



DEVELOPING HIGH-IMPACT TEAMS

By Ernie Turner and Isabel Rimanoczy

**Adopt an approach to coaching business teams
that is heavy on relevance and results.**

About a decade ago, executive coaching became a new organizational practice. Today we are flooded by offers of certifications, courses, workshops, and books and articles concerning the processes, skills, and techniques required to be a good coach to clients, employees, and even friends and family.

Coaching business teams is gaining momentum as the new way to improve the performance of individuals who must achieve results working together.

Team development in team meetings

Team building is not a new concept. However, a major weakness of many team-building programs is that they rely on simulations, role playing, case studies, and lectures, but tend to ignore the actual context in which the teams operate. These kinds of programs, therefore, become “just in case” training events that seldom bring about visible change because they simply lack the adrenaline of daily business challenges.

So, why not bring team coaching into the actual workplace? Why not make the coaching relevant to, and a part of, the team’s realities? In so doing, the team coach should include a learning dimension by explicitly ensuring that team members extract lessons from working on their business challenge so that they can transfer these insights to their own teams.

Institutionalizing the learning is essential, and the team coach’s goal should be to build a team’s capability for learning that translates into new behaviors. A team coach can play many roles, including co-designing team meetings; facilitating individual sessions where appropriate; teaching concepts, tools, and techniques; and



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coaching individuals and the team to apply these new skills. The following 10 learning principles can assist in structuring the team's learning process.

Effective team coaching

Since the team coach can play myriad roles and employ many effective solutions, the coach should examine the following 10 learning principles when structuring an effective learning process.

Relevance. Design your solutions around the needs and challenges of the team, just as you would do with an individual protégé. By using the real work of the team as the arena for learning, the solutions that the team coach employs become highly relevant. The issue of relevance applies also to the timing of the solution. If the team coach intervenes too early, the participants may not see the connection to their real situation.

To help determine when the time is right, ask yourself the following questions:

- What specifically do I want to offer to the team or request of the team?
- Why do I think this is important right now?
- How much time should this solution take?
- Will it add significant value?

Reinforcement. Learning that leads to new and lasting behaviors requires repetition and positive reinforcement. Seek to support a team in several of their meetings; this will give them time to imbed the new concepts and processes in their minds and in their meetings. Help them create their own instruments to measure their progress.

You can help teams convert their team norms into a high-performing instrument so that they can establish what their desired behaviors should be and then periodically assess how they are performing.

Ask each team member to identify one behavioral norm that she believes the team is doing well, and say why. Then ask them to identify a norm where the team is not doing so well, indicating why they think that is and

what they will personally do to help change the situation.

Reflection. At work, most of us are taught that “time is money,” and that results are valued above all else.

This may be understandable, but this belief is often translated as “just do it.” There is little or no time for reflection, which many managers believe is not real work. Taking time to pause and reflect can not only save time, but it allows introverts to collect and state their thoughts, which levels the playing field.

Select a focus question that helps a team find meaning from some recent experience they have done together. Give the team five minutes to quietly reflect and write down their thoughts on this question. Then introduce the concept of dialogue. Here are some very simple ground rules:

- Listen to what is said and what is not said.
- Speak from your heart as well as your head.
- Avoid ping-pong conversations that go back and forth between two individuals.
- Avoid jumping to conclusions or making judgments; this is not the time to make decisions.
- Slow down the conversation; let everyone complete his thought.
- Build on what others have said if you can, and at the end of a dialogue, ask someone to briefly summarize the key themes and emerging picture. Frequently, good decisions evolve as a result of this dialogue. (Allow some time after the dialogue to reflect on these decisions.)

Social learning. People learn from each other as much or more than from the instructors. Unleash the potential in the group by looking for opportunities to exchange insights.

Some of the best insights occur during breaks, meals, or free time. Teams often lose these nuggets because they don't take the time to share them, or to capture the accidental and incidental learning that happens in social settings. Ask, “So, what insights worth sharing came up during the break?”

Tacit knowledge. Never underestimate the knowledge any one individual can contribute. And when you multiply this by the number of individuals on a team, the combined knowledge is astounding. Teams usually have the information and insight as to what they should do. Another challenge of a team coach is to help the team mine this knowledge, for it is truly an underutilized asset.

A good question followed by some time for reflection is all it usually takes to extract a team's wisdom. As the team coach, add your own insights last; this way, you don't steal the learning opportunities or lead the discussion. When the insights and answers come from the team members, the likelihood that they will implement them is much greater.

