

Team Coaching and Effective Team Leadership



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Introduction

In order to enhance task performance and the satisfaction of workers and clients, leaders and teams must deal with organizational change successfully (e.g., Hawkins, 2014). One way to enhance this is through stimulating reflexivity as a key aspect of team learning and developing (e.g., Greif, 2008). In line with the increasing speed of changes in the world, a growing number of team leaders have added the role of team coach to their repertoire when dealing with permanent changes in their organizations (e.g., Buljac & Van Woerkom, 2015). Although coaching teams is often seen as an act of effective leadership (Hackman & Wageman, 2005), there are also many external team coaches aiding teams and their leaders to deal with: increasing performance pressures; demands for job satisfaction; or to overcome their disagreements and conflicts.

In this essay, we discuss the similarities and differences between the roles of an effective team leader and external team coach. The basic requirement from a team coach is that he¹ *always* strives to enable the team to learn. A team leader is also responsible for regular task execution. Even though an effective leader is able to bring about team learning, and may occasionally act as a team coach, one may ask: what can a team coach and team leader learn from *each other*? Before we address

¹ 'He' refers, of course, to either he or she.

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this question, we will define the main constructs of this essay: leader, team, and team coach.

Leader

For the purpose of this paper, we focus on the transformational leadership style (Bass, 2008), because leaders with this style are commonly assumed to lead change effectively. This style builds relationships among and enables empowerment of followers (see chapter “Leadership theories as knowledge base in coaching”). There are circumstances under which such leaders may (temporarily) not be effective, as a result of which it may be necessary to contract an external coach in order to enhance a team’s (or leader’s) effectiveness.

Team

We define a team as a unit of people in a work context. Team members have interdependent tasks and specialized roles. The group can be small or large, temporary or long lived and has to perform one or more tasks (Hackman & Wageman, 2005). The internal relations in a team’s life cycle are crucial. Tuckman’s well-known group developmental theory (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) includes the following phases: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. Not all groups follow this sequential pattern of development. Hackman and Wageman (2005, p. 275) point to Gersick’s (1988) alternative model: the beginnings, the midpoints, and the ends of a performing period. They conclude “that the readiness of work teams for coaching interventions changes systematically across their life cycle.” A team that is changing in composition, especially if turnover is high or the team is growing in size, may require coaching to further optimize its performance.

External Team Coach

A team coach executes “a learning intervention designed to increase the collective capability and performance of a group or team, through the application of the coaching principles of assisted reflection, analysis and motivation for change” (Clutterbuck, 2014, p. 271). A coach will act systematically and methodically and stimulate individual self-reflection and team reflexivity. Reflexivity is the extent to which teams reflect upon and modify their functioning (Greif, 2008; Widmer et al. 2009; Buljac & Van Woerkom, 2015). Both individual members and teams as a whole engage in learning. External team coaches ensure that team members can

learn from the different perspectives and reflections, and that interactive team learning takes place as well (Ward, 2010). We will argue, in this chapter, that the distinction between an external team coach and a leader is not primarily in terms of skills, but in the unique roles or positions. Accordingly, team leaders and coaches approach and affect mutual relationships and trust differently.

Three types of team coaches can, in practice, be distinguished: the team leader; the internal professional team coach; and the external professional team coach. Team coaching is usually integrated into a leader's daily activities. He is a member of the team with a specific role as a leader, including the matching responsibilities. We note that there is scarce empirical research on the effectiveness of the leader as a coach, and especially in team coaching. We will argue in this chapter that the most important impact a team leader can have as a team coach is stimulating the reflexivity and empowerment of team members. Coaching the team in its reflexivity and developmental processes may not always be easily combined with one's regular leadership role, such as evaluating direct reports and assessing their results. The team leaders' evaluating task is especially important as it affects members in the degree of being open in their communication (Hunt & Weintraub, 2002).

An internal team coach is part of the team's larger organization and is a coach for different intra-organizational teams. Such a coaching role can also be assumed informally by regular members of a team (peer coaching) (Dimas et al., 2016). In the perspective of this essay, we will not elaborate on these latter positions of intra-organizational and informal team coaching. We will focus on the *external* team coach. Such a coach is assigned, temporarily and formally, to a particular team for an explicit purpose; in the below, we use the term "team coach" for this position. We will compare the role of an external team coach to a team leader's role. We do so in order to help decision-makers recognize when to hire an external coach and when to carry on "doing it yourself" (DIY) as a team leader.

