

INSIGHT GUIDE #87

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

Leaders can make or break team coaching

'My understanding around the critical role that a team leader plays in high performance team coaching and change is one of the most significant things I learnt from this experience' (Michael, team leader).

This guide draws on a real team coaching case study to illustrate the important role a team leader plays in team coaching interventions. We focus on Michael and his official and emergent roles over his team's development journey.



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The leader

A team leader's role, by nature, has disproportionate influence, even within the most collaborative and self-directed environments.

Leaders often hire and fire, make certain key decisions, source and allocate resources, and shape priorities. They set goals, define roles, manage performance, influence rewards and recognition, and act as the main conduit between the team, the wider organisation and other stakeholders. Access to information, the authority to remove obstacles, and the ability to escalate issues means leaders play a central role in enabling (or constraining) their team's effectiveness.

Within a team coaching context, all the above matters. Equally, the team leader's attitude, stance, behaviours and mindset can significantly impact the coaching engagement.

Before looking more at the role of leaders in team coaching, let's briefly review the case on which these insights are based.

The case

This case centres on Michael, an experienced team leader who formed an entirely new senior leadership team following a significant restructure. The change was driven by a need for culture change to enable a new strategic direction for the function.

For the first 18 months of the engagement, I was brought in as transformation manager, reporting to Michael. My remit was supporting the team to become a collective unit, and helping individual members become great leaders. Regular coaching sessions were used as the primary intervention with the collective team. I also had the opportunity to informally coach Michael and the team members, one-to-one, on a daily basis.

I worked with the team for a further 18 months as an external consultant, with the scope during this second phase limited to collective team coaching.

Let's now look at the roles Michael played in the team coaching work.

Leader as sponsor

Michael's fundamental role in the engagement was as sponsor of the work. He created, scoped and recruited the team coach role (my role), and funding for it came from his budget.

Michael said:

'I knew a critical part of strategy enablement was changing the entire culture of the function I led. I knew the team needed support to change their skillsets, the way they worked with each other, and the way they led their teams. One of the biggest calls was the creation of a full-time support role, who was also part of the team – the team coach.'

For a definition of team coaching and how it differs from other modalities, refer to the following guides from Henley:

- [Insight Guide #6: How can I coach my team?](#)
- [Coaching in Action Guide: Team Coaching](#)



Leader as enabler

Michael provided time for the team to focus on development by scheduling monthly team days. These days were the primary intervention in this case, and sessions included team coaching. Despite Michael prioritising time to attend, the team members themselves were less enthusiastic.

Michael said:

'The team were hesitant about the process to begin with, partly because it was new to them, and partly because there was a trade-off between getting work done now and investing in longer-term development. Despite this, my view was that we had a clear strategy in place that included focus on people as an enabler, and we had the team coach lined up and ready to go. We were doing it!'

Initially, Michael needed to mandate participation. Over time, the team could see for themselves that the investment was paying off. Relationships between them grew, they worked more collaboratively, issues were resolved and delivery of outcomes improved.

Michael said:

'The team began looking forward to development days, as they gave us a chance to refocus, take a different mindset, and connect – buy-in from the team had turned 180 degrees.'

Leader as team co-coach

Another role Michael took on was that of internal team co-coach, working closely with me. We planned interventions together, reviewed team session content, agreed on roles we would play, and worked together within sessions to hold the collective learning space. After each session we debriefed together and adjusted future development content as a result. These are all things co-coaches would do together.

Michael said:

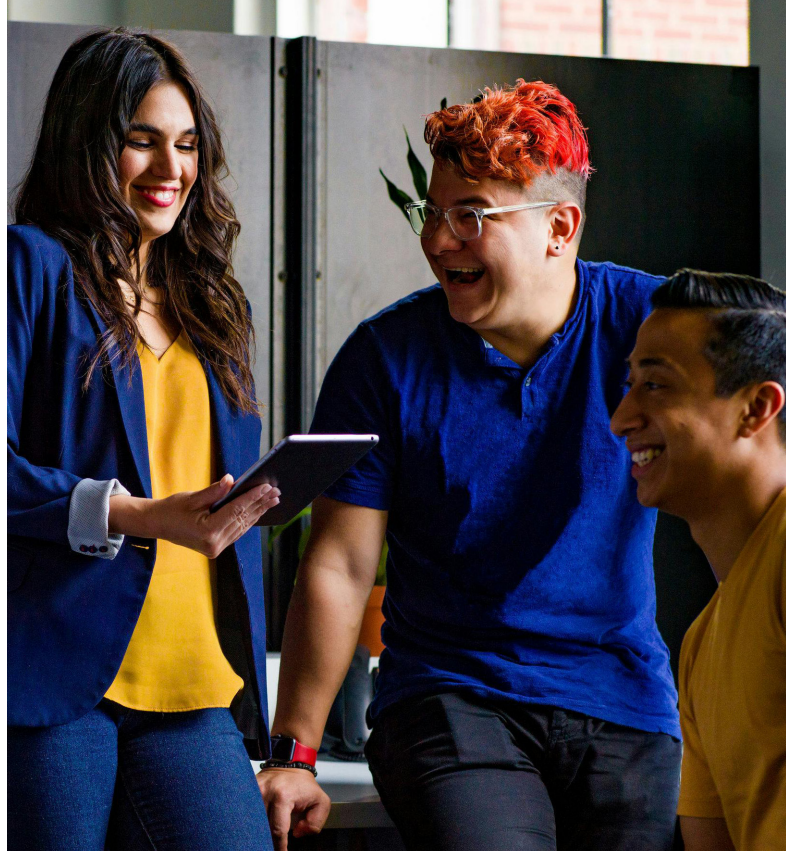
'I was supporting developing content and agreeing how we would work together within team development sessions. I also made sure I understood the models and frameworks being used to maintain consistency of approach across the organisation.'

