

INSIGHT GUIDE #84

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

Walking in the client's shoes – what do clients really value in team coaching?

We often hear about the value of team coaching engagements from the coach's perspective, but does the client share the same view? This Insight Guide invites you to step into the shoes of the

team, the team leader and their stakeholders to explore what they found valuable and challenging. Drawing from an in-depth, three-year case study, it offers a firsthand look at their experiences.



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The case

The client was a new senior leadership team, formed post-restructure. Michael, the team leader, re-organised the entire consulting function he led, to enable delivery of revised strategic outcomes. Apart from Michael and his personal assistant, all team members were new to their roles, and most were relatively new to the organisation. The function, comprising 60 staff, delivered services internally across an organisation of 3,000 staff.

For the first 18 months of the engagement I was a transformation manager, reporting to Michael. Part of my role was supporting the team collectively and individually to develop as a team and as leaders. I also worked on culture change across the function. For the second 18 months, I continued as an external consultant focusing on the collective team.

Regular team coaching sessions were used as the primary intervention within the team and across the function.

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***

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During the first 18 months, while inside the organisation and part of the team, I was also informally coaching Michael and team members one-to-one. Conversations were ad hoc and 'on tap' as opportunities arose, rather than following a set structure or schedule. Opportunities for informal coaching were plentiful as I worked closely with Michael and team members every day.

The team's working environment was complex and challenging throughout the three-year period. In addition to embedding themselves in new roles, team members were recruiting for multiple vacancies across the function and leading critical process and system changes. The organisation was subject to funding constraints, changes in operating regulations, building moves, multiple restructures and global crises that fundamentally changed the way the organisation needed to work.

Despite these challenges, there were positive tangible outcomes. Engagement scores of the team and function increased from 4.2 to 4.6 out of 5, and from 3.8 to 4.0 respectively. PERILL (Clutterbuck, 2020) was used as a diagnostic tool – completed by team members every six months. Scores increased from 3.1 to 3.8 out of 5 over three years. Verbal feedback was even more positive, with team members, Michael and wider stakeholders observing improvements in the way the team operated, their deliverables and value added to the organisation.





10 things the client valued most

Given this context, these are the top 10 areas the team, Michael and other parts of the organisation valued most – captured both during the engagement and through post-engagement reflection. My own insights take a back seat as we step into the client's experience. In no particular order:

1. Regular team development days

Being away from the office provided opportunity for the team to park work, focus and connect as a collective. Sessions included both team coaching components and facilitated exercises to increase self-awareness and ignite coaching conversations.

Team members said:

'It almost doesn't matter what the content is; the value is in spending time together away from the office.'

'It felt like sessions connected together over the months and built on each other.'

'There was a good mix of discussion and activity.'

2. Practical application

Once a regular pattern of team development days was established, team members could make the connection – seeing benefits come through in their everyday work.

Team members said:

'We appreciated short, digestible pieces of useful work that facilitated everyone's participation and application.'

'Flexibility of content was good and recognised what was needed in certain circumstances.'

.....
Sessions included team coaching components and facilitated exercises to increase self-awareness and ignite coaching conversations
.....

3. Flexibility

The team day agenda was extremely flexible. Content often changed in the days leading up to sessions, and within sessions themselves, as hot topics arose.

Team members said:

'I like the way we step into topics of interest naturally.'

'The focus was on what would help us rather than the pre-arranged plan.'

4. On-tap one-to-one coaching

As I was an internal coach and part of the team, individual on-tap one-to-one coaching was available for all team members and Michael. It was also an opportunity to embed topics covered in team sessions.

Team members said:

'Being part of the team meant Helen could get to know us really well, see all sides to us, how we tick, and appreciate our workload and day-to-day issues and how all that affected us.'

'There was no hiding things from Helen, as she knew what was happening. I liked that.'

Michael said:

'It was one of the greatest benefits of having an internal coach who was part of the team. As Helen worked alongside us there was plenty of opportunity for her to reinforce behaviour.'



5. Leadership style

In the beginning, Michael's leadership style was out of line with the trajectory of the team (more on that later). That changed over time, influenced in part by frank conversations within team coaching sessions.

Team members said:

'We had several conversations around how we could support Michael more to be the leader we needed. The main thread was that, although he was trying, he needed to spend more time mentoring and coaching us so he could delegate more, and this in turn would release more of his time.'

'It was a powerful and emotional session for all of us, and Michael appeared to be receptive to what we had to say.'

Michael said:

'In one of our team development sessions, I asked each member of the team what they individually needed from me as their leader. Weighing up the situation, I made an active and open commitment right there and then to focus on changing my own leadership style.'

