Expanding the coaching conversation: group and team coaching

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the expansion of the coaching context in organizations through team and group coaching. The paper provides definitions and several examples of what these engagements look like, along with key considerations when expanding the coaching conversation.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on research undertaken during the writing of two books on group and team coaching, including more than two dozen interviews with team and group coaches.

Findings – Group and Team Coaching are two modalities for expanding the coaching conversation in organizations. They provide opportunities to scale coaching, build organizational capacity and reduce the silos.

Practical implications – The paper provides examples of what team and group coaching can look like in action, informing coaches, leaders and other practitioners as they approach expanding the coaching conversation.

Originality/value – Group and team coaching are emerging sub-disciplines of the coaching profession. This paper will stimulate dialogue regarding how these modalities can be leveraged within organizations, and differences with related fields.

Keywords Learning, Coaching, Coaching culture, Group coaching, Team coaching

Paper type General review

The profession of coaching continues to expand. What once was solely a one-on-one modality, coaching has expanded over the last decade to include relationship coaching, conflict coaching, as well as group and team coaching, the focus of this paper. For experienced coaches, team and group coaching may be an evolution in their own work with clients, expanding the coaching conversation and impact.

The term coaching is often collapsed with mentoring and training, as well as counselling. This paper will expand on the definition of what coaching is and core elements of any coaching process, namely a focus on goals, action and awareness, and on-going accountability.

As coaching cultures develop in organizations, the coaching conversation is being expanded and scaled out to different levels. This often occurs through group, team and even peer coaching. This paper explores the emerging field of group and team coaching, including definitions and examples of what this work looks like, along with four key elements to consider in expanding the coaching conversation.

Coaching as a profession

Coaching is different than other related modalities such as counselling, facilitation and training in a number of respects. The coaching philosophy is grounded in a strengths orientation and a present and future focus. The client themselves are the expert and are the ones defining the issues they want to explore.
Research from the International Coach Federation (2013) has identified both productivity and positivity impacts from coaching. Increased productivity measures include improved work performance (70 percent), business management (61 percent), time management (57 percent), and team effectiveness (51 percent). On the positivity front, coaching has impacted positivity measures including increased self-confidence (80 percent), relationships (73 percent), improved communication skills (72 percent), and improved work-life balance (67 percent).

As previously stated, coaching is often lumped together with mentoring, or training, at its core, four elements help to distinguish the coaching approach. Let us look at each one in turn and how they relate to the team and group coaching context.

**Goal setting:** any coaching conversation is shaped by and focused on the goals the person, or persons, being coached. Central to any coaching conversation is revisiting these goals throughout the process. Coaching provides a pause point for busy professionals to explore their learning as they move towards these goals. Within group coaching it is important to have individual group members define their own focus and goal areas. With teams coaching there may be collective and individual goals involved. Most team and group coaching conversations start with a check in and check out around learning, insights as well as movement towards the goals.

**Action and awareness:** coaching takes place across the realms of action and awareness. Whether a leader is coaching their team or a professional coach working with clients, coaching is about expanding awareness around the issues they are facing, including self-awareness.

Coaching is not just any conversation. It is a focused conversation, geared to expedite results. Coaching conversations focus in on supporting the teams and groups in taking action and being accountable for the results they have identified. For each team or group, this balance of action and awareness looks different. Teams who are great at getting results, may actually benefit more by focusing on areas of awareness. This might include identifying key relationships, or exploring how their inability to address conflict impedes them in the long term.

**Ongoing accountability:** coaching is not a “one off” process, rather it is a process of change. Coaching is a sustained series of conversations and as such takes time over a period of months. Learning and ah-ha's occur during the coaching conversation. Also as important are the adjustments, and application of these new insights, when the team or group members get back to the office. Team and group coaches encourage those being coached to make the link back to their team and work processes.

**Expanding the conversation**

As coaching cultures become more established, group and team coaching are increasingly being incorporated in a number of ways – as a stand-alone program, or process, or as follow-on to current training initiatives. Group and team coaching provide important methodologies to scale coaching throughout an organization, build a coaching culture and strengthen organizational capacity.

