

Quarterly Reflections on Team Coaching

July – September 2026

Team coaching vs facilitation - what's the difference?



Team coach



Facilitator

Introduction

Team coaching in organisations continues to grow as a discipline, with the three biggest global coaching associations now having team coaching competencies. In line with a prevailing desire to differentiate coaching generally from other interventions, various authors have attempted to distinguish team coaching from interventions such as team building, facilitation, training etc. But not all these taxonomies are the same, some even conflict.

This study was borne out of a recent conversation with a newly trained team coach working inside an organisation. He suggested to the organisation that they introduce team coaching to the organisation, but his manager told him that they didn't need team coaching – they already had inhouse facilitators, and facilitation is the same as team coaching. The coach didn't feel confident in being able to articulate the difference. Not surprising, given that people articulate the difference between team coaching and facilitation in quite different ways. So what is the difference? *Is there a real difference?*

To shed further light on the question we spoke to 53 people, all team coaches and/or facilitators, asking them to tell us the difference between team coaching and facilitation.

Literature

There exist numerous attempts to differentiate team coaching from facilitation. In this paper we focus on three well known examples. First, David Clutterbuck and colleaguesⁱ differentiate between the two disciplines in terms of purpose, process, and relationship:

	Team coaching	Facilitation
Purpose	Performance improvement	Improving the process of team collaboration
Process	Dialogue related to the team task	Providing procedural, task and content-focused interactions
Relationship	Medium term, multiple interventions relating to a raft of issues	Multiple interventions focused on team processes

The ICF differentiate in terms of time frame, process, growth area, team dynamics/conflict resolution, and expert/ownershipⁱⁱ :

	Team coaching	Facilitation
Time frame	Longer term, months	Short, 1-5 days
Process	Team and coach partner	Facilitate dialogue
Growth area	Achieved goals and team sustainability	Clarity
Team dynamics/	Integral	Minimal

conflict resolution		
Expert/ownership	Team	Facilitator and team

We can already see some apparent contradictions. Clutterbuck et al. suggest dialogue is an aspect of team coaching; the ICF suggests it is an aspect of facilitation. Clutterbuck et al. suggest facilitation can be a medium-term intervention; the ICF say it is a short-term intervention lasting 1 – 5 days.

Dowse and Turnerⁱⁱⁱ differentiate between the team coaching and facilitation on the basis of terminology, purpose, goal, and role.

	Team coaching	Facilitation
Terminology	Refers to the group of people as a 'team'	Refers to the group of people as the 'participants'
Purpose	Development and relationship-focussed for the purpose of improving team dynamics, performance, and collaboration over time	Guiding a group or team through a process or series of processes for the purpose of helping the group reach their meeting goal(s)
Goal	Enhance the work of the team by coaching individuals in a group to change behaviour through long-term growth and development of the team as a cohesive unit	The goal is to be determined by the client or group. A facilitator ensures the meeting is inclusive, productive, and collaborative for the group to reach its objectives and outcomes
Role	• A guide who ensures the team's direction and decisions are on target • Delves into an analysis of team dynamics • Provide guidance, feedback, and support for the team to achieve their goals	• A neutral party who guides participants through a process ensuring everyone contributes and takes ownership of the meeting outcome • Does not delve into an analysis of the team dynamics • Support and guide the group using structured tools, techniques, process methods and appropriate interventions to enable the group to achieve the stated purpose and outcomes

Dowse & Turner then list 19 skills, tools, and techniques, suggesting that both facilitators and team coaches use all of these skills. There appears to be a contradiction within their own analysis in that they suggest that facilitators don't delve into team dynamics, yet list 'awareness of team dynamics' as a requisite skill across both disciplines.

These are just three attempts to differentiate the two disciplines, and they are quite different in some respects, even contradictory. This need not surprise us too much given that there exists

debate as to what we mean by a team, and what we mean by ‘team coaching’^{iv}, and that there exist different forms of facilitation. Nevertheless, the practising team coach is asked, and will continue to be asked, what is the difference between team coaching and team facilitation?

How should we answer this question?

Study

Participants

We surveyed 53 people:

- 17 male & 36 female
- 18 from Australia, 14 from the UK, five from Canada, three from USA, two each from UAE, South Africa and New Zealand, and one each from Hong Kong, Bulgaria, Spain, India, Japan, Ireland, and Netherlands.
- 39 practiced team coaching and facilitation, 10 only facilitated, and four only coached teams.

We found the 53 people by posting an invitation to participate on LinkedIn. 109 people responded to the advert, of whom 84 provided their email addresses, and 53 returned a paper survey. The author replied to 15 of those surveys with a request for more information, to be provided by email or via a Zoom conversation

Survey

Participants were first asked to define the difference between team coaching and facilitation in their own words. They were then asked to fill out four questionnaires relating to desired outcomes, process, skills, and duration. Questions were selected from the three analyses outlined above – Clutterbuck et al., the ICF, and Dowse & Turner. Participants were asked to tick a box against each item, marking one, both, or neither discipline. For example, the first questionnaire asked:

Here is a list of some desired outcomes. Please can you tick those you think apply to a facilitator and those you think apply to a team coach. You may tick as many boxes as you like.