Comparing Team Coaches to Team Leaders

Team Coach Characteristics and Skills

Effective team coaches have at least the following characteristics:

- A high personal developmental level: a relatively high educational level and/or a body of relevant knowledge. They join coach platforms in order to exchange professional coaching ideas.
- Integrity: relying on sound judgment (moral compass) in all circumstances; maintaining high standards on ethical behaviors.
- Confidence: feel self-confident as well as confident about the potential of the coachees and the coaching process.

- Coaching experience: well trained and experienced in coaching within organizations (Baek-Kyoo Joo, 2005).
- The ability to form effective relationships with team members and leaders.

Regardless of the theories used by a coach, the foundation of effective coaching is rooted in collaboration skills and accountability (e.g., Passmore, 2020; Stober & Grant, 2006). In order to enhance this collaboration and stimulate accountability in a team and their members (Llewellyn, 2015), coaches are able to:

1. *Slow down to speed up.* Take the time to make observations and analyze them clearly. It implies taking the time to check biases and assumptions in order to improve the feedback given by the coach during the process.
2. *Think systemically.* Look beyond the immediate or obvious, focus on the interactions, and be aware of the larger picture instead of just what happens in the room (Hawkins, 2014).
3. *Use influence over persuasion.* Instead of convincing others of one's point of view, a coach will support the team members in forming own opinions and conclusions, as well as helping them in their professional and personal life.
4. *Ask powerful questions and then listen.* By doing so, one is showing real interest in the other and therefore contributing to a trustful relationship.
5. *Look below the surface.* Understand the nature of the people and the factors that influence human behavior. Eminent in this context is that a team coach is aware of the functional and dysfunctional dynamics of a given team (Clutterbuck, 2014).

This set of skills and characteristics are not exclusively reserved for coaches. Reflective leaders may also have or use them (Bass, 2008). Either way, the leader and the team coach all need education, training, time, and maturity to acquire these skills and characteristics as well as the accompanying attitudes and values.

Foci of Transformational Leaders

Transformational leadership is elaborated elsewhere in this handbook (see chapter). In this chapter we will take its four main foci into consideration, each of which has accompanying characteristics, attitudes and skills (Bartram & Inceoglu, 2011): develop a vision; set goals; gain support; and deliver operational success. The effective transformational leader “emphasizes the exchange that occurs between a leader and followers” (Bass, 2008, p. 618) whereby inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation vis-à-vis work tasks are also important factors; effective transformational leaders also see themselves as part of a “relational team.”

Focus	Effective External Team Coach	Effective Team Leader
1. Develop a vision	--	++
2. Set goals	+ -	++
3. Gain support	++	++
4. Deliver operational success	--	++
5. Stimulate reflection	++	+ -
6. Self-leadership	++	+ -
7. Contractual relationship	++	+ -

- ++ eminently important
- + - of importance
- no focus

Fig. 1 Comparing the foci of effective external team coaches and leaders

Foci of Team Coaches

We will now discuss the three main foci of effective team coaches. *First:* stimulate reflection. An important part of a team coach’s work is to stimulate reflection in team members in order to mature them and to deliver more or better performance or output (Greif, 2008; Widmer et al., 2009; Buljac & Van Woerkom, 2015). *Second:* develop self-leadership and responsibility for the work. An important attitude in self-leadership is to be willing and brave enough to ‘look in the mirror’ and reflect on one’s work activities and contexts. Kohlrieser et al. (2012), Kets de Vries (2014), and McLaughlin and Cox (2016) for instance describe the latter extensively. *Third:* contractual relationship. Research on coaching shows that ‘relationship forming’ is important if not a crucial skill for an effective coach (e.g., De Haan, 2008). Using this comparative framework of effective team leadership and coaching, we will now elaborate on seven differentiating elements between an effective team leader and an external coach (Fig. 1).

Develop a Vision

Transformational team leadership has an impact on a team’s performance through the way the followers are stimulated and inspired (e.g., Kirkbride, 2006; Bass, 2008). To inspire members of the team, the vision of the organization and the team needs to be as clear and compelling as possible. Consequently, the leader tends to be much more team-task focused than a coach. After all, a leader has the overall responsibility for the productive well-being of a team.

