

Team coaching

The future of leadership development



*An interview with Richard Boston
Managing Director at LeaderSpace*

Team coaching has been around for years but is still very much an emerging discipline. Team leaders and their organisations typically find it hard to understand, hard to buy and hard to predict what impact a team coaching intervention will have. In this interview, Psychologist and Team Coach Richard Boston sheds light on the value of team coaching and the reasons it's not more common, and advises on how we should go about selecting the best coaches for our teams.



First of all, for those of us with vague or varied notions of what team coaching is, could you clarify what you mean by the term ‘team coaching’?

Team coaching is very much an emerging discipline and the term is used interchangeably with a host of others. Team coaches also vary greatly in their approaches and draw from a wide range of disciplines, so it's easy to get confused. At LeaderSpace, we define team coaching as a process by which one or more coaches works with a whole team, both when they are together and when they are apart, in order to help them improve their collective performance. We practice a variant called ‘systemic team coaching’, which recognises that the team exists within a system. Thus the coaching helps the team engage more effectively with its key stakeholders to jointly transform the wider businessⁱ.

Why is team coaching growing in popularity?

I see two key reasons: it's a better way to develop individuals, and the team is increasingly seen as the unit of success in organisations.

Firstly, organisations are looking for new ways to make people development more efficient. They've tried e-learning and it's paid some dividends, but they're increasingly aware that one major source of inefficiency is that people typically fail to implement much of what they've learned – whether they learned it remotely or in a classroom.

They might lack sufficient motivation to do so; they might forget or become distracted by other priorities. They might meet passive or active resistance from the people around them. The classic “Oh, look who's been on a course” is one of the most petty but insidious ways of preventing a colleague from changing their ways of working, but there are a whole host of reasons why an individual's team might get in the way of them doing things differently – fear, lack of buy in, time pressures, personal preferences, organisational culture, force of habit, and so on. The ideal way to address all of these blockers is to develop the whole team simultaneously, rather than taking each individual out separately, tweaking their behaviour, then dropping them back into the existing system.



Secondly, organisations and their leaders are increasingly seeing the team as the unit of performance – not the individual. Individuals do, of course, make a difference – particularly exceptional individuals – but more often it's teams that really deliver the goods. Apparently, venture capitalists rate the quality of a company's executive team as one of the three most important factors in a growing business being successfulⁱⁱ.

Accordingly, analysts' views on the top team can account for up to 35% of the difference between the share prices of two comparable companiesⁱⁱⁱ. It's no surprise, then, that wise organisations are looking to increase the effectiveness of their key teams – not just the top team, but any team whose performance has a significant impact on the success of the organisation.

And what, specifically, does the team coach do to help these teams?

A very good question, and one that most team coaches find fiendishly difficult to answer. Less effective coaches will have a pre-packaged intervention that they roll out whatever the team, whatever the challenge. Competent coaches will create new interventions for every team they work with. They'll design a bespoke one-off event, choosing from a range of tools at their disposal. If that first event goes well, they might be invited back for another event with a new brief. But we've realised that genuine, significant and sustained improvements to a team's performance only really happen when the coach works with the team over a



period of time – say six months or a year. The same is true when coaching individuals: one session generates insight and a great buzz, but the norm for executive coaching is four to six sessions, a month or more apart.

We've also realised that teams and their leaders need a sense of some over-arching structure to the work – a map of the journey ahead. So, we start with a thorough diagnosis, involving the team and key stakeholders, then build a framework for the intervention depending on the challenges the team is facing. The framework will evolve as the work progresses, but there's a clear sense of where we are and where we're headed.



So, what kind of challenges would prompt someone to seek coaching for their whole team?

The fundamental reason for seeking team coaching is to create high performing teams – teams that perform as more than the sum of their parts, meet or exceed ambitious objectives and outperform comparable teams in other organisations. Some clients come to us with a clear idea of what needs to change to make this happen. Others don't, but can see that a team's performance is down or that the company's strategy isn't working but they don't know why.

Sometimes it's a specific event that triggers questions that are best addressed by coaching: "How do we maximize the performance of our organization following a change in direction, or a merger or acquisition?", for instance, or "How do we bring in a new leader?", or "How do we create a new leadership team out of the ashes of the old?"

Some clients bring specific challenges to do with team dynamics – either within the team or between teams. They're looking for a more productive way to work with conflict; they believe the team is too dependent on its leader; they're keen for greater clarity on team members' roles and greater accountability. And, of course, there are more general challenges, such as "How do we help our teams handle and lead through significant change?" or "How can our team survive and thrive in turbulent times?"

It sounds like team coaching has a fairly wide range of uses. If that's the case, why isn't it more widespread?

You're right, team coaching is increasingly popular but it's by no means the norm. One reason is that it's far from a mature market. The quality of coaches and interventions varies enormously and there's no regulation. There's far less quality training available than there is for coaches who focus on working with individuals and it's a far more complex undertaking. So the potential demand for team coaching greatly exceeds the supply of high quality coaches.