	Team coaching	Facilitation
Improved team performance		
Improved team cohesion		
Improved team dynamics		
Changed team behaviours		
Improved collaboration		
The achievement of a session-specific goal		
The achievement of longer-term goals		
Greater clarity		

Notice that the 1st and 5th items are drawn from the Clutterbuck et al. table; the 3rd, 7th, and 8th items come from the ICF table, and all the first six items come from the Dowse & Turner analysis.

The same process was used to construct both the process and duration questionnaires. We added *‘providing expert knowledge when required’* to the process list given that we know this to be a contentious issue in some quarters. Anecdotally, we know that many coaches don’t believe it is their role to give advice. But in their commentary to the ICF team coaching competencies, the authors suggest that a team coach must have a broader knowledge base when working with teams and must often be more directive than an individual coach.

The list of skills included 17 of the skills listed by Dowse & Turner, four competencies from the ICF team coaching competency list, three from the EMCC list, and one from the AC list. All the questionnaires are attached for reference in the Appendix to this report.

Results

Answers to the open-ended question

People chose to answer the open-ended question - what is the difference between team coaching and facilitation? - through five dimensions; audience, purpose/outcome, process, skills, and duration.

1. Audience

For example, one respondent said:

“When I think about team coaching, I think about doing this with an intact team, an inter-dependent group of people who are aligned and working together towards the same goal. Facilitation differs in that it can be done with a team but also could be done with a group of people who are not specifically a cogent team.”

and:

“... with team coaching we're talking about a group of eight or less. In facilitation, you could have groups of hundreds.”

2. Purpose/outcome

People listed *general* outcomes of facilitation, such as making a decision, solving a problem, resolving a conflict etc., and *specific* outcomes, such as creating a strategic plan and the vision for a product. Facilitation may also have an educational purpose, for example, improving employee’s knowledge and skills around team effectiveness. Some of the outcomes listed reminded us of team coaching, for example improved levels of trust and relationships, a shared understanding of purpose and strategy, and shared agreements on actions, roles, responsibilities.

People talked about team coaching either in terms of team development, or in terms of specific outcomes *and* team development. For example, facilitation may be called for when *“there needs to be a more or less immediate outcome,”* and team coaching, *“helps the team achieve the outcome while also increasing its capacity to work effectively together in the future.”*

Accordingly, people talked about the following outcomes of team coaching, not mentioned so often with reference to facilitation:

- Becoming a cohesive, effective entity united by a common purpose
- The creation of a self-sustaining and well-oiled team that can independently work out their own decisions
- Engaging of key stakeholders to transform the wider business

Three people differentiated between the two disciplines in terms of who owned the outcome. For example:

"In facilitation, I'm managing structure and momentum toward an outcome that was agreed with the sponsor before I ever walked into the room. In team coaching, nobody has set that destination for me."

3. Processes

The vast majority of people referred to process when differentiating between team coaching and facilitation. People talked about facilitation being more structured, with the facilitator focussed on process and agenda.

"... the facilitator is quite active in stepping people through a process."

By contrast, the team coach will more often enable a dialogue driven conversation that goes where it needs to go, in the moment. The coach plays more of an observer role, offering feedback, and helping the team to notice and manage its own functioning.

"The coach is not stepping people through a process. The coach will be doing a lot of observation and then debriefing the team about what it is noticing; learning about its own functioning in light of the goals it has set for itself."

In the same vein:

"Facilitation is process-focused, whereas team coaching is conversation-focused. The facilitator has an agenda for the workshop, and their role is to provide the environment and tools for maximising learning. Team coaching should be about emergence, rather than structure (even though some team coaches may use structure for comfort)."

The team coach is more likely to feel like they are *"dancing in the moment."* The territory feels more 'certain' as a facilitator.

"In facilitation, I generally have a fairly clear idea of the objectives to be reached. In team coaching, although the coached group's objective remains the guiding thread, the compass of our sessions, I don't know as well what will emerge from the sessions. This heightened uncertainty makes coaching more cognitively demanding for me."

The facilitator manages the conversation, delivering information and insight, while the team coach is more likely to ask questions.

"Facilitation involves presenting information and providing support and group management for people to understand it, discuss it, and use it. Coaching doesn't present the information but rather provides the questions that require the coachees to find their own answers."

Two specific aspects of process emerged. First, the team coach is more likely to spend time with team members individually, before working the team together.

“Team coaching ... probably includes some consulting before the team coaching program begins as the team’s needs are diagnosed up front.”

Second, the team coach will need to spend more time contracting and recontracting where to go next:

“... team coaching requires contracting. Through the contracting, there is an expectation that there will be tension and deeper, more thoughtful conversation, with maybe some emergence.”

Team dynamics were mentioned by several people. One person differentiated between the two disciplines in terms of depth:

“Team coaches ... operate at a deeper systemic level and do not shy away from having the conversations that need to happen. On the other hand, [facilitation] is typically punctual or short-term and happens at a rather superficial level.”

Others said that *both* team coaches and facilitators work with team dynamics:

“Both require paying attention to what is happening in the room beyond just the topic being discussed. A good facilitator will sometimes need to work with team dynamics, and a team coach will use facilitation skills to help structure a conversation.”

Whilst asked to focus on the differences between team coaching and facilitation, some people concluded the differences were insignificant and/or a matter of personal approach:

“[Facilitation] is not simply about managing an agenda; it is about holding a process that enables insight, learning and connection. Presence, awareness, psychological safety, reflexivity and the ability to work with emergence underpin both facilitation and team coaching.”

