

Quarterly Reflections on Team Coaching

October - December 2025

Scaling team coaching



Introduction

To mark the publication of *The Wise Team Coach* we wrote this special edition of the QRT to describe a possible future role for team coaching in organisations. This is not a world full of external team coaches, but a world in which organisations change the way they go about building team effectiveness. This perspective has significant implications for both organisations and professional team coaches.

The future is team!

There is a popular view today that says team coaching is growing fast and will soon supplant individual coaching. The popularity of individual coaching, so the argument goes, is based on a flawed premise that says the more individuals you develop, the stronger your organisation will become. To focus on the individual is to neglect the connections between individuals. If a coach is to have a significant impact on an organisation then they need to work at the relational level, with groups and especially teams. Over the last few years I have come across many coaches keen to share their Damascene conversion to team coaching. Team coaching, they say, represents the future of coaching. Individual coaching will slowly wither away and/or become commoditised.

Or is it?

Team coaching is becoming more popular, but I haven't personally experienced a team coaching tidal wave. Nor do I think we will, for several reasons.

1. **Simplistic arguments.** The impending growth of team coaching is often framed in terms of thinking 'systemically'. We are told that you can't coach an organisation one person at a time – you have to coach at the relational level where the coach can experience and influence the dynamics of the organisation at play. If this is thinking systemically, it is a simplistic and linear way of thinking about systems. If we think of the organisation as an ever-shifting, dynamic, interplay of relationship, then we need to be agile in our thinking and look for multiple ways in which we can have a positive influence on that social network. That may include team coaching and group coaching and individual coaching and other interventions besides. We need to look beyond the simplistic '*team coaching is good - individual coaching is bad*' mantra.
2. **Team coaching is expensive.** I hear people talk about team coaching in terms of cost efficiency. As if by coaching six people at a time, a team coach is six times more efficient than an individual coach. This again is a simplistic perspective that ignores the fundamentals of working with a team. First, when the individual coach works with a coachee, there are two people in the room. Both parties have time to say what they need to say in a 60 or 90 minute session. When the coach works with a team of six, there are seven people who need to express themselves and significantly more time is required for everyone to contribute. Second, when the individual coach works with a

coachee, there is one relationship in the room. When the coach works with a team of six, there are 21 relationships in the room, a much more complex dynamic that must be paid attention to. No wonder that team coaching sessions tend to go for half a day, or a full day, and that the professional team coach needs a whole new set of skills and abilities in order to manage the dynamic. Few organisations, if any, can afford to offer that service to all their teams.

3. **Organisations are busy.** Organisations comprise teams and so for organisations to become more effective, teams need to become more effective, and teams become more effective through team coaching. Thereby goes the argument, which is again simplistic. The team coaching literature has historically put a lot of emphasis on the sanctity of a team, as if organisations consist of teams the same way an organism consists of cells. For teams to be effective, team membership must be clear and stableⁱ. And team coaching works best if the team commits to be coached on a regular basis. Some big assumptions here that don't stand up to scrutiny. First, many teams are far from being clearly bounded and stable. In many organisations the composition of a team is dynamic and fluidⁱⁱ. People belong to multiple teams. And there is evidence to suggest that teams want to be coached when they need coaching, and that may not be at regular intervalsⁱⁱⁱ. People interact with lots of people and belong to lots of teams, and those teams need help when they need help, which is not necessarily every month, and so in a busy world it is unlikely to make sense to people to attend team coaching sessions with all their teams on a regular basis.
4. **In their attempt to make life simpler, team coaches confuse the issue.** Team coaching has emerged only relatively recently as an organisational discipline. And as a coaching discipline it is subject to determined efforts to distinguish it from other ways of working with a team^{iv}. Advocates of this approach say it is important to explain to people the differences between team coaching and team building, consulting, facilitation, training and mentoring^v. It's important, so goes the argument, because the client needs to know what the practitioner does and doesn't do. They need to know what a team coach does and what a facilitator does and how the two are different. And team coaching needs to properly define itself so that it can develop its own evidence base^{vi}. Differentiating coaching in this way also enables the coaching industry to build competency and accreditation frameworks and generate income from those activities. Unfortunately, this drive to differentiate team coaching from other interventions may serve only to confuse. First because team coaches are unlikely to ever agree what is and what is not team coaching, indeed thinking in this space is more likely to fragment further^{vii}. Second, even if team coaches did all agree, all the people they are trying to differentiate themselves from are unlikely to agree, and they all talk to clients too.

