
Team Coaching: a Literature Review

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Introduction

The current economic climate has led to cuts in budgets and rapid organisational change, which has left organisations looking for new ways to engage their teams and maximise the efficiency of their employees in order to remain ahead of their competitors. A survey by Hay of 350 HR directors, found that more than one-third of respondents were now complimenting individual coaching and 360-degree feedback with dedicated team coaching (*Personnel Today*, 2003). Whilst many consultancy and coaching providers are keen to offer their version of 'team coaching', there is, as of yet, very little empirical academic research to explore fully what it is, the most appropriate time for its implementation, and the benefits for organisations and employees.

This literature review aims to draw from emergent empirical academic evidence where possible as well as from practitioner articles and case studies, to answer five questions on team coaching:

1. What is team coaching?
2. How is it different from other team development techniques?
3. When is it appropriate to use?
4. What is the evidence that it works?
5. What is the future for team coaching?

1 What is Team Coaching?

What do we mean by a ‘team’?

Within the academic literature there is much debate on the definition of a team and how it differs from a group of individuals (Robotham, 2008; Fisher, 1997). Some academics argue that the differences between groups and teams reflect only semantics and it is impossible, if not pointless, to separate the two (Guzzo and Dickson, 1996), whereas others, however, have rejected this notion (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993; Fisher, 1997). Nevertheless, numerous definitions of teams have been developed. One that is commonly adopted is that of Kozlowski and Bell (2003) who stated that teams are:

‘collectives who exist to perform organisationally relevant tasks, share one or more common goals, interact socially, exhibit task interdependencies, maintain and manage boundaries and are embedded in an organisational context that sets boundaries, constrains the team, and influences exchanges with other units in the broader entity.’

Katzenbach and Smith (1999) also described teams as:

‘A small number of people with complimentary skills, who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach, for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.’

The subtleties within both definitions seek to explain why a team is different from a group or a collective. Teams have limitations in terms of size, as the more people involved within them, the more complex the interactions and the less able the group is to function as a whole (Clutterbuck, 2009). The more people you have within a team, the more likely that sub-groups will develop. Groups do not have a limitation on size. Secondly, team members need to identify with the team, interact with other team members and have a clear sense of shared purpose and inter-dependence on other members (Kettlely and Hirsh, 2000). Katzenbach and Smith (1993) believe that as teams rely on individual and collective accountability, team performance is

higher as they produce outcomes based upon individual efforts and the joint contribution of their members – ‘a team is more than the sum of its parts’.

Before embarking on ‘team coaching’, organisations must be clear on the definition of a team, and to be certain that their employees are members of a team rather than a group. If team coaching is applied to employees who are not part of a real team, then the benefits from the investment in coaching are likely to be very limited.

Why the focus on teams?

The use of teams has been prominent within modern organisational life for some years (Thompson, 2004; Hackman, 2003). Research by Offerman and Spiros as far back as 2001 identified that 82 per cent of organisations with 100 employees or more reported using team structures. Organisations in both the public and private sectors are increasingly team based. The research evidence on the relationships between teams and absolute performance is by no means conclusive or consistent. But the prevailing view among researchers is that teamwork is a major contributor to improved performance, productivity and quality of decision making. It has been argued that, in many circumstances, teams are more effective than individuals because team members can share workloads, monitor their colleagues’ behaviours and co-ordinate different areas of expertise (Mathieu et al., 2000). Cases in support of this argument come from a variety of industries (Banker et al., 1996; Wellins et al., 1994). IES research (Kettley and Hirsh, 2000) also highlighted the enormous potential of cross-functional teams for both individual and organisational learning.

Definitions of team coaching

With the rise in popularity and utilisation of team coaching, comes the need for clearer clarification on what is meant. Researchers Hackman and Wageman (2005) describe team coaching as:

‘direct interaction with a team intended to help members in the co-ordinated and task-appropriate use of their collective resources in accomplishing the team’s work.’

A number of practitioners have also attempted to define team coaching in a way that is easily comprehensible for organisations. For instance, David Clutterbuck (2009) defines team coaching as:

‘Helping the team improve performance and the processes by which performance is achieved, through reflection and dialogue.’

Due to the lack of a commonly accepted definition for team coaching, organisations must be sure that what they wish to gain from the coaching is in alignment with what the coach is offering. Team coaches must be sure that this is exactly what they are offering as opposed to team facilitation or team building.

2 How is it Different from Other Team Development Techniques?

How is it different from team facilitation?