4. Skills

Few people differentiated between team coaching and facilitation on the basis of skills. Many spoke about a significant crossover across disciplines. Both facilitators and team coaches are good at active listening, asking open questions, encouraging participation, and helping people hear different points of view.

One respondent said that *“the team coach has a deeper grasp of how teams change, function as a system, grow and learn together.”* But others said that both pay attention to team dynamics, *“to what is happening in the room beyond just the topic being discussed. Things like relationships, emotions, power dynamics, assumptions and what people may not be saying.”*

5. Duration

Some respondents said that facilitation as a one-off engagement and team coaching is longer term. For example:

“A key aspect in team coaching is time. Like a fine wine it takes time for the team to mature.”

As we will see later, however, this distinction doesn’t work for everyone.

Questionnaires

The open-ended questions allowed respondents to talk about the difference between team coaching and facilitation in their own words. The questionnaires enabled us to compare everyone's responses across all items. Results are shown in the four tables below, together with selected comments on those ratings. The delta number (Δ) is positive if the difference is in the predicted direction, negative if in the opposite direction.

Purpose/outcome

Purpose/outcome	Specific to	Findings		
		FAC	TC	Δ
Improved team performance	TC	70%	100%	30%
Improved team cohesion	TC	51%	98%	47%
Improved team dynamics	TC	51%	98%	47%
Changed team behaviours	TC	51%	100%	49%
Improved collaboration	FAC	81%	92%	(11%)
The achievement of a session-specific goal	FAC	96%	62%	34%
The achievement of longer-term goals	TC	45%	94%	49%
Greater clarity	FAC	91%	92%	(1%)

All results are in the predicted direction, except 'improved collaboration' and 'greater clarity'. The literature suggests these two outcomes are specific to facilitation, but respondents said they are more typical of team coaching.

The only item that respondents ticked more often for facilitation than for team coaching was 'the achievement of a session-specific goal'.

Whilst the results suggest that most of these outcomes are more characteristic of team coaching than facilitation, the facilitation scores are still high. 45% of respondents said, for example, that one outcome of facilitation was the achievement of longer-term goals:

"My key reflection is that facilitation and team coaching are not mutually exclusive. Both can improve collaboration, cohesion, team dynamics and performance. The difference lies less in the outcomes than in the intent, timeframe and depth of development."

The main differentiator, however, does seem to be time, and the degree of change possible over an extended period:

"It is evident that while there is considerable crossover between facilitation and team coaching, team coaching is more comprehensive. It can encompass all areas of facilitation within its work but remains clearly distinct because of the greater depth of the work and its longer term focus."

“I think there is considerable overlap in the desired outcomes, which is why I’ve ticked some for both. A skilled facilitator can absolutely influence team performance, behaviour and dynamics, just as team coaching can help a team achieve a specific goal. The difference is more about the primary purpose and time horizon.”

Process

Process	Specific to	Findings		
		FAC	TC	Δ
Enabling specific processes/conversations	FAC	98%	72%	26%
Working with team dynamics	TC	62%	98%	36%
Providing guidance, feedback, and support	TC	72%	89%	17%
Ensuring direction & decisions are on target	TC	81%	58%	(23%)
Ensuring everyone contributes	TC/FAC	91%	79%	F 12%
Ensuring everyone takes ownership of outcomes	FAC	74%	79%	(5%)
Using structured tools & techniques	FAC	94%	72%	22%
Facilitating dialogue	TC/FAC	96%	91%	F 5%
Providing expert knowledge when required	TC	79%	58%	(21%)

About half of the results are in the predicted direction. Respondent’s ratings were consistent with the idea that:

- Facilitators are more likely to enable specific processes and conversations
- Facilitators are more likely to use structured tools and techniques
- Team coaches are more likely to work with team dynamics
- Team coaches are more likely to provide guidance, feedback, and support

Three results went against predictions:

- Facilitators are more likely to ensure direction and decisions are on target
- Facilitators are more likely to provide expert knowledge when required
- Team coaches are more likely to ensure everybody takes ownership of outcomes

For the two items where there was disagreement among writers:

- Facilitators are more likely to ensure everyone contributes
- Facilitators are more likely to facilitate dialogue

Again, the delta between the two disciplines is often small, and even for those items where there is a significant delta, both disciplines score at least 58% on every item:

“I’ve realised through doing this questionnaire that facilitators and team coaches are more similar than I thought.”

Many respondents emphasised the role of the facilitator in working with a structured process, and the role of the team coach in working with emergence:

“Overall, the facilitator is much more concerned with managing the process compared to the team coach. The team coach is less directive, although at times, and only when genuinely necessary, the team coach may adopt a more directive stance. When team coaching, many of the outcomes listed above are handed back to the team for them to consider and work on. Each of these areas is relevant to team coaching, but it is mainly the team that does the work on them, not the team coach.”

The distinction may not always be clear cut:

“There is considerable overlap in process, and the distinction is more about intention and how the process is held than a completely different set of techniques. Both can involve structured tools, dialogue, working with dynamics and addressing the content of a conversation where appropriate. “

Processes may show up differently in practice in each discipline:

“I checked all boxes for both, but three of them apply differently depending on the context. ‘Addressing the content of the conversation’, ‘Providing guidance, feedback, and support’, and ‘Providing expert knowledge when required’. In coaching these three happen in a more indirect, questioning-based way, while in facilitation they tend to be more direct.”

