



Teaming for Change

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Teaming is a useful lever to enable change, bring strategy to life, and build collective resilience. Organisations could leave effective teaming to chance, or instead consciously invest in it.

Michael, a team leader, commented on his decision to invest. "A critical part of strategy enablement for us was changing the entire culture. To enable that, I needed a team with modern leadership philosophy based on trust and collaboration." He also said, "This was not a stand-alone team-building exercise. It was complete reengineering of how we operated as a team, as leaders, as a system and as people."

Teaming, or "actively building and developing teams", was a term popularised by Amy Edmondson around ten years ago. Back then, she said the time frame to resolve issues was shrinking as the complexity of our environment was expanding. Her words have been corroborated by events over the last ten years. Edmondson also said that organisations thrive or fail based on how well small groups within them work collectively, not by the capabilities of individuals within them.

So how can teaming be activated? In Michael's case, he sponsored an extensive team coaching programme.

What is team coaching?

An experienced team coach, or co-coaches, support a team to have the conversations they need to have. The coaching 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 - not one spaghetti and marshmallow tower in sight.

In practice, a team might need some time to warm up. Often, coaching conversations will form part of a team off-site, with some more familiar facilitated content surrounding them.

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What are the benefits?

Conversations might focus on improved collaboration, prioritisation, delegation, accountability, problem-solving, decision-making, and learning - whatever the hot topic is for the team at the time.

Increased focus on how a team works together, rather than on what they deliver, ultimately supports staff, suppliers, and customers. Stakeholders working with Michael's team observed "better planning and communication" and "leadership being shared more", benefitting everyone within the organisation, as well as external stakeholders.

Returning to the three useful levers of teaming: **enabling change, bringing strategy to life, and building collective resilience**. Let us run through some scenarios to help bring team coaching to life.

Enabling change

Imagine a new team has been formed post-restructure, or a new system or process implemented, or all of these at once. Often, once a change initiative has gone live, the change team, or human resources, dissipate, leaving the leader and team to work it out for themselves. Even the best designed and executed change will fail if not embedded well.

Now consider a team coach working in partnership with that team, helping them clarify why they exist and what their objectives are. Picture them tailoring their communication, stakeholder relationships, and priorities to the team's particular challenges. Surely, the new team will perform more effectively and move through forming and storming stages faster.

In a joint study by the Human Capital Institute and International Coach Federation in 2018, it was found that coaching was an effective way to sustain change. Why? It is bespoke, brings theoretical concepts to life, and takes unique environmental circumstances of the client into consideration.

Bringing strategy to life

Imagine a board has endorsed a new five-year strategic plan. Expectations, outcomes and targets are clear - how they will be met is not. This is the responsibility of leaders and teams within the organisation.

Michael was in that exact situation, struggling to find capacity and capability within his team to follow through. To formulate his execution plan, he consciously applied McKinsey's 7-S framework. "The first part of 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-S's (shared values, style, staff, and skills) needed to align for our strategy to be successful."

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Think of a team coach helping team members to articulate and share their individual, then connecting shared values across the team, and linking those with organisation-wide values. We know alignment of values improves sense of belonging and performance.

Consider working with a team coach to understand individual and collective leadership styles, and why and how those styles might need to adapt in different circumstances to support new strategic imperatives.

Imagine a team understanding their individual and collective strengths, how their strengths align with strategic enablement, how to maximise strengths, and what staff development or changes might be needed to fill any gaps. Resulting recruitment and development plans would be aligned with strategic direction.

The new strategy might require leaders and teams to communicate more effectively. Consider a team working with a team coach on specific skill development areas, such as effective ways to pitch new initiatives, or having difficult conversations. Again, improving team effectiveness and accelerating strategic enablement.

Building collective resilience

What if there is an earthquake, and a team needs to move their operations to a new site overnight? Imagine, two months later, there are funding issues requiring immediate reduction in resources available. Another month later, there is a global pandemic, and overnight a team, their entire organisation and all their suppliers and customers need to either close down or work remotely.

Consider how over time, working with a team coach on how they work together can build a team's comfort with the unknown, enabling more effective collective response to adversity and unforeseen events.

A member of Michael's team said "Our collective leadership in difficult times meant that, ironically, traumatic events brought us closer together. We discovered depths of resilience we didn't know we had. We all believe the development and coaching work we undertook was central to us building our individual and team resilience."

Organisation benefits

The argument for proactive teaming and team coaching as change enablers is strong, and even better, the positive impact will be felt wider than the team being coached. A study by O'Connor and Cavanagh found the benefits of coaching extended widely across an organisation, and significant gains were felt by those not directly involved at all.

Michael's team noticed too. A team member said, "Everyone experienced the coaching ripple effect. Similar to the effect across our team, our team agreement, effective meeting structure, improved accountability, and better communication skills were new habits applied to every interaction we had across the organisation."

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An organisation-wide ripple effect need not to be left to chance. One-to-one coaching along-side team coaching helps reinforce change, whether the coach is a professional or a skilled team leader. Michael said, "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."

An integrated programme coaching multiple teams within an organisation in parallel is possible and gaining popularity in some parts of the world. Focusing on project, agile or horizontal teams is even more common.

A logical next step would be for leaders proficient in one-to-one coaching to expand their skillset to team coaching, enabling them to better support their own teams to have the conversations they need to have. Watch this space!

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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