Organisations new to team coaching may view it as similar to team facilitation processes or team building exercises with which they may be more familiar. However, there are important differences. Team facilitation is where the facilitator leads the team through a conversation in which they have a clear perception of where it is going. The process tends to be composed of a few short interventions designed to solve the current problems of the team. In contrast, a team coach is more emergent within the team and helps with the quality of thinking rather than leading towards a specific realisation. The coach helps the team build their longer-term skills and capacity to manage new challenges from their own resources (Clutterbuck, 2009). This will usually require an extended period of intervention.

How is it different from team building?

Team building has been defined as:

'a specific intervention to address issues relating to the development of the team. Typically, it consists of a one (or more) day programme focussed on the improvement of interpersonal relations, improved productivity or better alignment with organisational goals.'

(Kriek and Venter 2009)

Team building aims to examine, diagnose, and act upon behaviour and interpersonal relationships (Schein, 1999). Whilst there is evidence to show that this may work in helping team members strengthen collaboration there is mixed evidence of whether this translates into sustained productivity and performance (Kriek and Venter, 2009; Klien, 2009). In contrast, team coaching focuses on underlying skills and processes such as how the team communicates both

internally and externally and relates to the work tasks (Clutterbuck, 2009). This will typically take much longer than one or two days, but may have a more lasting effect on the productivity and output of the team.

How is it different from one-to-one coaching?

Research on coaching can be found in a number of different disciplines including: psychology, business management, adult education, and training. The majority of studies of 'coaching at work' deal with executive one-to-one coaching. Within an organisational setting, coaching is defined variously as a:

'form of tailored work-related development ... which spans business, functional and personal skills.'

(Carter, 2001)

'process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective.'

(Peterson, 2002)

Academic literature has tried to clarify what executive coaching involves and the approaches coaches take. Four major activities occur in coaching relationships: data gathering; feedback; implementation of the intervention; and evaluation (Feldman and Lankau, 2005). There are many ways that coaches can approach the coaching process depending on their academic backgrounds and intellectual traditions (Carter, 2001). Coaching approaches include: Psychodynamic, person-centred, cognitive therapeutic, and system-orientated (Feldman and Lankau, 2005).

Although there is now a significant body of research into coaching in the workplace, the vast majority focuses on approaches to one-to-one executive coaching. There is very little empirical evidence on whether any of these approaches can be transferred and applied effectively to team coaching and team learning due to the complex dynamics and variances within the team. The literature also provides very little empirical evidence supporting one coaching approach over another. It is therefore up to the coach themselves to decide which approach would best suit their client and provide them with the necessary skills to aid their development.

A summary of the main differences between team coaching and other related development forms are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Main differences between team coaching and related forms of development

Team Coaching	One-to-one coaching	Team facilitation	Team building
Emergent within the team	Coachee-led	Facilitator-led	Consultant-led
Extended period of intervention	Series of sessions	Series of short interventions	One specific intervention, eg 1-2 day 'event'
Thinking based	Incorporates cycles of feedback and action Spans business, job and personal issues	Conversation based	Action-based
Focus on building longer-term skills and capacity	Focus on improving effectiveness	Focus on current/specific problems	Focus on behaviour, relationships and collaboration

Source: IES, 2010

Can coaches trained to deliver one-to-one coaching easily switch to deliver team coaching?

For a coach entering team coaching, they not only have to manage the individual one-to-one relationships but also be aware of the complexities of working with a team. There is an extensive body of academic literature surrounding team effectiveness and performance (for a comprehensive literature review see Mathieu et al., 2008). To understand the sheer quantity of studies that explore the numerous factors and complex interactions that have a beneficial or detrimental effect on a team's performance, some of the literature indicated below can be read.

An overview of the literature suggests that variances in team performance can come about through team diversity and the demographic make-up of a team (Kilduff et al., 2000; Jehn and Bezrukova, 2004; Webber and Donahue, 2001; Jackson et al., 2003; Kirkman and Shapiro, 2001; Leonard et al., 2004; Li and Hambrick, 2005; Timmerman, 2000; Jackson and Joshi, 2004), the team leader's competencies at managing their team (Gilley et al., 2010), the way in which different teams learn (Edmondson, 1999; Van den Bossche et al., 2006; Schippers et al., 2003; Van Dyck, 2005; Van Woerkon, 2003), and reach decisions at different speeds, the form and operation of the team, the membership of the team and the fact that some members may also be involved with other teams. A team coach must also be aware that they have to balance the confidentiality from one-to-one sessions into wider team conversations.