The biggest delta was for ‘working with team dynamics’, but some people do see this as absolutely relevant for facilitators:

“[As a facilitator] I’m doing this constantly (e.g. voice, power, avoidance, energy, who is speaking, who isn’t, what isn’t being said, psychological safety/discomfort, patterns under pressure) but I think the ‘what for?’ and ‘how deep?’ is important. [As a facilitator this] is often about how these dynamics impact our ability to achieve our objective, whereas in team coaching the intervention is about deepening awareness of the team system.”

As anticipated, the role of practitioner in providing expert knowledge was debated:

“The only thing I think a coach might not do is provide expert knowledge when required. That’s not to say they can’t, but providing knowledge is more aligned to mentoring than coaching, and a coach isn’t necessarily a subject matter expert – but a facilitator must be.”

“Facilitators, I don’t see as much providing direct guidance. I would see that guidance and feedback being more of a coaching hat.”

Skills

		Findings		
Skills	Specific to	FAC	TC	Δ
Contracting – agreement of behaviours & outcomes	Both	89%	92%	T 3%
Helping the team/group to find their own solution	Both	75%	100%	T 25%
Creating ways to encourage collaboration	Both	89%	87%	F 2%
Asking open-ended questions	Both	92%	98%	T 6%
Group development/effectiveness skills	Both	68%	85%	T 17%
Listening attentively	Both	92%	100%	T 8%
Summarising and reflecting	Both	98%	91%	F 7%
Clarifying and aligning ideas	Both	91%	87%	F 4%
Decision making techniques	Both	89%	74%	F 15%
Brainstorming	Both	98%	70%	F 28%
Problem solving techniques	Both	92%	75%	F 17%
Action planning techniques	Both	91%	77%	F 14%
Energising activities	Both	94%	70%	F 24%
Working with team dynamics	Both	66%	96%	T 30%
Action planning – measurements and milestones	Both	83%	77%	F 6%
Conflict management	Both	74%	91%	T 17%
Time and meeting management	Both	94%	74%	F 20%
Acts ethically	TC at least	94%	98%	4%
Cultivating trust and safety	TC at least	94%	100%	6%
Maintaining presence	TC at least	92%	100%	8%
Evokes awareness including self-awareness	TC at least	79%	100%	21%
Diagnoses team's current state and needs	TC at least	60%	89%	29%
Systems thinking	TC at least	64%	89%	25%
Use of models and techniques	TC at least	92%	87%	(5%)
Effective communication	TC at least	98%	100%	2%

Of the three writers we referenced, none differentiated between the two disciplines in terms of skills, indeed Dowse and Turner suggested that the skillsets are the same. Respondents rated the following skills as being particularly high for facilitators ($\Delta > 20\%$):

- Brainstorming

- Energising activities
- Time and meeting management

The following skills were rated particularly high for team coaches:

- Helping the team/group to find their own solution
- Working with team dynamics
- Evokes awareness including self-awareness
- Diagnoses team's current state and needs
- Systems thinking

Many respondents agreed with Dowse and Turner that all the skills listed are important for both roles:

"Both require psychological safety, skilled questioning, active listening, working with group dynamics and facilitating meaningful dialogue."

"I think all these skills are useful in both, depending on the needs and dynamic of the team/group. Both facilitators and team coaches need to be prepared for anything to emerge in the room and respond accordingly. So, all of these are important."

Again, there may be nuances:

"A facilitator might summarise what they are hearing, whereas a team coach is more likely to ask the team to summarise for themselves and only become more directive if necessary. A facilitator might diagnose a team's current state and needs, whereas a team coach will allow the team to diagnose their own current state and needs. Team coaching is more likely to delve into deeper work such as working through conflict and challenging team dynamics."

Some respondents emphasised the ability of both role-holders to evoke awareness of self:

"Ultimately, technical skills can be learned. The real differentiator is the practitioner's ability to use themselves consciously and ethically in service of the group."

Duration

		Findings		
Duration	Specific to	FAC	TC	Δ
An intervention is for just one session	FAC	91%	28%	63%
An intervention is short --- 1-5 days	FAC	89%	68%	21%
An intervention lasts for several months	FAC/TC	26%	94%	T 68%

Most respondents see facilitation as the shorter-term intervention:

"In order to create sustainability and long-term behavioural changes, I insist on spending a minimum of six months coaching a client. They need the time to be coached on their work"

while they are doing the work. They also need time to practice new behaviours and skills and successfully manage accountability within their team and within their system.”

Not everyone agrees:

“I’m just scoping a project for a new client. This is likely to be facilitation over several years as we seek to understand and influence how the community view the presence of the sanctuary and also change it in response to community views. Looking to adapt the system.”

Others differentiate less on duration and more on purpose/outcomes:

“I do not see duration as a defining distinction between facilitation and team coaching. There can be multi-session facilitation processes and shorter team coaching interventions. For me, the more meaningful distinction is the purpose and depth of the work, rather than its duration.”

Commercial factors play a role:

“I do know of some team coaches who will refuse to work unless the client commits to the full program of six months or a year or a set number of sessions, which I understand. I personally believe that it makes commercial sense to take one-off sessions as long as you are clear up front with the client, saying, ‘I’ll take your one-day session at this point but be aware that I don’t think it’s going to fully solve the problems you’re trying to solve. My recommendation is to be open to doing more work to continue the process.’”