6. Team resilience

The team noticed that work done in team coaching sessions helped them work with each other, and support each other, when significant and unexpected environmental changes occurred.

Team members said:

'When times are difficult and uncertain, connection and collective development is even more important.'

'The development and coaching work we undertook was central to us building our individual and team resilience.'

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 both professionally and personally.'

7. Leader as coach

Over time, particularly in year three when I was no longer with the team every day, Michael actively took on the leader-as-coach role.

Michael said:

'I fully embraced the role of leader as coach, and I suppose the baton of one-to-one coaching had been passed from Helen to me.'

'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 individual member of the team 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.'

.....
'Leadership was being shared more, and we saw more support from team members in C-suite meetings, which was very fresh and constructive.'
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8. Ripple effect

The work done as a team rubbed off on other parts of the organisation – others noticed and benefited from work within the team.

Team members said:

'We have learnt the benefits of focusing on development, and we have all invested in this for our direct report teams as well, so the benefits flow across the organisation.'

Stakeholders across the organisation said:

'Previously, the team always gave me the impression they were stressed and unapproachable. Now I feel like they have time for me.'

'Team members were more visible, and we were getting to know them better.'

'There is better planning and communication, which is really important to us.'

'Leadership was being shared more, and we saw more support from team members in C-suite meetings, which was very fresh and constructive.'

9. Team leading their own development

Feedback was actively sought and incorporated into future development content throughout the engagement. During year three this went a step further – Michael delegated the leadership role for development purposes to team members. They rotated, taking turns to partner with me pre, post and during team sessions.

Team members said:

'The shared leadership approach meant it wasn't all on Michael and there was more input from the team on [the] content of sessions.'

'Helen supported whoever was in the lead role for sessions, and it was a good learning experience for us too.'

10. Good endings

Near the end of the third year, Michael announced he was leaving the organisation. I suggested we invest time in a team story – a way to capture history, challenges and progress made. The team loved the idea and insisted a future-focused element be added.

Michael said:

'The team asked to focus on future development as well – in effect, allowing time for the team to create their own team development plan going forward.'

'The "good endings" sessions were amongst the most valuable times we spent together as a team. It felt like everyone contributed to the collective story with equal voice.'

'We saw the significant impact our journey had on us and collectively agreed on content.'

Figure 1: Areas the client found most valuable



10 things the client found challenging

Flipping the coin, these are 10 areas, in no particular order, that the team, Michael and other parts of the organisation found most challenging about the work – captured both during the engagement and through post-engagement reflection. Again, my own insights are on hold as we walk in the client's shoes...

1. Environment

The environment the team was working in was volatile and unpredictable. The resulting pressure on the team was distracting, forcing them to focus again and again on short-term survival, rather than innovation and learning.

Team members said:

'It was unbelievable – we could not have made this stuff up!'

'Our environment was extraordinary. It felt like the universe was throwing everything it could at us.'

2. Resistance

Although regular team development days appears in the 'valued' section above, at the beginning there was strong resistance – effectively Michael forced team members to attend.

Michael said:

'Unsurprisingly, the team were hesitant about the process to begin with, partly because it was new to them, and partly because there was trade-off between getting work done now and investing in longer-term development.'

'Did I think the team ready for focused team development and/or coaching process at the beginning? If I am honest, no! My view was that we had a clear strategy in place that included focus on people as an enabler – we were doing it.'



3. Flexibility

The fluidity of agendas and organic content of team development sessions did not suit everyone. Time constraints within sessions were also a challenge.

Michael said:

'The team was caught in the conundrum of appreciating the benefit of fluidity and spending more time on relevant topics as they arose, normally at their own request, versus content dropped from the agenda.'

'Sometimes we felt defeated by only covering part of what we intended to cover. The dynamic around this made it hard for some team members to engage.'

'Sometimes it felt like topics were "left hanging". If picked up in subsequent sessions, a break to reset and re-evaluate topics was beneficial at times. At other times we were unable to recreate "the moment" or flow, and potential benefit was lost.'

4. Models and frameworks

Various team coaching, change management and strategic tools, models and concepts were used throughout the programme – with varying degrees of resonance and uptake.

Team members said:

'It's best to weave content into more practical applications and what is immediately happening for us right now.'

'Helen discussed the model with the team, and they appeared to accept it, but I am not sure any of us fully appreciated what it meant at the time.'

