

Why team coaching is an effective organisational development tool

Helen Zink explores how the method can be used to develop high-performing teams, bolster resilience and enable strategy

by Helen Zink 17 November 2023

What is team coaching?

A simple description is holding space for a team to have the conversations they need to have or would benefit from having. Team coaching differs from facilitation and team building in that conversations are intentionally flexible and organic, all tailored to the particular environment in which the team finds itself. This might sound 'fluffy' and unstructured but, if done well, it is far from superficial.

Jane, a member of a team I worked with over a long period of time, reflected afterwards that her self and collective team awareness grew substantially. She said: "It is interesting looking back and realising that the change we wanted to see across the function we led came from us – starting with ourselves."

Here are five ways team coaching can be used in a proactive OD context:

1. Building high-performing teams and leaders

The concept of high-performing teams (HPTs) has been around a long time, with many authors describing characteristics that create high performance. However, the piece often missing is how to create and build those characteristics and actively bring HPTs to life.

Team coaching can help. Conversations might focus on improved relationships, collaboration, prioritisation, delegation, accountability, problem solving, decision making, leadership style, meeting stakeholder needs and learning.

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As a result of coaching, stakeholders working with Jane's team observed better planning and communication and leadership being shared more, which ultimately improved team effectiveness, benefiting everyone within the organisation.

Team coaching can have a profound impact on the team leader and leadership style of individual members. For example, a team coach can encourage conversations around the type of leadership the team needs to work at their best and ways team members can support the leader and each other to develop that style. Michael, the leader of Jane's team, commented: "I did not appreciate how much my leadership style would change, how much I would learn and how significant the personal impact would be."

2. Enabling strategy and change

Team coaching is a way to bring strategy or change initiatives to life. For example, a coach can support the team to understand the needs of stakeholders, develop options and create and monitor implementation plans, all within the team's unique circumstances.

In Michael's case, he was aware of McKinsey's 7-S framework (Peters and Waterman, 2008) of change, saying: "The first part of our strategic implementation focused on technology, system and process changes to enable key organisational-wide objectives. As we embarked on a structure change, I was acutely aware that the soft Ss (shared values, style, staff and skills) needed to align for our strategy to be successful."

My role as team coach allowed me to step in and support the team in bringing their change programme to life.

3. Increasing team resilience

Team resilience, defined as the collective response to adversity and the ability to overcome it together (Hartwig, Clarke, Johnson & Willis, 2020), requires effective communication, collaboration and coordination among team members. They are all areas that can be the focus of, or a positive by-product of, team coaching.

Team coaching goes deep, allowing a team to practise exploring uncharted and unexpected territory, creating muscle memory that kicks in when triggered by real life volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) events.

Michael said: "I am grateful we started the development journey when we did, as the groundwork played a big part in the team and I surviving later on, both professionally and personally."

Jane added: "We discovered depths of resilience we didn't know we had. We were much more open with each other and pulled together to solve problems."

4. Accelerating culture change

Organisational culture change is another area popular with authors and again practical implementation is often harder to grasp. In my experience organisations are great at describing the culture they want to see, creating shared values for employees to guide their actions – and

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hanging posters on the wall describing both. However, they are less effective at bringing words on those posters to life.

Culture change is challenging and it takes a significant investment in time and resources to embed. In addition to common implementation tools such as culture champions and values workshops, team coaching is a way to tackle bite-sized organisational chunks.

In Jane and Michael's case, organisation-wide values include working side by side and having open minds. Jane had this to say about the relationship between team coaching and values: "Over time we felt more connected, understood each other's roles better and were solving issues together. It became clearer that our development work positively impacted the way we worked together."

5. Creating a ripple effect

O'Conner and Cavanagh (2013) studied the coaching ripple effect where the positive outcomes of one-to-one coaching were felt more widely than those actually being coached. Team coaching rubs off too – possibly even more so, as more people are involved.

Jane said: "Our team agreement, effective meeting structure, improved accountability and better communication skills were new habits applied to every interaction we had across the organisation. We all benefited."

A C-suite member commented: "Team members were more visible; they joined our meetings from time to time and we were getting to know them better."

A staff member reporting to Jane said: "Increased focus on communication, delegation, collaboration and empowerment was noticeable. This helped me learn a lot more about my role too as work was delegated to me."

The case for proactive team coaching as an OD tool is strong – give it a try.

Helen Zink is a growth, leadership and team coach.

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