Leader as one-to-one coach

An important intervention in this engagement was the formal and informal coaching of team members. As I was part of the team and worked with them every day, there were many opportunities to provide support and coaching. Towards the end of the engagement, when my role was external to the team, Michael took up the role of one-to-one coach.

Michael said:

'The one-to-one conversations I was having with each individual team member in parallel with our collective team development supported the work we were doing. It was a chance to work with the team member on their own unique leadership journey, focus on their positions and personalities, reflect on how they were impacted and changing, and help them customise key elements of the team's collective journey in a way that worked for them.'



Leader as client

In addition to working on team development, Michael and I worked closely together on other work related to strategy enablement and change. There was plenty of opportunity for me to be his sounding board, to offer advice and coach on a day-to-day basis. Although Michael did not wish to pursue a formal coaching arrangement with me or with anyone else, he did appreciate our informal one-to-one coaching approach.

'I was receiving coaching informally. Sometimes it was solicited and sometimes offered, often in-the-moment. This was one of the significant benefits of having an internal coach as part of the team. The coach was right there with me experiencing a lot of what I was experiencing, and she was literally on the spot offering advice and coaching as events played out.'

Leader as role model

Within team coaching sessions, Michael helped build trust and psychological safety by expressing his own vulnerability and soliciting feedback – he was a fantastic role model in this regard. His behaviour encouraged other members of the team to open-up and do the same. He also encouraged experimentation within team sessions, encouraging a safe-to-fail learning culture.

'Sometimes, topics and conversations that took place triggered emotional responses from team members and from me. I was not concerned as, in my view, emotion shows vulnerability and helps build trust.'





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Although there were bumps along the way, Michael maintained his commitment and took a 'learning' approach for the remainder of the engagement.

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Leader as collaborator

One of the most significant things Michael enabled was the expectation of shared leadership and collaboration. To help facilitate this, a business plan was created that clarified priorities, roles, accountability and that identified the mutual support required to deliver agreed collective outcomes.

'I ensured that all initiatives were assigned to members of the team, ringfencing myself into a sponsorship role. Accountability and responsibility were crystal clear.'

Another example, in the third year of the engagement, was the decision to rotate the leadership role in relation to team development sessions.

'I would still be there, keeping an eye on content; however, the leadership baton would be passed from me to the team and to each team member respectively.'

Leader as learner

Up to this point, I have described a leader committed to fostering team growth and engaging in the team coaching process. Yet in day-to-day life, outside of structured sessions, things were less straightforward. For the first year of the engagement, Michael's leadership approach was misaligned with the team vision he aspired to, despite consistent feedback from stakeholders, his manager, the team – and from me. His resistance led to significant tension in the system, impacting all involved.

'I knew I relied on what others describe as a "top-down" leadership style. I made most [of the] decisions myself and did not delegate enough.'

Near the end of the first year, pressure from the team increased. We talked about the leadership style the team needed to perform at their best, and Michael finally committed to changing his stance.