**Group coaching**

Group coaching is often viewed a natural extension of the individual coaching conversations taking place in an organization. Expand the coaching conversation to additional layers of an organization group coaching is a way to scale coaching, involving more individuals at different levels. As such, group coaching can play a key role in building relationships across the silos that exist, and supporting culture change.

Bringing together small groups (often four to eight individuals), group coaching is an “intimate conversation space.” It is a rich area of deep dialogue, sharing and discovery. As more group members are added, we move into the terrain of more facilitated discussion. Key to the group coaching process is the focus on goals and ongoing accountability.

Examples of group coaching processes include a multi-session group coaching process delivered over several months for new managers, or supervisors. The focus of these
conversations is shaped by the group members and the leadership competencies of an organization. Session by session they focus on exploring what the competencies mean in the context of their work. Coaching conversations focus on the integration into their own development plans.

In contrast, another group coaching process with another group may be launched with the completion of a 360, or assessments such as Emotional Intelligence, DISC, or MBTI. In these instances the outcomes of the assessment shape the conversations. Peer sharing and insights are central to the conversation.

A major benefit identified by many group coaching clients is the peer accountability formed. Coaching is not just any conversation, rather it is a “conversation with intent” (Britton, 2013b) geared to support new awareness, and movement into action towards the goals they have set for themselves. Typically group coaching conversations will end with a coaching request – field work for people to complete, a challenge designed to stretch the coachee/client into new learning and action, or an inquiry – a question an individual will reflect on.

**Team coaching**

In expanding the coaching conversation, teams may also be a focus for coaching. Different than group coaching, as well as team building, team coaching as an approach supports teams in expediting their results and strengthening their relationships.

Typically a sustained series of conversations, team coaching provides ongoing support for a team to gain awareness around their strengths and patterns, and supports them in developing new practices and habits as a team. Just as in other coaching modalities, team coaching provides ongoing accountability around their goals and action they have set for themselves. Intact teams, virtual teams, projects teams can all benefit from team coaching.

In his seminal 2007 book, *Coaching the Team at Work*, David Clutterbuck defined team coaching as: “Helping the team improve performance, and the processes by which performance is achieved, through reflection and dialogue.”

In my book, *From One to Many: Best Practices for Team and Group Coaching* I define team coaching as “a sustained series of conversations [...]. The focus is on goal setting, deepening awareness, supporting action and creating accountability. The focus of the coaching may be on the team as a system and/or strengthening individuals in the team. Team coaching links back to business goals, focusing on results and relationships” (Britton, 2013b, p. 18).

The deployment of an assessment such as Team Coaching International’s Team Diagnostic at the start of the coaching engagement can provide the team with important information which then shapes the coaching focus. Assessment results indicating low levels of trust within the team, or the inability to work along differences point to areas where the coach, along with the team, focus their conversation.

As teams, the real focus on team coaching is on behavioral change, the development of new habits, as well as learning and integration of new skills (providing feedback, difficult conversations), embedded in business goals. Also key to the dialogue is helping the team to develop a common framework around the core elements of high performance such as vision, practices, and norms.

Common focus areas in team coaching include work around exploration of strengths, styles, and roles with in the team. A team coach may be working with the team around team effectiveness areas such as creating shared behavioral frameworks such as a Team Agreement, Team values, and shared behavioral norms. Team coaches may also find themselves working with the team to develop common frameworks and skills for their conversations, in areas such as listening, having difficult or courageous conversations, or working across differences.

In addition to the different focus with the team (the team as a system or entity), team coaching is also different than group coaching due to the relationships which exist before and after the coaching engagement. As such the team coach plays a larger role in capacity building. Another
key difference is the impact of formal and informal leadership within the group, as well as some of the risks posed by being vulnerable in front of your team members, deeply connected with your livelihood.

Team coaching in action

Practitioners new to team coaching are often curious about what this work can look like. Consider these examples.

Example No. 1: a new leader comes on board and recognizes that team performance is sub-optimal. At the same time their own leadership approach is radically different from their predecessor. The new leader decides to engage a team coach. The six-month process starts with an offsite supporting the team in identifying and exploring strengths (individually and collectively), as well as learning more about each member’s role within the team. They explore perspectives, identify leverage points and gaps with their roles, and the work they do.