For these reasons, team coaching - as currently conceived - is unlikely to take over the organisational world. For it to have the impact some believe it can have, practitioners will need to take a more holistic perspective on their efforts to help organisations become more

successful. They will need to take a less rigid approach to thinking about the work and engaging with clients, and they will need to think differently about how to scale the potential value of team coaching.

How to scale team coaching

How then do we help organisations get better at teaming? Two clues sit embedded in the literature.

Area of most impact

In their team coaching literature review, Allison Traylor and colleagues found that efforts to enhance team leader behaviours tend to be more impactful than external team coaching interventions^{viii}. They suggested this is because team leaders:

- Have a better sense as to when team coaching may be best deployed
- Are more familiar with their teams and the challenges faced by the team
- Are more likely to take a broad approach to the development of their team

The future of team coaching in organisations may lie in capability development rather than the deployment of multiple external team coaches.

The meta-team

If we think of a team as something dynamic and fluid, with people constantly moving from team to team, often belonging to more than one team at a time, then we may want to think differently about how best to make a difference. In such circumstances there usually exists a bigger pool of people from which specific teams are constantly being formed and reformed, whether that be a specialised team, a department, or the organisation as a whole. Diana Santistevan and Emanuel Josserand suggest that in such circumstances we might usefully think in terms of the meta-team^{ix}. Jessica Mesmer-Magnus and colleagues came up with a similar notion in writing about ‘multiteam systems’^x. Train up the meta-team, then everyone in the bigger team can then take that teaming knowledge into all the teams they work with. Robert Hirschfeld and colleagues reported that teams whose members have a high level of teamwork knowledge perform better than teams that don’t.^{xi} Scott Tannenbaum and colleagues suggest that employees can usefully be taught ‘transportable’ teamwork competencies^{xii}. Rachael Hanley-Browne suggests that the industry as a whole may collectively shift its focus away from the single team and toward enterprise^{xiii}. The notion of meta-teams links to ideas around teaming. Tripp Driskell and colleagues suggest that good teamers have a low need for hierarchy. They tend to be confident, expressive and emotionally stable^{xiv}. Amy Edmondson says good teamers speak up^{xv}. They communicate well and collaborate, they are comfortable taking risks, and they reflect openly with others.

Implications

To scale team coaching then, will require us to help organisations enhance the skills of their team leaders. This approach has the following consequences:

- Team coaches need to renounce a linear systemic perspective that says ‘team coaching is more systemic’ and therefore a ‘good thing’, and instead access a more informed perspective that attempts to understand the dynamic and complex nature of organisations and plots a range of interventions accordingly. Coaches need to expand their horizons.
- Team coaches need to think less about differentiating team coaching from consulting, facilitation, team building et cetera, and more about how they can help teams to be more effective by whatever means necessary. Coaches need to expand their collective skillsets.
- Organisational development functions need to enhance their understanding of team effectiveness, including team coaching, and build overarching strategies to enhance team effectiveness that focus above all on enhancing internal capability. Such strategies may include the use of external team coaches, but the use of external team coaches will be thoughtful and strategic.
- Organisations need to think about teaming and what implications teaming has for profiling recruits at all levels of the organisation.

