

# INSIGHT GUIDE #88

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

## How can team coaches remain flexible in rapidly changing environments?

'The environment in which we were operating across the team coaching programme was extraordinary. It felt like the universe was throwing everything it could at us. Yet we survived. The development work we undertook was central to us building our individual and team resilience' (Jane, team member).

This guide draws on a real team coaching case study to illustrate the implications of rapidly changing environments on a team coaching engagement, highlighting the need for flexibility throughout.



Where business comes to life

## Flexibility and change

Change is no longer an occasional disruption for teams – it is constant.

The term VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity), has been extended to VUCAH to include *hyper-connectedness*. With a fifth industrial revolution playing out, some believe VUCAA might be more appropriate – the *acceleration of AI*.

Whichever acronym is used, teams are increasingly required to pivot and evolve, whether in response to technological advancements, shifting market conditions or evolving customer expectations. Those teams that match or exceed the rate of change in their environment will survive and thrive, and those that do not will fade away.

In team coaching, we are taught to meet the team where they are at. If the team is operating in a VUCA environment, then team coaching engagements need to match or exceed the rate of change in that environment to be effective.

Before considering the implications of this, let's briefly review the case that the insights in this guide are based on.

### The case

This case focuses on a new senior leadership team, formed post re-structure.

For the first 18 months of the engagement I was brought in as a transformation manager, reporting to Michael (the team leader). My remit was supporting the team to become a collective unit and helping individual members become great leaders. Regular team coaching sessions were used as the primary intervention with them as a collective. I worked with them for a further 18 months as an external consultant, with scope during this second phase limited to collective team coaching.

The environment the team and I were working in was complex and challenging throughout the three-year period the case covered. 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 wider organisation was subject to funding constraints, changes in operating regulations, building moves, multiple restructures, and global crises, all of which were fundamentally changing the way the organisation and the team worked.

In this context, what are the implications for flexibility and team coaching?

### Flexibility and participation

A fundamental implication for team coaching within a VUCA environment is the problem of getting the team to be physically present, to be focused during sessions, to have prepared in advance where necessary, and to take their agreed actions back into their business-as-usual environment. If the team is in survival mode, business-as-usual is likely to take all of their attention.



Using the analogy of football training, it is like expecting the team to maintain focus at practice even when the pitch is flooded, the lights have gone out and someone has set off a fire alarm in the locker room.

In the case study we are using, team members often asked to be excused from team coaching sessions. Michael declined their requests, effectively forcing attendance for the first six months of the engagement.

#### Michael said

'The team had a new structure to implement, new roles, new challenges, new technology and processes to implement, new teams to recruit and build, and I was asking them to work on their leadership and how we operated as a team at the same time.'

The good news is, once the team could see the benefit of attending sessions for themselves, mandating them was no longer required.

## Flexibility and content

The content of team coaching sessions can be used to increase a team's flexibility by explicitly discussing topics related to agility, and by providing a safe space to practice and build flexibility.

### Explicit discussion

By explicitly focusing on topics – such as change, agility, collaboration, embracing diverse perspectives, innovation, making better decisions, making quick decisions and solving complex problems – team coaching can include content about what change means for a team and how they can address it. In football training, this is similar to reviewing recordings of past games and developing new game-plays for the future.

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### Space to practice

By encouraging open dialogue and psychological safety in relation to any topic, team coaching creates a safe space to practise working with flexibility. In football, this would be like drill training; when skills are needed in a game, areas developed in training kick in automatically.

The case drawn on in this guide included both. Examples of explicit session content include working with personality and

strengths profiling. These sessions helped team members get to know each other, value differences and consider flexible ways to achieve certain outcomes.

## Flexibility and process

Team coaching is sometimes described as a step-by-step process, and includes periods of evaluation, scoping, delivering, closing and reviewing. Team development plans are also encouraged. However, if the objective of team coaching is to work on content relevant to the team and to meet them where they are at, then for a team that is engulfed in a VUCA environment, the team coaching process and content needs to match that.

During a football match, players adapt to shifting dynamics of the game as they unfold. Sticking rigidly to pre-rehearsed gameplay is not appropriate.

The case study is a great example of holding processes and content lightly, acknowledging that plans are likely to change, and continually contracting with the leader, the team and other stakeholders.

Michael supported the approach, commenting that:

**'The content of development sessions was extremely fluid and flexible. Often, agenda items were changed several times leading up to a session, the morning of a session, and sometimes in the moment, during a session.'**

Flexibility meant that team development plans were more of a retrospective record of content covered, rather than a detailed forward plan for future sessions.