Systemic thinking. No problem has ever been satisfactorily addressed from only one or two perspectives. Every situation involves multiple stakeholders; each one has her own rationale and point of view. When you encourage your team to think systemically in solving their challenges, the solutions are more effective.

Here are three questions that can stretch a team's thinking: Who are the key individuals or groups that have some stake in this challenge and need to have their voice heard? What are the assumptions that must be true for each of them if we are going to solve this problem? How will we engage these people?

Self-awareness. Behavior change begins by taking a critical look at our thinking, assumptions, and habits. The road to self-awareness has no end, but every opportunity can be used to make some progress. Find ways to increase each team member's self-awareness.

Numerous instruments exist to increase self-awareness. Yet, sometimes the simplest and most powerful way of increasing awareness is to get feedback. Use “One Minute Post-It Feedback Sessions” with teams: invite the team to write down one question for which they would like feedback from their teammates. Supply them with as many post-its as there are team members.

Then, one after the other, each team member asks his question and the rest of the team silently writes as much as

they can for one minute on a post-it—one post-it per person until everyone has had an opportunity to ask for and receive feedback. They then exchange the feedback and read it.

Ask everyone to put his initials on the post-its so that if a comment isn't clear, the person can come back for further information. One minute helps individuals get to the heart of the matter quickly since time and space are limited. **Integral framework.** People are a combination of mind, body, and spirit. Yet in a corporate environment, teams usually connect only on a professional level, leaving out the richness of the other parts of one's self.

As a consequence, interactions are often superficial, mutual respect and acceptance are limited, and working together is a less than satisfactory experience. Bring the personal as well as the professional into the conversation. Encourage individuals to speak from their hearts as well as their heads.

When coaching a team, always factor in some time for personal stories. One very simple and powerful way is to secure a private dining space, usually on the first evening of a team development meeting. If possible, get a round or square table so that everyone is within hearing distance. Invite everyone to select one question that is personal in nature and designed to get information that they don't already have about their teammates.

Each person has to answer his own question as well. After a minute's reflection everyone should have at least one question. Then invite someone to start the dinner conversation by asking her question.

Once everyone has responded to the first question, the person who asked the question selects someone else to go next. This continues until the meal is over. Expect to see noticeable improvements in team relationships due to increased awareness of their teammates as persons.

Paradigm shifts. Behavioral change is the result of learning new ways of being and acting with each other. As we discover our own mental maps and see some of our inherent prejudices and

faulty assumptions, we are more inclined to take the time to explore and try out new perspectives and behaviors. As a result, our paradigms shift.

Since taking time for reflection in meetings is seldom done, ask your teams to take just a few minutes for reflection in your next meeting before each major discussion item. Then at the end of the meeting, ask the team to describe the difference in their conversation. You will most likely hear the following comments: more people spoke up; there was better listening; or the ideas were better formulated.

Every situation involves multiple stakeholders; each one has her own rationale and point of view. When you encourage your team to think systemically in solving their challenges, the solutions are more effective.

These results are obtained by encouraging a team to do something out of the ordinary—taking a few moments to collect their thoughts before jumping into a discussion. Once they realize the effect this has on their team dynamics, they will be more inclined to take time for reflection in future meetings. As a team coach, look for small challenges that stimulate paradigm shifts. Never underestimate how much a little will do.

Facilitated learning. It takes a highly disciplined and developed team to pay close attention to team processes while tackling the team's tasks. That's why we seldom see a sports team or individual athlete who doesn't have a coach. Business executives and teams deserve the same kind of support.

However, given the reality of the competitive business environment where there is a constant demand to do more with less, faster and better, it is simply unrealistic to expect that every business team will have an ongoing coach. So it is a team coach's responsibility to help teams develop the capability of coaching themselves

as they conduct their business.

Demonstrate your added value by providing a toolkit of resources for your solutions that includes processes, concepts, tools, and techniques. Then, as you introduce each one, take some additional time to explain how the team can use and implement these by themselves in other occasions.

Encourage them to apply what you already have introduced. We have discovered that after three or four solutions, teams can master most of the team processes to become high-performing teams.

Team coaches have many opportunities to make a difference through creative application of these 10 principles. Team coaching opens a new field in the development area and calls for a new professional profile, combining four important sets of skills into one—designer, facilitator, instructor, and coach. As a result, teams will be more productive and fully engaged. **T+D**

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