*'We struggled to reach agreement on whether we needed a written purpose for our team at all, let alone agreeing on the wording of it; the strongest critic suggesting we simply needed to "get s**t done", and spending time on developing anything more substantial was a waste of time.'*

5. Leadership style

Returning to Michael's leadership style – previously noted as an area of value. For the first year of the engagement his 'top-down', 'hub-and-spoke' style was completely at odds with the collaborative and trusting culture he sought to foster within the team.

Team members said:

'We do not speak up in meetings, we wait for Michael to make all the calls, and nothing happens unless he is there.'

'Michael makes all the decisions around here.'

Michael said:

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

6. Measurement

The two tangible measures – engagement scores and PERILL diagnostic – were tracked throughout the engagement. However, their use as measures for the purposes of understanding development programme impact was convenient rather than planned.

Michael said:

'Measuring the outcomes of our team development journey was not managed as well as it should have been. Apart from engagement and the diagnostic, we did not discuss, agree or create other tangible measures. Ironically, we were creating a measurement framework for other deliverables and strategic changes we were working on. We should have included development measures in the framework as well.'

7. Speed of change

Change took time to become evident to the team's stakeholders – resulting in more tension. Questions were asked about the value of investing in the team's development.

Stakeholders across the organisation said:

'While we saw great improvements in the third year, improvements should have happened earlier in the team's journey.'

'The impact was not immediately visible in the engagement scores. I think this reflected [that] people [were] sceptical of change.'

8. Ripple effect

The impact of work done by the team on other parts of the organisation – previously noted as an area of value – also resulted in unexpected negative consequences.

Michael said:

'The layer of management below the team exhibited both technical and leadership capability gaps. This constrained the ability of the team to step up to the level I expected of them as they developed.'

'I noticed team members compensating for team managers reporting to them, even stepping in with hands-on work at times, to ensure collective deliverables were met.'

9. Team leading their own development

The value of the team leading their own development, explained above, was mitigated by a lack of experience and the physical capacity constraints. Michael and I often stepped in last minute to fill gaps.

Team members said:

'Being in the leadership role in sessions is hard.'

'I don't feel comfortable in the leadership role in sessions at all. I focus on the content and forget that I am facilitating, or vice versa.'

10. Sponsorship and stakeholders

Post-engagement 360-degree feedback revealed a common theme: stakeholders were not involved in the programme enough.

Stakeholders across the organisation said:

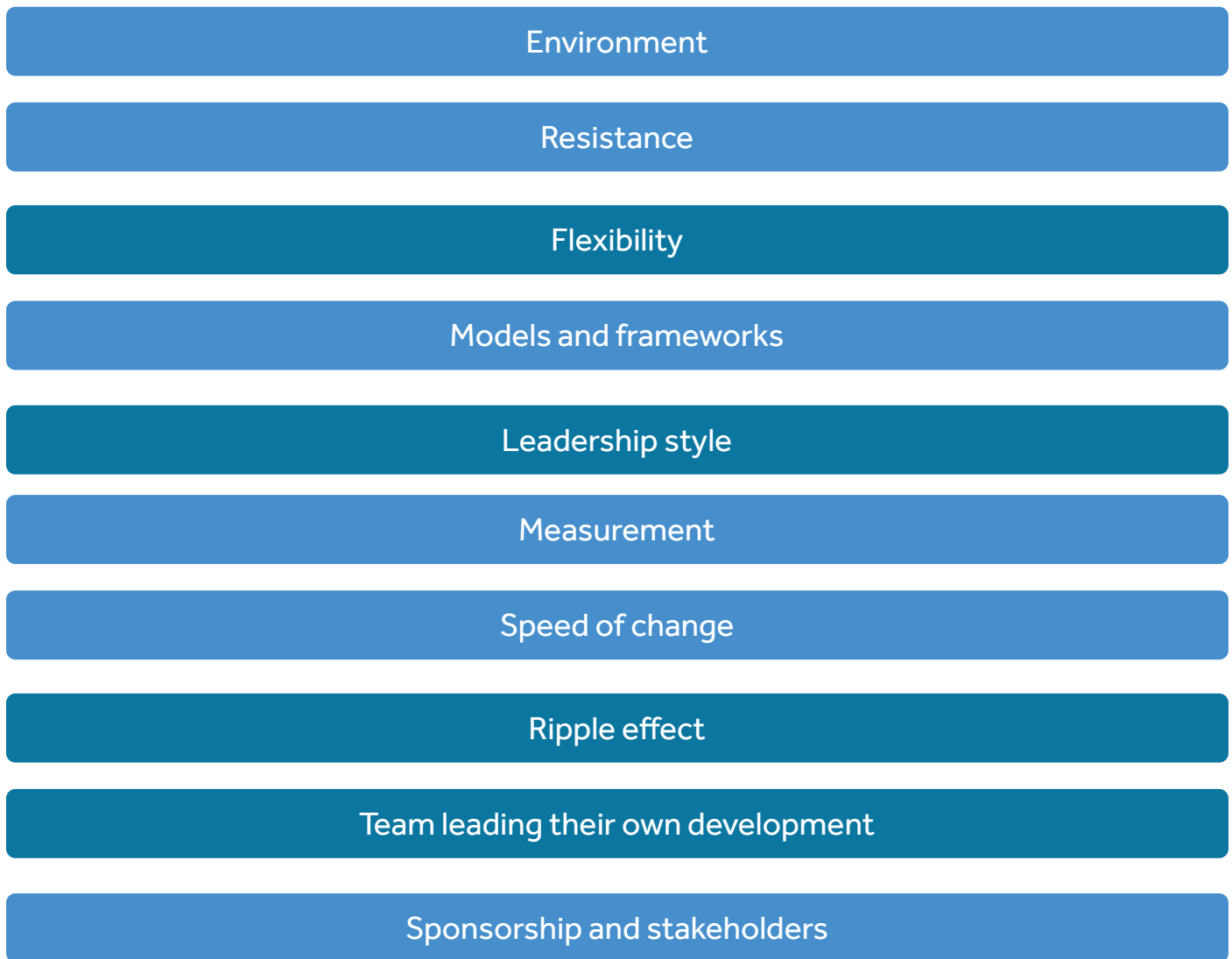
'We should have been engaged more throughout the process. A customer engagement group would have been useful.'

