

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF TEAM LEADER IN TEAM COACHING - A CASE STUDY

In team coaching, the collective team is our client. Yet, where does the team leader fit in? How important are they? What is their role? **Helen Zink** finds some possible answers in sharing the personal journey of a team leader.

Michael, the leader of a team I coached said, *'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.'*

BACKGROUND

The experience Michael refers to is a team development journey that took place over a three-year period. The team were newly-formed post restructure, and all, except Michael, were new to their roles. Multiple process and system changes were in play and the team was expected to manage those changes as well as embed a new structure and work on their own leadership capabilities - all within a complex and ever-changing environment.

There was acknowledgement that learning curves were steep and stakeholder expectations of the team and Michael were high. I was brought in to support team members with aspects of their collective and individual development, which included team coaching.

In this article I focus on Michael, the team leader, and his official and emergent roles as the team's development journey unfolded.

LEADER AS SPONSOR

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

'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.'

LEADER AS ENABLER

Michael provided access to the team. The primary intervention in this engagement was monthly team development days, which included team coaching. Despite Michael prioritising team development, team members themselves were less enthusiastic.

'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 a focus on people as an enabler, and we had the team coach lined up and ready to go. We were doing it!'

Michael mandated attendance, and 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.

'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

Michael took on the role of 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: all things co-coaches would do together.

'I was supporting with 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

Another 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 coach. Over time, towards the end of the engagement, Michael took up the role of one-to-one coach.

'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 each 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

We weren't only 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, offer advice and coach on a day-to-day basis. Although Michael did not wish to pursue a formal coaching arrangement, he did appreciate our more informal 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 across the team 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 provided permission to experiment within team sessions, creating 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.'

LEADER AS COLLABORATOR

One of the most significant things Michael facilitated was moving the team towards collaboration and shared leadership. To help facilitate this a combined business plan was created clarifying priorities, roles, accountability and mutual support required to deliver agreed 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.'

The third year of the engagement saw 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.'

The team leader should be open to feedback and change, consider themselves an additional, separate client, and see themselves as work in progress.

LEADER AS A WORK IN PROGRESS

So far, I have described a leader creating, facilitating and encouraging team development and the team coaching process. However, day-to-day life outside of team coaching sessions did not go smoothly. Paradoxically, despite messages from stakeholders that he needed to change, and ongoing advice and coaching, his leadership style was not in line with the vision he had for his team.

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

Fortunately, near the end of the first year of the engagement Michael agreed to work on himself, partly as a result of pressure from the team, who by this time appreciated benefits of the work we were doing together and were clear on the leadership style they needed to perform at their best.

'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, to be expected when changing something embedded for many years, Michael maintained his commitment and took a 'work in progress' stance. This reinforced the benefit of the leader as coach and leader as collaborator roles described above and accelerated the team's development journey.

LEADER AS A TRANSFORMATION

During this engagement, there was common agreement amongst team members and the team's stakeholders that they were growing, maturing and developing.

In parallel, despite the lagged start described above, Michael was growing, maturing and developing as well.

'It has genuinely been a transformational experience for me, with most of my growth in the areas of EQ-centered leadership; leader as coach; matching leadership style with circumstances; sharing leadership, knowledge and delegating; and improved communication.'

LEADER AS A CRITICAL ROLE

The team leadership role, by nature, has disproportionate influence within a team. This engagement illustrated how the role of the leader in team coaching is also disproportionate and vital from beginning to end - sponsoring and enabling the work in the first

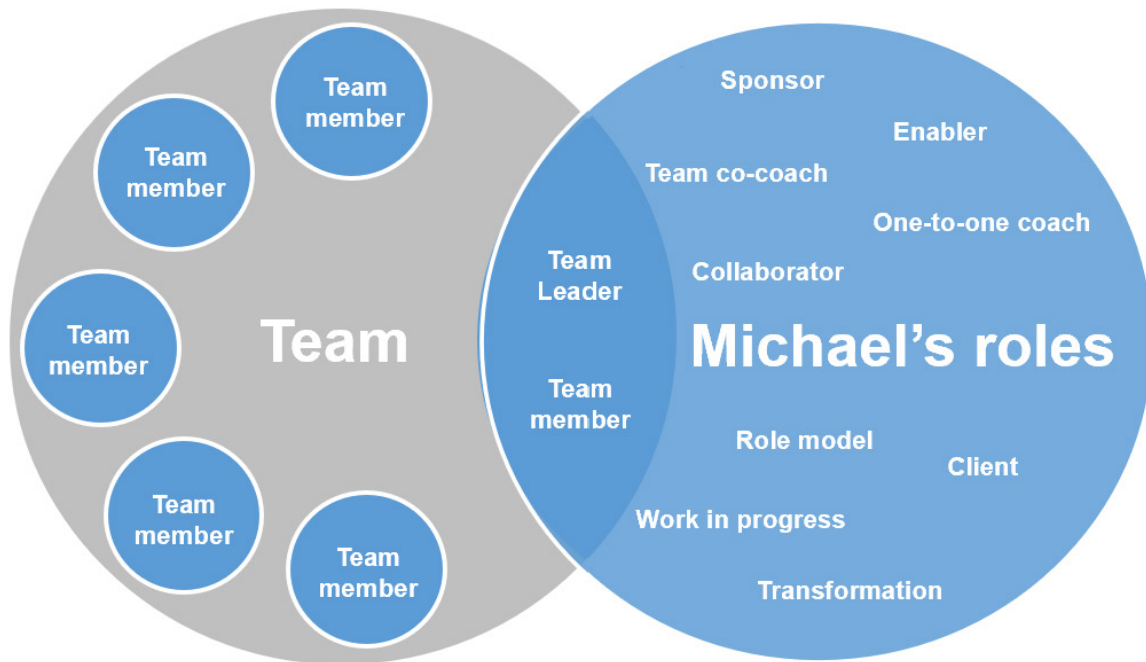
place, hands on involvement during team coaching sessions (as co-coach or supporting the coach/co-coaches), role modelling, and facilitating collaborative ways of working (see figure 1).

While the client is the collective team in team coaching, this engagement also highlighted how the team leader might need special attention.

The team leader should be open to feedback and change, consider themselves an additional, separate client, and see themselves as work in progress.

'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.'

Figure 1 – Leader's multiple roles



FOOTNOTE FOR CONTEXT

The content for this article has been extracted from a more significant team coaching case study where the story is told by five different elements within the team's system over a three-year period. Those five elements are: the team themselves, the team leader, the wider organisation, the team coach (me) and my supervision and support networks. For the full case study see: Team coaching for organisational development: team, leader, organisation, coach and supervision perspectives. Routledge. 2023.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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.

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