Within these areas, there have been many studies conducted that, superficially at least, appear to contradict each other, but actually demonstrate the complex interactions between the make-up of a team's dynamics and that of its effectiveness

and performance. All these factors must be considered before a coach embarks on team coaching.

Views from employers and experienced coaches

Many large organisations have trained cadres of internal coaches – usually managers or HR specialists who, in addition to their day job, are trained and deployed as coaches. A recent IES member e-survey (Carter, 2010) found that 60 per cent of organisations thought that it would be very easy for their internal coaches to coach teams as well as individuals. However, experienced coaches and coach training providers tend not to agree with this conclusion. For a coach to move into team coaching they must realise the considerable effort it takes, as the main principles of one-to-one coaching are magnified. David Sole, the Head of Leadership Development at Whitehead Mann has stated that team coaching: *'can be like running eight coaching sessions simultaneously'*. Not only does the team coach have to be knowledgeable in their one-to-one coaching skills when working with individual members of the team and the team leader, but also they must be aware of the additional complexities of the team that they will have to manage. Damion Won, Director at The Performance Coach told IES:

'Whilst I do feel that 1-2-1 coaching skills and capabilities are valuable in a team coaching environment, and that a team coach should be a highly skilled 1-2-1 coach; there are a great deal more dynamics in team coaching. Therefore a team coach will need to be highly experienced in working with group dynamics as well as group learning processes to be effective.'

Hilary Rowland, currently Director of Leading for Health at NHS London (formerly at PriceWaterhouse and BBC) says that group dynamics can be tricky. She suggests some questions for internal coaches to consider before embarking on team coaching:

'What are the hidden agendas? What is the team avoiding dealing with? What are the things they are finding it hard to talk about? What is the team hoping you will do for them? Do you have someone you can go to like a supervisor to talk over what is happening? It is very easy to get sucked into individual agendas: can you maintain boundaries of confidentiality and neutrality?'

The view from the professional coaches would suggest that many of the coaches who are trained in one-to-one coaching will still need to undertake a great deal more training in order to feel comfortable understanding and working with the team as a combined entity. It would also suggest that organisations do not appreciate the complexity of team coaching, and it is important that they have a full understanding of the time and effort it may take to train their one-to-one coaches to be effective team coaches.

3 When is Team Coaching Appropriate to Use?

In this section we highlight the findings from what academic research there actually is on team coaching. The majority of the academic research to date has focused around team leader coaching and the effects this has on team performance. Whilst some have found there to be positive effects on team performance (Edmondson, 1999), others have found there to be very little influence (Wageman, 2001). Aside from team performance, other studies have found that team leader coaching has a positive influence on team member relationship quality, member satisfaction (Wageman, 2001), team empowerment (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999), and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999).

More recent research has explored when team coaching is appropriate to use, and suggests that team coaches need to have a clear understanding of when the time is and is not propitious to coach the team.

Hackman and Wageman (2005) focus on the functions of the team as a whole and theorise a method of team coaching. They focussed on four main aims which they believe would enable team coaching to be most beneficial for team performance. These aims are coaching functions, timing of the coaching, team tasks and team design, as described in Table 2.

One limitation of this theory of team coaching is that it is not grounded in empirical evidence that addresses all the links between the coaching intervention, the team process and the team performance (Rezania and Lingham, 2009). A notable study by Chin-Yun Liu et al. (2009) has attempted to provide empirical evidence on these links by applying the Hackman and Wageman theory to Research and Development teams from industries within Taiwan. They found that not all the team performance processes of effort (motivational), strategy (consultative) and skills and knowledge (educational) impacted the relationship between team coaching and team effectiveness. Team coaching directly affected team members'