'The first time we were asked to provide input was contributing to this.'

'If representatives from various parts of the organisation had worked with the team, perhaps as a cross-organisation working group or steering committee, more staff would have understood the team better and results would have come faster.'

On the next page, Figure 2 summarises these challenges. Note that some areas of value were also challenging from the client's perspective, and so appear in both lists.

Figure 2: Areas the client found most challenging



Implications

As the team coach in this case, would I choose the same top 10 areas of value and challenge as the client? No!

Looking at the case from the perspective of the team, Michael and other parts of the organisation, rather than my own, highlights five important considerations for all team coaching work.

1. The client's perception of value and challenge might differ from the coach's

Areas the team coach thinks are valuable, or has been taught to believe are valuable, are not necessarily valuable for the client.

For example, many team coaching models highlight the importance of working on shared purpose early on in an engagement. In this case, I initiated conversations about purpose on multiple occasions. Each attempt was met with indifference or blatant resistance (see challenge 4). I also sensed that repeated attempts to bring up the subject were annoying the team.

2. Perception of value and challenge can vary across stakeholder groups

Teams, team leaders, sponsors, human resources or other stakeholders might not agree on what is valuable to work on or include.

In this case, Michael pushed back on my suggestion to directly include stakeholders in our work. Yet, in post-engagement interviews there was a strong message that stakeholders should have been, and wanted to be, directly involved through the development journey (see challenge 10). If I had been aware, I would have pushed harder for stakeholder inclusion.



3. Areas of value can also be challenging

It can be difficult to balance the pros and cons of particular approaches, as many have both beneficial and detrimental impacts within a team's system. It is often impossible to predict what pros and cons might materialise.

In this case, flexibility, leadership style, ripple effect and the team leading their own development appeared on both the value and challenge lists (see Figures 1 and 2).

4. Areas of value and challenge can change over time

What presents as a challenge in one phase of an engagement may be valuable at another time, and vice versa. Circumstances, the environment and team maturity change over time, impacting the value of particular approaches.

Initially, the team in this case found attempts to discuss their shared purpose frustrating and unproductive. However, what is not mentioned above is that changed in the third year. By then team members had increased understanding of their individual roles, their individual and collective challenges and their stakeholders' needs.

5. Areas of value and challenge differ between clients

Just as a team's perception of value and challenge can differ over time, it follows that what one team finds important or difficult is unlikely to be the same for other teams in other circumstances. One shoe size does not fit all!

The experience of walking in the client's shoes in this case highlights the importance of including input from teams, sponsors and relevant stakeholders within team coaching engagements. It is dangerous to assume that what you are experiencing in the team coach role is the same as those you are working with.

Curiosity, flexibility and a desire to learn are important characteristics for team coaches, along with the need to:

- contract and continually re-contract with all stakeholders
- actively seek and incorporate feedback on what is valuable and challenging
- have awareness of the pros and cons of approaches employed

Final words from Michael:

'I hope learning from our collective journey enables other coaches, leaders, teams and organisations to benefit from a more informed and less experimental version of this team development and coaching journey.'



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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).

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