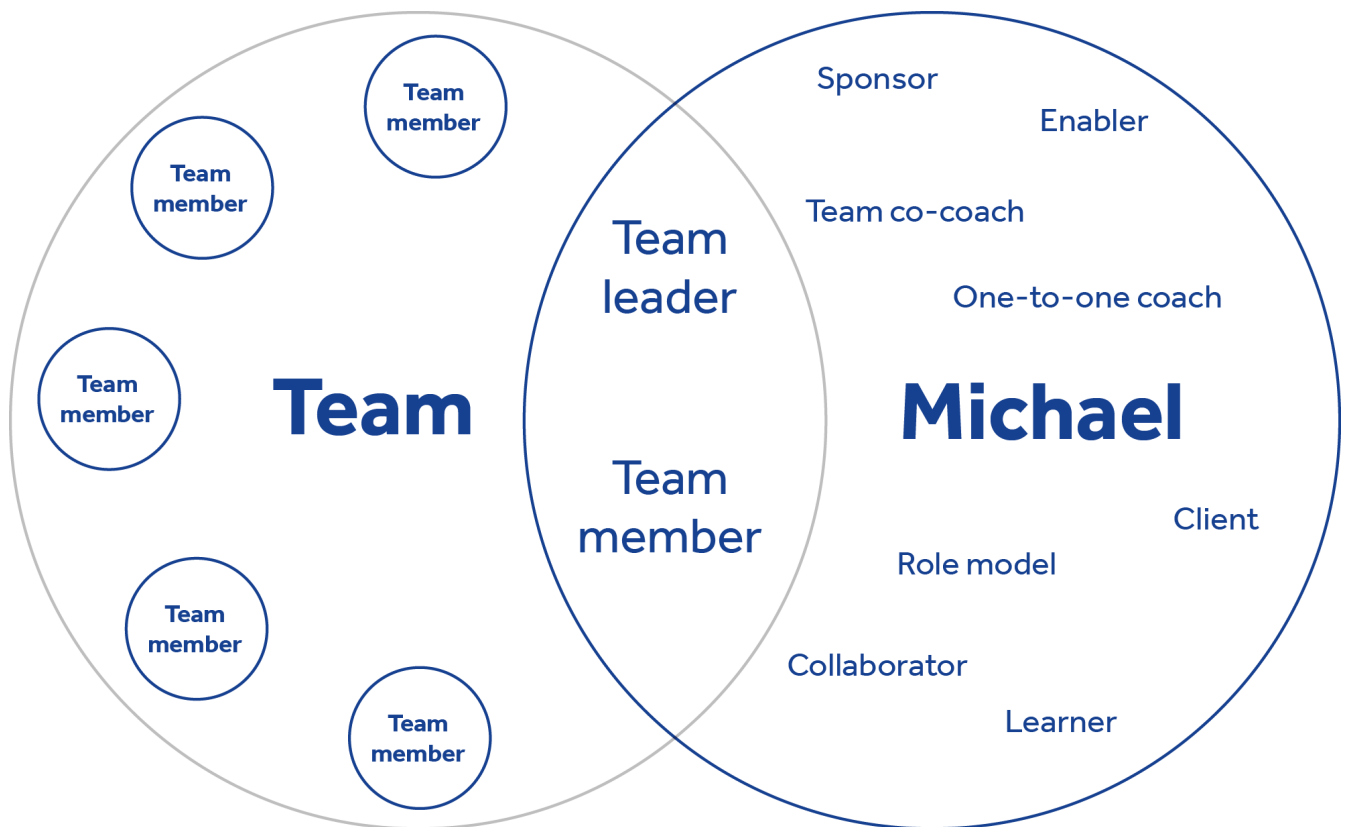
'While I heard and intellectually understood the rationale for change, and may have subconsciously used lack of capacity as an excuse, the shift did not come until I genuinely bought into it and made a conscious and explicit decision.'

Although there were bumps along the way – which is to be expected when changing something that's been embedded for many years – Michael maintained his commitment and took a 'learning' approach for the remainder of the engagement.

Implications

This case illustrates the disproportionate role a leader can play in team coaching. While unique in each situation, a team leader can have many roles in the process, such as: sponsoring and enabling the work in the first place, delivering team coaching (as co-coach or supporting the coach/co-coaches), role-modelling agreed behaviours, facilitating collaborative ways of working in business-as-usual environments, performing one-to-one coaching, and learning to adapt to their own leadership style. The figure below illustrates these roles.

Figure 1: Leader's multiple roles



While the client in team coaching is the collective team, the team leader deserves special attention. While different leadership roles will be critical in different engagements, if those roles are not played effectively, leaders may disable rather than enable their team's progress, thereby diminishing the value of the development investment.

One-to-one coaching (or another focused development approach) used alongside team coaching can help leaders be aware of and play the roles they need to play.

In this case, informal one-to-one coaching helped Michael realise his disproportionate and unhelpful influence on team coaching and the team... eventually!

'I knew a critical part of strategy enablement was changing the entire culture of the function I led, beginning with the leadership team reporting to me. However, I did not anticipate that one of the most significant things to change would be me.'

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Helen Zink

Helen holds many qualifications, including Senior Practitioner Team and Individual Coach (EMCC). Helen is author of *Team Coaching for Organisational Development: Team, Leader, Organisation, Coach and Supervision Perspectives* (Routledge, 2023).

References

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