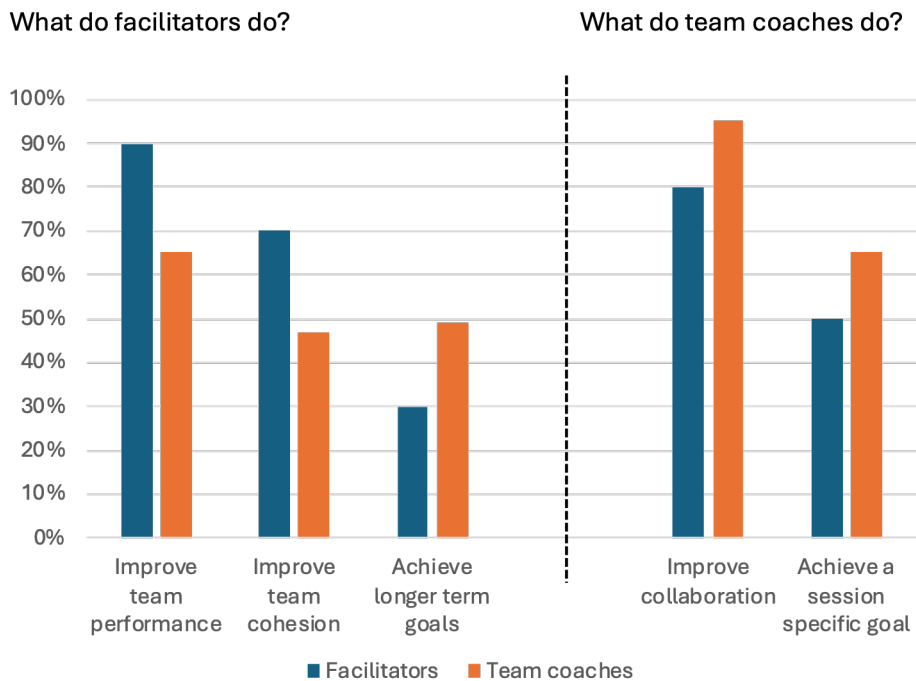
“The accreditation bodies draw the distinction partly on duration, with team coaching usually running over months. In practice, teams often balk at a long-term assignment on budget and time grounds, and assignments frequently start as short pieces of work and become longer ones.”

“Real team coaching processes take several sessions to really make significant impact and change [but] as a businessman, I also have to balance my commercial needs with the client’s need. Sometimes, at the beginning of a client relationship I have to persuade a client to trust me, which sometimes only comes with them giving me an opportunity to show that I am worth it.”

Different Perspectives

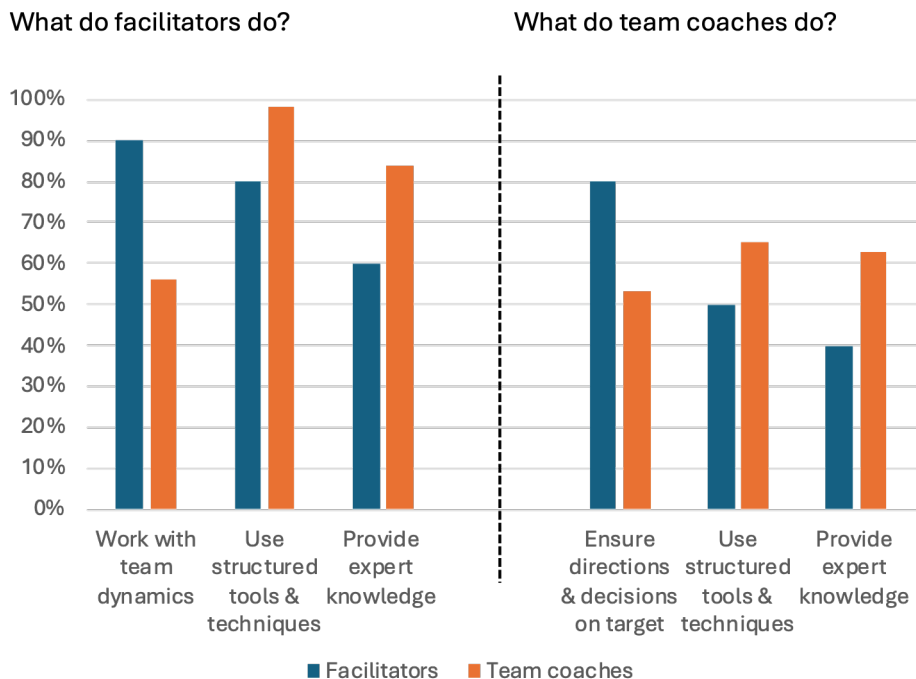
Of the 53 people we surveyed, 39 people practice team coaching and facilitation, 10 only facilitate, and four only coach teams. The coach-only group was too small to compare to the other groups – we found very few people who did team coaching and did not do facilitation. But we were interested to see if the facilitator-only group (n=10) had a different perspective to those who coached teams. In the graphs below we show those items where facilitator ratings differed from team coach/facilitator ratings by 15% or more.

1. Outcomes



Facilitators are more likely than team coaches to think that facilitators work to improving team performance and improving team cohesion, and are less likely to think that facilitators work to achieve longer term goals. Team coaches are more likely to think that team coaching objectives include improving collaboration and achieving a session-specific goal.