It's also harder to buy than coaching for individuals: there's even more variety and team coaching is far more easily confused with other offerings – from strategy consulting to a weekend eating worms in deepest darkest Wales. In the past ten years, organisations have developed a far more sophisticated understanding of what they're looking for when finding coaches for individual executives. The same needs to happen with team coaching.



But there are other reasons HR professionals, leaders and team members might shy away from team coaching. HR professionals are pressured to provide quick fixes – interventions that require minimal effort and time out of the business while delivering a significant, measurable return on investment. And most organisations talk “teams” but have a mind-set of focusing on individuals: the majority reward, promote and performance-manage individuals, not teams. Similarly, many leaders feel they’re not rewarded for developing their teams, meaning they’re less likely to invest their time and budget in doing so. Some leaders worry what team coaching

might surface: it might turn out that they’re “the problem”, the coach might undermine their authority or the process might delve too deeply into people’s psyches and turn into group therapy. Of course, there’s always the concern that if a leader asks for outside help, it’s an admission of failure.

And then there are the more prosaic, logistical challenges. Team coaching takes time and effort: you only get the return if you make the investment. We’re all busy; everything’s urgent and it’s easy to convince ourselves that the team’s problems will go away if we ignore them for long enough – when generally they fester. Plus, it’s harder to coordinate those busy diaries than to send individuals off on courses on their own – particularly with more and more of us working flexibly, remotely or virtually.



Sounds hard. I can see why people default to sending their staff on training courses.

I know. It’s easy to revert to old habits when it comes to improving people’s performance – particularly as it doesn’t expose team members or their leader to the possibility of dealing with real challenges within the team. But investing in individual training is a smaller investment with disproportionately smaller yields. Honing the whole team means investing more for significantly greater rewards.

So, if I wanted to use a team coach, how would I choose one?

Peter Hawkins, one of the world’s leading experts in team coaching, offers important advice on finding and securing the right team coach^{iv}. First, you need to define the need. What’s the gap between the team’s current and desired performance? What do you think it’ll take to close that gap? And what kind of help will you need in order to do so? As sensible as it sounds, there’s a certain irony to this: often it’s only when the coaching begins that the true nature of the gap emerges – coaching enables teams and their stakeholders to be more candid about such things, as well as offering them a lens through which to assess the team’s performance and processes. But it’s good to have a starting point. A preliminary gap analysis helps you brief potential coaches and create your own “job specification” – as you would if you were seeking a new recruit – and helps you determine whether you think they have the necessary knowledge, training, rigour and skills to deliver the outcomes you’re looking for. Style is important, too: you’ll need a coach who’s able to get on with the team but is different enough to shake things up.



What about experience in my industry? I imagine that's important.

You may want a coach to be familiar with your industry. It can save time as they get to know your organisation and it can be easier for them to gain the respect of the team. But be wary of limiting yourself: if you're looking for someone who knows your industry inside out, you're probably looking for a mentor, non-exec or surrogate team leader, not a team coach. A good coach will work to understand your organisation and its context, and will show a strong grasp of the patterns and processes in and around teams.

Okay, so I've got my "coach spec". What then?

Once you're clear what you want, you need to source potential coaches. Some organisations have good internal coaches who have experience working with teams. If that route's unavailable or inappropriate, seek recommendations from friends and colleagues, and check out reputable consultancies. Then whittle down your list, scratching off those who don't meet your criteria. You'll want to cross off those who lack rigorous training in team coaching. You'll probably also want to avoid those who aren't affiliated with a reputable and demanding governing body, bearing in mind that most focus far more on individual coaching than team coaching. You'll want to read or hear about some case studies – examples of their team coaching in action.



Once you have a shortlist of three or four, you'll want to arrange "chemistry meetings". Ideally, your potential coaches would meet the team leader, the person sponsoring the coaching and a couple of members of the team. The number of people involved in these "chemistry sessions" is a good predictor of the success of the coaching: it helps get their buy-in and if they start committed they're more likely to invest the time and energy required over the coming months.

What really makes the difference, though?

Trust. You really need to trust your team coach. Do they genuinely care about your team's success? Will they challenge you and speak frankly while maintaining confidences? And can you trust them to be honest but eminently resourceful when they reach the limits of their own experience? After all, if team coaching isn't taking both the team and the coach into uncharted territory, then neither the coach nor the team are fulfilling their true potential.

ⁱ LeaderSpace's definition of a high performing team draws on a range of sources, but has at its heart the definition in Hawkins, P. (2011) *Leadership Team Coaching: Developing Collective Transformational Leadership*. London: Kogan Page.

ⁱⁱ Data from *Supervision in and of Teams and Organisations*, a team coaching course run by Bath Consulting Group.

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^{iv} See, for example, Hawkins, P. (2011) *Leadership Team Coaching: Developing Collective Transformational Leadership*. London: Kogan Page.