### Flexibility and team membership

A volatile environment might mean changes in team membership, interrupting collective direction of travel, as new team members are inducted, and as lost team members are grieved. The content of team sessions may need to be repeated or re-started multiple times during an engagement. Team induction and grieving could also be a useful focus of team coaching conversations themselves.

In the same way, in football, mid-season player trades can shake up dynamics and progress.

In the case study we are using, there were numerous changes in team membership, particularly during years two and three. A team member said: 'There was a lot of disruption around re-structures, with various people joining and leaving the leadership team, which in effect required forming a new team each time. The people who joined brought valuable contributions, and I missed them when they left, so that wasn't the issue; it was more the chopping and changing. The dynamic hindered us.'

### Flexibility and team resilience

In a VUCA environment, teams constantly face mutual challenges that may impact their collective performance or individual wellbeing. Such challenges can include funding cuts, global pandemics, and restructures. Team resilience is the collective response to that adversity, and their ability to overcome it together (Hartwig et al, 2020).

A football team recovering from an early conceded goal needs to stay composed, the members need to rely on each other, draw on their collective skills, recall what they have practised, adjust the game plan and push for a comeback.

Team resilience is based on many characteristics, including (Hartwig et al, 2020):

- the resilience of individual team members
- the quality of team processes, such as ground rules, decision-making and planning
- collective emotional support
- psychological safety and trust
- team identity and purpose

All these characteristics can either be the explicit subject of team coaching sessions or emerge as the team practises working together in a safe environment on other topics (see 'Flexibility and content', above).

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The team in this case study recognised the impact on their collective resilience of the coaching content and of having a safe space to practise in. A team member said: '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.'

And Michael added: 'I'm grateful we started the development journey when we did, as the groundwork done early on played a big part in the team and I surviving later on, both professionally and personally.'

## Flexibility and the coach

So far, we have talked about teams working in VUCA environments and the need for team coaching content and processes to match that environment. It follows that team coaches need to be in line too, by having a curious, flexible and learning mindset.

In football, the team's coach needs to constantly read the game, adjust tactics, embrace new strategies and be ready to shift approaches to enable them to guide the team effectively.

Also, continuous uncertainty, rapid change and complexity within coaching engagements can be exhausting, impacting the mental and physical health of coaches. Just as teams must respond to adversity and overcome it, so too must their coaches – resiliency is vital.

This need for resilience is recognised in the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (2020) team coaching accreditation standards, which require coaches to have adequate self-care, supervision and support.

While I consider myself naturally curious, flexible and willing to learn, I struggled with personal resilience throughout the three-year period of the case study. Despite significant investment in wellbeing, supervision and other support activities, it was one of the most challenging experiences of my working life. (For more, refer to *Insight Guide #85: Ready, set, go – what do new team coaches need to know?*).



## Implications

In VUCA, VUCAH, or VUCAA environments, teams must keep up with – if not outpace – rapid shifts around them to stay effective.

Rigid, one-size-fits-all development approaches will not cut it with teams facing shifting priorities, changing dynamics and unexpected external pressures. Team coaching can be a powerful support for teams in these conditions, but to be effective, it needs to be relevant and therefore flexible, constantly adjusting to where the team is at and adapting to what emerges in real time.

To enable this, team coaches need high levels of awareness, presence and flexibility to sense what is happening and adapt in real time. The interplay between the environment, the team, the coaching process and the coach must be balanced – each with enough capacity to hold and work with the complexity at hand.

Just like in football, success depends on everyone involved being attuned to the game: individual players, the collective team, the coach and supporters. They must all be in sync while staying sharply aware of the ever-changing conditions on the pitch and of their wider environment.

## Henley Centre for Coaching

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The Centre provides formal accredited coach training through our *Professional Certificate in Executive Coaching* and *MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change*, and accredited supervision training through our *Professional Certificate in Supervision* and *Professional Certificate in Team, Board and Systemic Coaching*. These programmes are delivered in the UK, at venues across the world and online.

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The Henley coaching team consists of leading practitioners and academics who have shaped the coaching profession since the late 1990s. They have written many of the most popular coaching books and they continue to publish in leading management journals and to contribute at conferences worldwide. Their writing, thinking and research informs our teaching and ensures our programmes are at the cutting edge of coaching practice.

The Centre offers annual membership to all professional coaches, providing a virtual-learning environment where the members shape research and practice in coaching. Check out our website for details on how we can help you and your business come to life.



### 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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Henley Business School  
Greenlands  
Henley-on-Thames  
Oxfordshire  
RG9 3AU  
Tel +44 (0)1491 418 767  
[henley.ac.uk/coaching](http://henley.ac.uk/coaching)

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