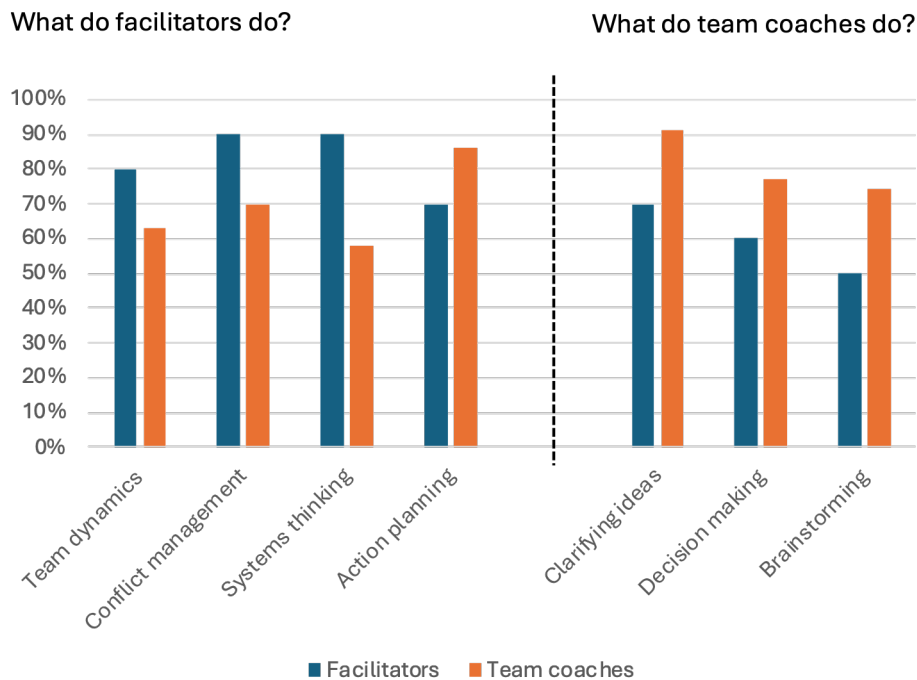
2. Process



Facilitators are more likely than team coaches to think that facilitators work with team dynamics, and less likely to think that facilitators use structured tools & techniques and

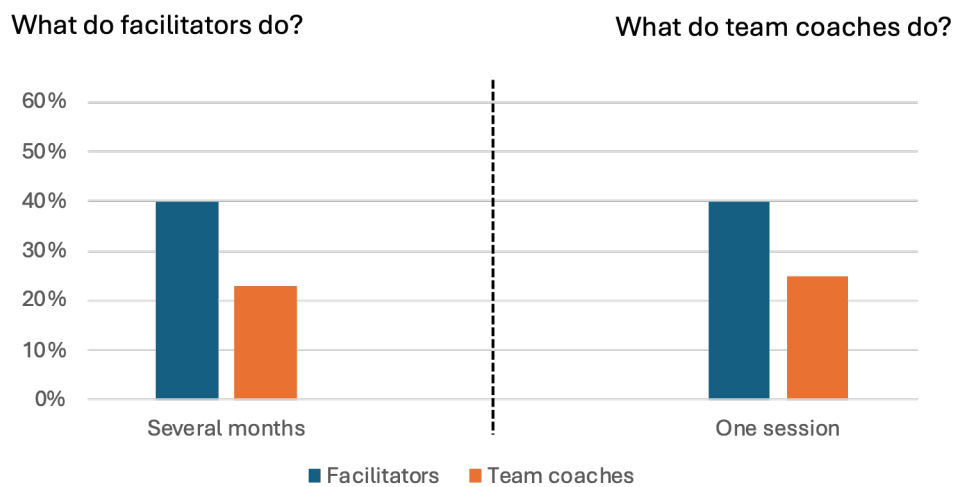
provide expert knowledge. Team coaches are more likely than facilitators to think that team coaches use structured tools & techniques and that they provide expert knowledge, and less likely to think that team coaches ensure directions and decisions are on target.

3. Skills



Facilitators are more likely to think that facilitators are skilled in team dynamics, conflict management, and systems thinking, and less likely to think that facilitators have skills in action planning – setting milestones and measurements. Team coaches are more likely to think that team coaches are more skilled in clarifying and aligning ideas, decision making techniques, and brainstorming.

4. Duration



Facilitators are more likely than team coaches to think that facilitation is a longer-term intervention and that team coaching is a shorter-term intervention.

Discussion

Revisiting the literature

None of the three attempts to clearly differentiate team coaching from facilitation were wholly validated. Some of the suggested differences didn't even trend in the right direction. For example, our raters:

- Did not validate Clutterbuck et al.'s view that facilitators are more focused on improving collaboration than are team coaches, nor the idea that dialogue is a process more often deployed by team coaches than by facilitators.
- Did not validate the ICF view that facilitators are more focused on enhancing clarity than are team coaches.
- Did not validate Dowse & Turner's idea that the team coach is particularly focused on ensuring that the team's direction and decisions are on target, nor the idea that facilitators pay particular attention to ensuring people take ownership of meeting outcomes, nor the notion that facilitators don't delve into an analysis of team dynamics.

Some suggested differences did trend in the right direction. For example, our raters overall:

- Validated Clutterbuck et al.'s view that team coaches are more likely to work toward performance improvement, and that facilitators are more likely to provide procedural, task, and content-focused interaction.
- Validated the ICF perspective that team coaches are more likely to work toward performance improvement and team sustainability, and that dialogue is a process more often deployed by facilitators than by team coaches.
- Validated several of Dowse & Turner's distinctions.