Table 2: Hackman and Wageman's aims of team coaching

Coaching functions	<p>A coach should move away from the idea that better team performance is brought about by establishing better inter-personal relationships between team members as this is not always the case (Straw, 1975; Guzzo et al., 1986; Woolley, 1998). Instead, a coach should provide three distinct functions:</p> <p><i>Motivational coaching</i> addresses the effort of the team and encourages process gains such as shared commitment to the group and minimising process losses such as 'social loafing'. Coaching by the team leader can motivate members to devote themselves to the teamwork and share workload (Parker, 1994).</p> <p><i>Consultative coaching</i> addresses performance strategy and fosters the invention of new ways of proceeding with the work that is aligned with the task requirements. Denison et al. (1996) found that successful leaders facilitate flexible problem-solving and team development.</p> <p><i>Educational coaching</i> fosters the development and appropriate use of team members' knowledge and skill. Team leader coaching increases team psychological safety which in turn increases learning behaviours and improves members' skills and knowledge (Edmondson, 1999).</p>
Timing of coaching	<p>Specific elements of team coaching are most effective when carried out at specific intervals of a team's life cycle. They proposed that motivational coaching is more helpful at the beginning of a performance period, consultative coaching at the mid-point of a performance period and educational coaching when the performance activities have been completed. Although they agreed that coaching was not irrelevant outside of these periods (some coaching to help members co-ordinate activities or coaching to reinforce good team work processes may be beneficial) it would not have as great an impact.</p>
Team tasks	<p>For coaching to have a positive effect on team performance, it needs to focus on the most salient team performance processes for a given task. For example, if a team were assigned with moving materials, then the only process that is required is the level of effort that team members expend. Focussing coaching on other processes that are not needed, or are constrained, would be ineffectual and may even decrease team performance as it would redirect employees' time away from the most important process needed to complete the job successfully.</p>
Team design	<p>Teams need to be well structured and supported in order for competent coaching, which focuses on the three functional areas highlighted above, to be most beneficial. Poor coaching interventions aimed at poorly structured and supported teams will be more detrimental than beneficial for team performance.</p>

Source: Hackman and Wageman, 2005

efforts and skills and knowledge and therefore influenced how they selected and applied strategy in teamwork. Although the contributions of skills and knowledge of team members did not foster team effectiveness directly, it helped members identify good strategies for team tasks. They found that team coaching improved members' efforts, and skills and knowledge, which in turn improved their strategy selection – and so enhanced their effectiveness as a team. This is different from Hackman and Wageman's theory, as they believed that team coaching would directly affect all three areas of team performance (effort, strategy, skills and knowledge) which in turn would increase team effectiveness. It is unclear, however, whether these findings can be applied to other types of teams within other cultures.

More recently, research by Reich (2009) has attempted to examine the roles (rather than functions) that coaches can play when working with a product development team in an educational setting. The results are empirically tested and it is hoped that they can form the basis of a conceptual framework. Through a mixed method approach of qualitative and quantitative data analysis, Reich distilled five fundamental coaching roles, termed:

1. **consultant** (problem-focused intervention due to urgent product or process related needs)
2. **supervisor** (problem-focussed intervention due to high authority of the coach)
3. **instructor** (problem-focussed guidance to impart knowledge and expertise)
4. **facilitator** (coaching as a loose, independent relation that focuses on the offer of specialised services by the coach) and
5. **mentor** (coaching as voluntary, sometimes emotionally-related interaction that focuses on mental support, environmental protection and non-expert task-related help).

With two different frameworks being established focussing on both the functions (Hackman and Wageman, 2005) of team coaching and the role of the team coach (Reich, 2009), it has provided a foundation for further academic evidence to build upon and so enlighten the field of team coaching.

4 What is the Evidence that Team Coaching Works?

Within the academic literature there is little empirical evidence to state the *benefits* of team coaching. However, a number of practitioners have provided a business case for team coaching and have published case studies to show how it can work and the benefits it can provide for an organisation.

Clutterbuck (2009) proposed that team coaching could be used to:

- Improve some specific aspect or aspects of team performance: the coach makes sure the team are asking the right questions, at the right time, in order to achieve the shifting requirements. It also helps improve the leader's ability to manage the performance of individuals.
- Make things happen faster: team coaching can help a team move rapidly through the stages of development that may be hindered without a coach due to mistrust, poor communication, and avoidance of important but less obvious questions.
- Make things happen differently: where culture change is accompanied by individual and team coaching, the pace and depth of the change will rapidly increase by supporting people as they come to terms with new attitudes and behaviours.

Coaching practitioners have provided descriptions of their work which they term 'team coaching'. We present two case examples below to give an idea of current practice.

Case example 1: Jaguar and Land Rover

Peter Wall, a coach for Jaguar and Land Rover, describes how he works on three different levels with the team:

1. with the leader of the team on personal effectiveness and impact
2. with the team as a whole, coaching them on their relationships and effectiveness
3. with individuals among the team who may need to change their approach in order to move forward.

Wall carried out team coaching for a period of months while Land Rover was producing a new product. He initially worked with the leader to establish what success would look like and set out standards for how the leader should behave in order to progress the project. While undertaking specific one-to-one coaching with the team leader he also ran team development workshops with the team as a whole and any interventions he used focussed on the business needs and were of direct relevance to the team's work. He stated *'that if the team wanted to work on team effectiveness, I would observe them doing some real work and then help them to understand what they had learned from that'*. The main approach that Wall took while working with the team was to stress the integrity of the coach and to make the team believe that he was there for their collective benefit and there were no alliances between members.

