Coaching the team at Work

Introduction

While a great deal has been written about coaching individuals, there has been relatively little investigation of coaching teams at work. Yet in discussions with senior human resource and organizational development professionals, this ability is consistently cited as one of the most serious weaknesses in the capability set of managers at all levels. Even in organizations that have made considerable steps towards becoming coaching cultures, the focus of attention for that coaching is the individual.

However, few people in organizations work alone. Indeed, the whole point of having an organization is to harness the collective efficiency of people working together. Peter Senge makes the point succinctly when he says:

Knowledge generation . . . primarily occurs in working teams. Individual learning is a by-product of what goes on in really innovative teams. But individual learning is not the goal. In fact, if it becomes the goal, you are in trouble.

Organizations employ teams because they have found that this is a more effective way to organize complex work than any alternative yet designed. Teams provide the bridges between individuals and the organization; and between the need to make localized decisions and customize, and the requirement to adhere to large-scale plans and strategies. Teams also provide the focus of activity that meets people’s needs for socialization. They establish the environment where people can share effort, reward and risk. They provide a sense of common identity, rooted in shared ideas, purpose, stories and attitudes. And they provide an opportunity for conversation, support, recognition and other activities that make people feel motivated and raise self-esteem.

Unfortunately, teams don’t always live up to their promise. The depressing evidence is that many, if not most, teams in the modern workplace do not harness their collective capability to anything like the
extent that they could. Failures of structure and process, lack of purpose or commitment, internal conflict and poor leadership sap the team’s potential to work at its optimal level. Some of this loss of performance is inevitable – a simple dynamic of team size, for example – but most is readily manageable, if team members and leaders are minded to reflect intelligently on how they operate and have the skills to do so.

This is where team coaching can be beneficial. It helps teams review performance, boost results, improve communication and build rapport.

Very few goals at team or organizational level can be achieved without some form of performance management process. While addressing the issues that emerge from performance review at an individual level is helpful, in practice most issues involve interaction between team members or in some way have an impact on other members. Addressing performance solely at the level of individuals may be much less effective than engaging all the players in the issue. The more that other team members understand what is needed to help a fellow team member improve performance, the more achievable and sustainable that improvement is likely to be.

Secondly, team coaching, as we shall explore in the following chapters, is a significant part of the remedy for team performance shortfalls. It harnesses a combination of intelligence and curiosity to help teams think through what they are doing and why, how they will integrate individual skill sets and how they will innovate. It also helps the team ask questions that will stimulate the intellectual dialogue necessary for addressing performance issues effectively.

Team coaching also fosters a higher quality of communication, both within the team and between the team and external stakeholders in its activities, ensuring that the dialogue is both intellectual and emotional in character and content. And team coaching promotes the social dialogue that builds rapport, stimulates understanding of self and other team members, and develops the skills to avoid negative conflict and enhance positive conflict within the team.

The aim of this book is to bridge the gap between the limited but growing academic literature on both team learning and team coaching,
and the practical experience of managers and workplace coaches. Some of the questions it attempts to answer are:

- How is coaching the team different from coaching individuals, and from other processes such as facilitation?
- What skills underpin effective team coaching?
- What is the responsibility of team members in this process?
- How do you know when team coaching has been effective?
- When is team coaching appropriate and when will other approaches deliver better results?
- How can organizations make team coaching a sustainable, automatic process?

Along the way, we demolish a number of myths about teams and coaching. Among these are the following:

- **Teamwork is always better than working alone.** Not true. A whole range of social factors conspires to undermine the efficiencies expected from working collaboratively. Research into team effectiveness suggests that limited collaboration (where everyone does their own thing, with clear guidelines and occasional liaison) often delivers better results than trying to get everybody to work together. Like any other organism, teams are subject to chronic diseases, such as social loafing (where everyone eases off a bit on the assumption that others will take up the slack). Nonetheless, well-managed teams, used in the right circumstances and for the right purposes, are the bedrock of a high-performing organization.