But our raters did not speak with one voice.

Consider, for example, team performance. 100% of raters said that team coaches work toward helping a team to perform better, while 70% said facilitators work to that objective. This is a difference of 30% - a sizeable difference, but 70% of raters still say that facilitators do, on occasion, work toward helping a team to perform better. The distinction is not definitive, nor defining.

This is an important point. It implies that both facilitators and team coaches may, on occasion, work toward all of the outcomes listed as differentiators by the authors we considered. Both may engage in all of the processes we listed. Both facilitators and team coaches may deploy all of the skills we listed, including team coaching competencies listed by the global coaching associations. There is no evidence here to support the idea that team coaching and facilitation are radically different forms of intervention.

Raters don't all agree that systems thinking skills are specific to team coaches

The lowest numbers in the Process and Skills tables relate to facilitators and elements of systems thinking. Raters overall rated facilitators relatively low in terms of:

- Working with team dynamics as a process (62%)
- Having the skills to work with team dynamics (66%)
- Diagnosing team's state and needs (60%)
- Systems thinking skills (64%)

The scores are still all over 60% however, and the specialist facilitators think the numbers should be higher.

- 90% said facilitators work with team dynamics as a process
- 80% said facilitators need the skills to work with team dynamics
- 90% said facilitators need systems thinking skills

So, not everyone agrees that systems thinking differentiates team coaching from facilitation.

The biggest difference is duration, but the difference is not defining

If we look across the data as a whole, there are only three scores of less than 50%, and they are all related to duration. Raters said:

- Facilitator assignments are unlikely to last for several months (26%).
- Team coaching assignments are unlikely to take the form of a single session (28%).
- A facilitator is unlikely to work to the achievement of longer-term goals (45%).

So, whilst our rates don't all agree on any clearly differentiating factors, the closest they come is in agreeing that facilitation is often the shorter-term intervention. The majority of respondents say that facilitators are most often asked to achieve their objectives over a shorter period of time, those objectives often having been determined in advance. Facilitators may respond to these shorter term demands by turning more often to structure. Team coaches typically have longer time frames to work with their clients, working to longer term goals and objectives. They have more opportunity to delve deeper, to address deeper patterns of team behaviours and functioning. But the skills are the same and the journey is unpredictable. One team coach said that the work of a team coach is ...

"... seldom so binary. It's common to start an intervention or session with something that is more structured because team members do not have the capacity to work emergently. Moreover, they may never really develop it, so that the coaching is, of necessity, more structured. I have also spoken with facilitators who do not recognise the distinction I have outlined: they see themselves working in the moment. So, if there is a distinction in how the two manifest in practice, it's largely down to the practitioner's beliefs around their purpose, the purpose of the intervention, the team's context and how to address the team's needs."

In other words, what the client needs is contextual and dynamic. The practitioner expecting to work at a deeper level may find themselves working with structure, and the practitioner expecting to work with structure may find themselves drawn into working at a deeper level. Therefore, both team coach and facilitator may require all of the skills we have discussed. The team coach may *more often* find themselves in a context where they are working with process, and the facilitator may *more often* find themselves in a context where they are working with

structure, but this is about context and the demands of the situation. It does not imply that these two roles can be rigidly demarcated in terms of desired outcome, process, skills, or even duration of assignment.

Implications

If this is a valid perspective, then the idea that a practitioner wears different hats during an assignment is inappropriate. The ICF has a team coaching competency that says a team coach:

“Explains what team coaching is and is not, including how it differs from other team development modalities. It is important for the team coach to highlight the difference between team coaching and other team development modalities.”

Clutterbuck et al. say:

“There is an understanding that the team coach may move between aspects of team coaching, team building and team facilitation, during a session or assignment.”

We call this the ‘hats’ strategy, with the practitioner picking up the team coaching hat for a while, then swapping it with a facilitator hat, and so on. The ICF competency implies that the coach should do this explicitly with a team. But our findings suggest this may be neither helpful nor appropriate in the case of team coaching and facilitation. Switching from structure to process, or process to structure, for example, is not about switching from one clearly demarcated role to another; it is about the skilled practitioner (whatever they call themselves) adapting to the needs of the moment, in the moment.

This has implications for practitioner development. If the needs of the client in the moment are changeable and dynamic, then all practitioners, be they facilitators or team coaches, ought to develop the ability to work with structure *and* process, with content *and* team dynamics to short *and* long terms goals,. The practitioner who prefers structured ways of working with teams over single sessions may nevertheless find themselves on occasion in a situation where they need to work at a deeper level. The practitioner who likes to work on an emergent basis with teams over a longer period of time, may nevertheless find themselves in a situation where the team needs a more structured approach to help them deal with a relatively superficial problem.

When the facilitator is being asked to put on their team coach hat, what they are actually being asked to do is to place more emphasis on the team dynamics skills that many already have. When the team coach is being asked to put on their facilitator hat, what they are actually being asked to do is turn to structure and content, in their role as team coach. The role of facilitator and the role of team coach are not qualitatively distinct. Practitioners from both camps may be asked to achieve the same outcomes, deploy the same processes, and demonstrate the same skills.