This proved successful in helping the team to produce the product but also helped them to make their own process interventions and gave them the ability to coach themselves without the need for a coach.

Source: Personnel Today, 2006

Case example 2: NHS South East Coast

Coach and OD consultant Hilary Rowland was asked by Steph Hood (Director of Communication and Engagement at NHS South East Coast) to undertake team coaching with one team that was experiencing tension and frustration, and a lack of team identity, values and behavioural norms. Steph wanted the team to undertake team coaching, as she wished for something more enduring and longer term, which would pay more dividends in the long-run as opposed to team building or team facilitation. Team coaching was selected as a way to develop the team in real time and real life rather than in a one-off short fix. The team coaching inputs spanned a period of nine months.

The coaching that was delivered focussed on helping the team think about how they sustained their already high performance. Initially, the team had difficulties with getting beyond the 'forming' stage of development, as there were high numbers of

vacancies and high turnover rates, which meant that there was little sense of stability. The team felt disjointed and people were worried about upsetting one another. As the team had grown quickly, they had not given sufficient attention to management issues and the systems and procedures needed to function effectively. The team also seemed to suffer from a lack of confidence in its own ability, and was looking for someone to come in from the outside to help to fix it.

A mixture of development techniques were used including Appreciative Inquiry, MBTI and 360 degree feedback. Through these the team became more confident and started to communicate more effectively. They had honest conversations and were able to identify some shared thinking and agreement on core issues. Through the 360 feedback and MBTI, they became more self-aware and more supportive of one another. 360 feedback was very effective at giving team members a chance to feed back about others in a safe and confidential environment, and also receive honest and constructive feedback themselves. This increased members' confidence by realising what others appreciated and valued in them and their work. Facilitation skills were used throughout the coaching to enable discussion to flow. As a coach, it was important to remain impartial and independent and give a holistic team overview. The team had to set time aside to focus on the work. A number of benefits were noticed following the team coaching session, such as:

- a better sense of 'team' with less tension and unhappiness
- changes in recruitment and turnover so it is not the same group that the coaching began with, but the core has remained consistent
- a clear set of team values and behaviours with which to identify
- a greater sense of confidence in abilities to address issues that arise
- a greater extent of individuals taking personal responsibility
- a desire to continue developing and a willingness to engage with real issues affecting team development.

Source: Rowland, 2010

5 What is the Future of Team Coaching?

It is clear that there needs to be more empirical evidence that highlights the benefits of team coaching on team performance. The introduction of Hackman and Wageman's 'Theory of team coaching' (2005) and Reich (2009), has provided empirical foundations for which further studies can be carried out to understand the role of the team coach and the conditions (task, team, contextual, developmental) under which team coaching can meaningfully influence team performance.

Despite this lack of empirical evidence, coaching providers are still offering various ranges of team coaching for organisations that are very keen to take it up. This can be seen in the number of tool kits that are currently being sold to organisations as a way to improve the performance of their team. Companies attach a high importance to team effectiveness, particularly in the current economic climate, and therefore see team coaching interventions as a way to improve performance. Team coaching interventions are being called upon when teams go through major transitions in role or membership, whenever they encounter significant problems, and a different perspective, or better quality reflection and decision making processes, may benefit them or whenever a major shift in behaviour is required.

Currently, team coaching has predominantly been limited to executive teams or board level, as these are seen as the teams that can influence change within the organisation and therefore need to work together effectively. As team coaching is relatively expensive when resourced using external experts, it has been limited in its widespread use. In the future, this situation may change as organisations try to equip their most experienced internal coaches with the additional skills necessary to carry out team coaching. However, it is important that they are given the correct training, and have the appropriate knowledge of team dynamics and complexities to undertake this task.

Now that a clearer definition of team coaching has been established, more credible sources of training courses are emerging, which will provide coaches with a better

understanding of what team coaching is, and the complex competencies required. This is sure to result in a rise in team coaching due to the demand from organisations that are looking for new ways to stay ahead of their competitors.

Summary of main learning points to maximise the benefits from team coaching

- Be clear on the definition of a team and make sure your targeted employees are part of a real team rather than a group.
- Don't underestimate the complexity of working with teams. Internal coaches may need more training in group dynamics in addition to their one-to-one coaching skills.
- Consider the most propitious time for the team to be coached, taking into account the team's life cycle, structure, and specific tasks they are working on.

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