The team coach works with the team to create a common vision and identify team agreements around how they want to operate as a team. A series of team goals are created at the initial offsite with focus areas for future conversations identified. The role of the team coach is to support the continued development of the team over time and hold them accountable around the key goals they set at the offsite. Future sessions explore topics including difficult conversations, creating a vision and identifying limiting beliefs.

Example No. 2: an established team continues to struggle with interpersonal relationships in the team, and low results. The initial team assessment deployed points to low levels of trust and an inability to work around conflict. Team members are highly committed to making this work and embark on a series of four coaching conversations with a team. They focus on understanding each other’s roles and how they relate as they develop proactive ways to work with conflict, and build trust.

Key issues in expanding the conversation

Whether we are coaching an individual, a team or a group, it is important to keep in mind these issues when embarking on expanding the coaching conversation.

Coaching is not a solution for all situations: as professionals who support performance in today’s workplace, it is important to explore what the best solution will be in each and every instance. Coaching is not a solution for all situations. When skills need to be developed in a group or team it is important to turn to training. When a performance issue is at play, performance management solutions are required, and possibly more direction and feedback on the supervisor with their supervisee. When a leader wants to explore their own limiting beliefs, individual coaching may be a better solution than group coaching. If conflict is at the core of the issue, a “clearing” and resolution through mediation may be a more expeditious initial route before the entire team is involved in a team coaching process. Another key area for exploration with each individual is their “coachability.” Are they really ready to engage in the coaching process, and take responsibility for their learning and action?

Involvement/Engagement of the leader: during the course of team coaching work it is common to have issues emerge related to the team leadership. The openness of the leader to change and their involvement in it is key. Their support for integrating new practices into every day communication and business is critical. Before the work with the team begins, it is important to have dialogue with the team leader about all these possibilities to prime them to what may occur.

In a group coaching process, leaders can create opportunities for coachees to put into practice what they have learned. They should also be aware of some of the new relationships across an organization which have been formed.

Consider your preferences as a coach: as I have previously written, “Group Coaching is not going to be a preference for all coaches. Some coaches may prefer the ‘deep dive’ we take with individual coaching clients. Others may enjoy the width and breadth a group coaching conversation leads the group in. The ability to create a safe environment where group members
feel confident to engage in a coaching conversation, the ability to step back and let the group lead the process, can be a motivator for many group coaches” (Britton, 2013a).

Many coaches have enjoyed moving the coaching conversation into the realm of many, while others prefer the depth of the individual coaching conversation. Consider what you enjoy best.

Today’s issues often require a blend of approaches: as the business issues surrounding our work continue to be more complex, global, and ever changing, a multidisciplinary approach is important. Linking the team and group coaching processes to other organizational initiatives is critical. As coaches, this also encourages us to bring into the coaching conversation approaches from related disciplines. Whether we are using an OD intervention such as the Six Thinking Hats, leading from an appreciative approach, or utilizing assessments coaches need to be aware of when they are moving outside of the terrain of “coaching” as defined by our ICF competencies and to define this with the groups and teams they are working with.

As you consider the organizational context you operate within, what opportunities are there to expand the coaching conversation?

References


Further reading


About the author

Jennifer Jane Britton is the founder of Potentials Realized, a Canadian-based performance improvement company. She is the author of Effective Group Coaching, the first book to be published on the topic of group coaching back in 2009 by John Wiley and Sons. Her second book, From One to Many: Best Practices for Team and Group Coaching (2013, Jossey-Bass) expands the focus to the team coaching realm. Her work focuses on leadership, teams, performance, with a special focus on global team leadership. She brings past experience as a Program Manager with the United Nations, and has been involved in working with teams and groups in more than 19 countries around the world since the late 1980s. Jennifer holds a Bachelor of Science (Psychology, McGill) and a Masters in Environmental Studies (York). She is a Professional Certified Coach, and also holds certifications in the areas of performance improvement, and HR. Jennifer is also the host of the Teams365 blog. Jennifer Jane Britton can be contacted at: info@potentialsrealized.com

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