This is an agenda in which multi-skilled, sophisticated, teaming practitioners work together with organisations in crafting ways to enhance the teaming ability of employees generally. This is a world in which the role of the professional team coach, focussed solely on winning specific team coaching assignments, becomes tactical and less relevant. This is a world in which organisational development functions everywhere, enhance their understanding of team effectiveness and craft medium-long term strategies to shift the collective capacity of all their employees to work together most effectively with others.

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Notes

ⁱ Wageman, R. & Lowe, K. (2019). Designing, Launching, and Coaching Teams: The 60-30-10 Rule and its Implications for Team Coaching. In: D. Clutterbuck, J. Gannon, S. Hayes, I. Iordanou, K. Lowe & D. Mackie (Eds.), *The Practitioner's Handbook of Team Coaching*. Routledge

ⁱⁱ Mortensen, M. (2015). *Boundary multiplicity: Rethinking teams and boundedness in the light of today's collaborative environment*. INSEAD Working Papers No. 2015/31/OBH. Retrieved from <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers>

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, Gersick, C. J. G. (1988). Time and Transition in Work Teams: Toward a New Model of Group Development. *Academy of Management Journal*, 31(1), 9-41 & Gersick, C. J. G. (1989). Marking time: Predictable Transitions in Task Groups. *Academy of Management Journal*, 32(2), 274-309

^{iv} Clutterbuck, D., Gannon, J., Hayes, S., Iordanou, I., Lowe, K. & Mackie, D. (2019). Introduction: defining and differentiating team coaching from other forms of team intervention. In: D. Clutterbuck, J. Gannon, S. Hayes, I. Iordanou, K. Lowe & D. Mackie (Eds.), *The Practitioner's Handbook of Team Coaching*. Routledge

^v <https://coachingfederation.org/app/uploads/2021/01/Team-Coaching-Competencies-4.pdf>

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- vi Jones, R. J., Napiersky, U., & Lyubovnikova, J. (2019). Conceptualizing the Distinctiveness of Team Coaching. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 34(2), 62–78
- vii De Haan, E., Stoffels, D., Cavicchia, S., Knights, A., Day, A., Bell, J., Sills, C., Tawadros, T., Stubbings, A., Birch, D., & Hanley-Browne, R. (2024). The Future of Team Coaching. In: E. De Haan & D. Stoffels (Eds.), *Relational Team Coaching*. Routledge.
- viii Traylor, A.M, Stahr, E. & Salas, E. (2020). Team Coaching: Three Questions and a Look Ahead: A Systematic Literature Review. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 15(2), 54-68
- ix Santistevan, D. & Josserand, E. (2018). Meta-Teams: Getting Global Work Done in MNEs. *Journal of Management*, 45(2), 510–539
- x Mesmer-Magnus, J.R., Asencio, R., Seely, P. & DeChurch, L. (2018). How Organizational Identity Affects Team Functioning: The Identity Instrumentality Hypothesis. *Journal of Management*, 44(4), 1530–1550
- xi Hirschfeld, R.R., Jordan, M.H., Feild, H.S., Giles, W.F., & Armenakis, A.A. (2006). Becoming Team Players: Team Members' Mastery of Teamwork Knowledge as a Predictor of Team Task Proficiency and Observed Teamwork Effectiveness. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91(2), 467–474
- xii Tannenbaum, S., Mathieu, J.E., Salas, E., & Cohen, D. (2012). On Teams: Unifying Themes and the Way Ahead. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 5, 56–61
- xiii De Haan, E., Stoffels, D., Cavicchia, S., Knights, A., Day, A., Bell, J., Sills, C., Tawadros, T., Stubbings, A., Birch, D., & Hanley-Browne, R. (2024). The Future of Team Coaching. In: E. De Haan & D. Stoffels (Eds.), *Relational Team Coaching*. Routledge.
- xiv Driskell, J.E., Salas, E., Goodwin, G.F. & O'Shea, P.G. (2006). What Makes a Good team Player? Personality and Team Effectiveness. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 10(4), 249–271
- xv Edmondson, A. (2012). *Teaming*. Jossey-Bass.