- **Coaching is the responsibility of the team leader.** Not true. If coaching is to work, it has to be the responsibility of the team as a whole. There are no spectators. The management of the coaching process belongs to both coaches and coachees.

- **The coach is the team leader.** Not necessarily. The role of the team leader is to create the environment where coaching happens, and to provide an example of good coaching practice (as both coach and coachee) for other team members to follow. Peer coaching is as important and frequently more important for a
• **Coaching within the team is an occasional activity.** Not when it’s at its most effective. In reality, the more coaching becomes integrated with day-to-day activities and processes, the greater and more lasting its impact on performance.

• **Team coaching is about task performance.** Partially true. But *sustainable* improvements in task performance are the result of effective management of three aspects of team focus: achieving the task; managing continuous, relevant learning at both the operational and the wider contextual levels; and managing behaviour within the team and between the team and external stakeholders. It is the integration of these aspects that provides the foundation for teams that are successful over the long term.

**About the book**

The learning journey of this book follows a logical series of steps – just like coaching – starting with the nature of coaching and ending with helping the team make the decision to self-coaching. On the way, we take a variety of detours that seem interesting and relevant – just like coaching. And we try to create insights by asking difficult questions – just like coaching. And if we spend some time in didactic mode, well, it is a book, isn’t it? So what do we cover?

**INTRODUCTION**

In Chapter 1, we review the nature and processes of coaching:

- Where does the instinct to coach come from?
- How is coaching different from facilitation, mentoring, counselling and other forms of helping people look inwards to learn and grow?
- Why has coaching expanded in popularity so dramatically in recent years?
- What’s the difference between effective and ineffective coaching?
In Chapter 2, we take a look at the nature of the team itself:

- What’s the difference between a team and a group? Does it matter?
- What are the dynamics that underlie team effectiveness and how do they manifest themselves?

Chapter 3 focuses on the role and practice of coaching within the team, answering questions such as:

- Who does it? To whom?
- When is the best time to coach the team?
- How does coaching the team differ from coaching individuals and how can both processes be integrated for the team’s collective benefit?
- How can the team coach foster a coaching culture?
- When is it appropriate for the coach to be the team leader and when should the coach be an external professional?

In Chapter 4, we progress to considering the processes of learning within teams generally and within each of six key team types. We ask:

- What helps and hinders learning?
- How do teams increase the quantity and quality of the learning they experience?
- What should the coach do with each type of team?

In Chapter 5, we examine in more detail the issues that the team coach needs to manage and the skill sets required to do so. We present a framework for organizing team coaching and for developing the relevant skills. Among questions we ask are:

- How do you know you are coaching the team well?
- How do you avoid becoming too cosy?
- What is the right level and kind of conflict for an effective team?

We also offer some suggestions of useful techniques and approaches to cope with common issues that arise in team coaching, relating to the management of interpersonal relationships, temporal issues, and key
processes such as goal setting, systems thinking and communication.

Chapter 6 brings the emphasis of team coaching back to the team members, where it belongs, asking:

- How can the team members ensure that they take responsibility for coaching themselves and each other?
- What can they do to assist the leader or an external coach in building the coaching habit?
- What help do both need from the organization?

Throughout the book are case studies drawn from countries as widely separated as Scandinavia, Chile and Australia. They illustrate the variety of approaches used around the world and the potential to learn from others’ experiences in an emerging area of knowledge.

This book isn’t meant to be a manual for the team coach, whether new in the role or experienced – although it could be used as such. Rather, it is intended to assist those engaged in or aspiring to team coaching in a dialogue that will help them define what team coaching means in their circumstances and environment, the outcomes they expect of it, and how they are going to make it work now and work better in the future.

The essence of coaching is to use the wisdom of the coach to bring to consciousness the wisdom that those being coached hold within themselves. The more we understand how coaching and learning work in a collective context, the more effective our teams will be.

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