Practitioner identity

Whatever conclusions we may come to here, people will continue to call themselves ‘facilitators’ and ‘team coaches’. What you call yourself depends on the story you tell about

yourself. You may be very adept at working with process over a long period of time, but that may not be the work you most enjoy. Or you may be great at working with structure and content over a single session, but that's not the work you want to do. We tend to identify most with the work we most enjoy and want to do. You may spend your time with a lot of other people who call themselves facilitators and very little time with team coaches. But that doesn't mean that some facilitators and some team coaches don't do pretty much the same work, seeking to achieve the same objectives, deploying the same processes, and demonstrating the same skills.

Personally, no matter what the ICF may tell me, I have no intention of ever telling a client during a session that '*now I'm facilitating*', and '*now I'm coaching*'. I associate all of the work I do with being a team coach, *and* with being a facilitator. I am not saying that contracting isn't important – good contracting is critical. I will always contract carefully with the client as to what I am doing and why. Perhaps now is the time to focus on structure and content? Or perhaps now is the time to focus on how the team is working together? I can have those conversations without complicating the issue by invoking a binary model of team coach – facilitator.

So - what *is* the difference between team coaching and facilitation?

The answer to this question will depend upon how you define 'team coaching' and how you define 'facilitation'. Repeating what one of our respondents said:

"If there is a distinction in how the two manifest in practice, it's largely down to the practitioner's beliefs around their purpose, the purpose of the intervention, the team's context and how to address the team's needs."

My personal response to the question, based on my beliefs and purpose, and depending on context, would likely be along the lines of:

"Team coaches and facilitators perform essentially the same role. They work to achieve similar outcomes, deploy similar processes, and leverage the same skill set. If there is a difference, it is that the people calling themselves 'facilitators' more often work to short term outcomes, focussing on structure and content, while the people calling themselves 'team coaches' more often work to longer term outcomes, spending more time helping teams improve their underlying ways of functioning."

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APPENDIX – Questionnaire items & their source

Purpose/Outcome	Specific to	Source
Improved team performance	TC	Clutterbuck, Dowse & Turner
Improved team cohesion	TC	Dowse & Turner
Improved team dynamics	TC	ICF, Dowse & Turner
Changed team behaviours	TC	Dowse & Turner
Improved collaboration	FAC	Clutterbuck, Dowse & Turner
The achievement of a session-specific goal	FAC	Dowse & Turner
The achievement of longer-term goals	TC	ICF
Greater clarity	FAC	ICF

Process	Specific to	Source
Enabling specific processes/conversations	FAC	Clutterbuck
Working with team dynamics	TC	ICF, Dowse & Turner
Providing guidance, feedback, and support	TC	Dowse & Turner
Ensuring direction & decisions are on target	TC	Dowse & Turner
Ensuring everyone contributes	TC/FAC	ICF/Dowse & Turner
Ensuring everyone takes ownership of outcomes	FAC	Dowse & Turner
Using structured tools & techniques	FAC	Dowse & Turner
Facilitating dialogue	TC/FAC	Clutterbuck/ICF
Providing expert knowledge when required	TC	ICF

Skills	Specific to	Source
Contracting – agreement of behaviours & outcomes	Both	Dowse & Turner
Helping the team/group to find their own solution	Both	Dowse & Turner
Creating ways to encourage collaboration	Both	Dowse & Turner
Asking open-ended questions	Both	Dowse & Turner
Group development/effectiveness skills	Both	Dowse & Turner
Listening attentively	Both	Dowse & Turner
Summarising and reflecting	Both	Dowse & Turner

Clarifying and aligning ideas	Both	Dowse & Turner
Decision making techniques	Both	Dowse & Turner
Brainstorming	Both	Dowse & Turner
Problem solving techniques	Both	Dowse & Turner
Action planning techniques	Both	Dowse & Turner
Energising activities	Both	Dowse & Turner
Working with team dynamics	Both	Dowse & Turner
Action planning – measurements and milestones	Both	Dowse & Turner
Conflict management	Both	Dowse & Turner
Time and meeting management	Both	Dowse & Turner
Acts ethically	TC at least	ICF
Cultivating trust and safety	TC at least	ICF
Maintaining presence	TC at least	ICF
Evokes awareness including self-awareness	TC at least	ICF
Diagnoses team's current state and needs	TC at least	EMCC
Systems thinking	TC at least	EMCC
Use of models and techniques	TC at least	EMCC
Effective communication	TC at least	AC

Duration	Specific to	FAC
An intervention is for just one session	FAC	ICF
An intervention is short --- 1-5 days	FAC	ICF
An intervention lasts for several months	FAC/TC	Clutterbuck/Clutterbuck, ICF

ⁱ Clutterbuck, D., Gannon, J., Hayes, S., Iordanou, I., Lowe, K., & MacKie, D. (2019). Introduction. In: D. Clutterbuck, J. Gannon, S. Hayes, I. Iordanou, K. Lowe, & D. MacKie [Eds]. *The Practitioners Handbook of Team Coaching*. Routledge

ⁱⁱ ICF, Team Coaching Competencies (<https://coachingfederation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/icf-cs-team-coaching-competencies.pdf>)

ⁱⁱⁱ Dowse, E. & Turner, E. (2026). Team Coaching vs Facilitation: What is the Difference and Why Does it Matter for Today's Leaders? *Leader to Leader*, Winter 2026, 70-76

^{iv} Lawrence, P. (2025). *The Wise Team Coach*. Routledge