversity of opinion.

- Set yourself boundaries and remember that being helpful is not always the best thing in the long run – teaching a team to fish is more beneficial than giving them fish.
- Ensure you have all the support you need – training, reflective practice, supervision, peer groups and your own personal support network.

Final words of advice

This article alludes to the complexities of team coaching, reflected by the years of study, practice and supervision it takes for professional team coach certification.

Don't be put off. Although often challenging, the rewards for the team, leader, oraganisation and yourself are high. Integrating just some of the practical tips and tools suggested in your work with teams will bring team coaching approaches to life.

Further reading
Clutterbuck, D. (2020). Coaching the team at work. London & Boston: Brealey.
Clutterbuck, D., Turner, T. & Murphy, C. (2022). The team coaching casebook. London: Open University Press.
European Mentoring and Coaching Council (2020). EMCC global team coaching accreditation standards framework. Retrieved from https://emccglobal.org/accreditation/tcqa.

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