In contrast, a team coach will support and facilitate the team working on their tasks but has no formal responsibility for the execution of the work. The task of a team coach is not an active one in terms of developing the vision. They will understand and endorse the given vision, including the guidelines for the targets of

the organization. Regarding the effective practices of team coaching, the coach is interested in the organization at large. He has knowledge about the sector in which the organization and team (and its issues and dilemmas) are embedded and is aware of and familiar with the current context.

Set Goals

Another focus of a team leader is setting and sharing goals. These goals or targets are mostly economical or technological in nature, or commercially driven. Another aspect of goal setting is the focus on the developmental team goals, but not only task and result-related goals. In practice, the external coach will focus on the learning or developmental goals that are mostly related to the quality of the relations and intra-team and inter-team collaboration. These goals can evolve over time. The team goals will also cover competencies of the team as a whole, e.g., giving and receiving feedback; conflict management; communicate respectfully; working efficiently, etc. The supportive contribution of an external team coach is to intervene and to enhance the quality of the team interactions while taking the organizational team goals as a fact. The type of goals an external coach is responsible for do not pertain, therefore, to the actual team tasks but to the goals a coach and the team want to attain together for the good of the team.

The goal-setting focus of an external team coach differs from that of the team leader. The importance of goal setting in coaching is described widely (e.g., Whitmore, 2009; Greif, 2008). It is also important to enhance the quality of team interactions such as collaboration and giving feedback. These are keys to effective team development.

The points that an effective leader and coach have in common in terms of goal setting are that they must gain a team's support for and commitment to its goals. The role of the team coach is to facilitate rather than be substantively responsible. In practice, goal setting is a part of the coaching process. This process of setting effective team coaching goals reveals the needs and wishes of the team members and helps them to look below the surface for a while. Goal commitment by the team members can arise due to reflecting on these goals together: in advance of or during the team coaching process itself. Mutual accountability occurs when the team recognizes and actively pursues better conditions for accomplishing its goals (i.e., task- and performance-related as well as developmental coaching goals) (Llewellyn, 2015).

Gain Support

Gaining support for the team goals and motivation to work together better, involves empowerment in order to deliver results. Empowerment is about unleashing the

potential in team members to contribute to team performance. An effective team leader shows a belief in the potential of every member of his team. In this way, he addresses the innate desire of humans to develop and grow (e.g., Temple, 2008), including a balancing act while searching for safety, on the one hand, and the need to explore, on the other (Robertson, 2003). Kohlrieser et al. (2012) calls this the “safety/risk” paradox. To inspire and motivate others to unleash everyone’s potential, a team leader has to care and support, and at the same time challenge members to take some risk and explore new ways of behaving or thinking: in other words “caring and daring” (Kohlrieser et al., 2012) at the same time.

Empowerment, as set out in the above, is also a necessary skill of a coach. Part of empowering is: using influence over persuasion; asking questions with real interest; and listening well. A coach uses skills and concepts from his “toolbox,” such as therapy and consulting (Grant, 2009) and he is trained to apply them. Therefore, he can be a source of inspiration to the team leader. By understanding the nature of humans and the complexity of group dynamics in relation to team-performance tasks and leadership, he will empower, motivate and challenge the team members to work toward their developmental goals. The coach is loyal to the agreed-upon goals without being formally responsible for them. Hence, within the domain of empowerment, the team leader and coach are similar to each other but they respond to the team goals differently. The team coach mostly focuses on the developmental goals while the leader may focus on other types of goals.

Deliver Operational Success

Some of the activities and responsibilities of a team leader is translating the team vision and strategy into clear effective work processes and tasks. A transformational leader aims to influence members’ behaviors positively and so enhance their performance. Sometimes, this might entail changing structures or processes, responsibilities, etc. Continuously improving the operational execution of a team’s vision is of the highest priority for any team leader (e.g., Llewellyn, 2015).

Since a team coach is not formally part of a team and has no performance responsibility, he will only intervene in specific team issues such as the cooperating process; trust; accountability; ownership in the context of team successes; etc. These are learning interventions “designed to increase collective capability and performance of a group or team” (Clutterbuck, 2014, p. 271). Typically, an external team coach will help members to understand the nature of their interaction patterns better. In that spirit, he provides the team with feedback about both effective and dysfunctional interactions between members: in a way that they learn from it and can engage in remediation (Stober & Grant, 2006).

Stimulate Reflection

Team reflexivity has been identified as an important positive determinant of team performance (e.g., Buljac & Van Woerkom, 2015), and also as a key component of team learning (Patterson et al., 2005). Team coaching will provide the team with more time to look into the mirror instead of looking merely through the window (Baek-Kyoo Joo, 2005; Greif, 2008; Llewellyn, 2015). When there is a need to change *rapidly*, the team is challenged with developing reflexivity because people tend to need extra time to achieve this. A coach is inclined to slow things down by helping the team to develop this ability to reflect. To reflect on the past and the present helps to create awareness about both personal and collective belief systems. Since coaching is always goal- and future-oriented, a team also needs to look ahead and turn the past- and present-oriented reflections into reflections of the future. Therefore, we suggest the term “*pro-flection*,” because team coaching is also geared toward actively and positively creating a way of thinking about the future, including solutions and new actions; it aims to enrich members’ behavioral repertoires. In order to achieve this, a team coach or team leader should use the skills ‘observe and think’ systemically, because the team’s performance is influenced as much by external as by internal factors (Hawkins, 2014).

Team reflections are generally interconnected with individual reflections (Greif, 2008). If individual self-awareness has been stimulated in the team, self-reflection processes and re- and pro-flection at the team level are possible. The reflections and pro-flections are, in the end, goal focused and ultimately help the team increase their autonomy in finding their own solutions. Herein lies a challenge for the team leader, in terms of being a part of a system, running it, and working on transformation and development at the same time. Taking a coach-enabled systemic view on its own interaction patterns is complicated for a team leader because of the intertwined relations between the team members and the leader himself. These relations are particularly burdened when the team has relational types of problems. In practice, being a part of the team implies you are a part of the team’s problems. A team leader, or team members, can possibly undermine the level of team trust and psychological safety. An external coach can help then: especially if the team leader has a conflict-avoiding tendency.

The term psychological safety is a widely used construct. It signals that the team members’ contributions to the team discussions are appreciated by the team. It defines the shared belief of members of a team that the team is safe for the exchange of interpersonal viewpoints (Edmondson, 1999). Widmer et al. (2009) found that team characteristics such as trust and psychological safety among team members, a shared vision, and diversity as well as leadership styles of the team leader, influence the level of team reflexivity. These empirical results underscore the complexity and potential of team coaching. It is especially important that when a team conflict arises, the team members develop an awareness about the patterns of interaction in which they operate. The goal of coaching is to give feedback and feedforward, in order to create this awareness and it is a part of the ability to reflect and pro-flect. It leads to an

increased level of team member autonomy, individually and as a team as a whole. The conflicts that are task related tend to be solved mostly by the team members themselves. However, when they become relational issues, they have a negative influence on a team's climate (Widmer et al., 2009). Hiring a team coach on time is therefore important. With regard to team learning, the team leader and coach can then complement each other, especially if they manage to work together solidly and transparently.

Self-Leadership

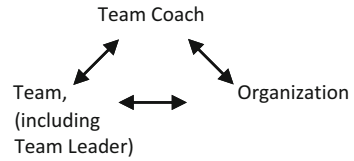
What you learn in life defines you as a person and managing yourself is part of what is nowadays called self-leadership (e.g., Kohlrieser et al., 2012; Kets de Vries, 2014). This applies to team leaders, team members, as well as to coaches. Hence, an effective team leader is aware of his role in the system and uses this insight in his actions and interventions when leading the team. He needs a suitable set of skills, attitudes, and experiences to live up to the standard of effective leadership. Yet, leadership is also innately personal. People will only challenge themselves if they find a so-called secure base in their life. They should feel safe and socially respected in order to take risks with trust and cooperation (Robertson, 2003). As an effective leader, you are a secure base for your members. In short: in order to *be* a secure base, you need to *have* a secure base (Kohlrieser et al., 2012, p. 15).

The way you see the world and direct your focus is part of self-reflection and, consequently, part of your belief system and your drives. Kohlrieser et al. (2012) call this "awareness of one's own focus: The Mind's Eye." To challenge team members to change and take risks, "leaders should begin from a position of as much understanding of their own emotions as possible in order to facilitate emotional balance" (McLaughlin & Cox, 2016, p. 88). An effective coach requires at least the five skills/characteristics to achieve this (see paragraph #2). In order to gain and train these skills and characteristics at a high professional coach level, team coaches also need to look regularly "into their own mirror." Team coaches can help team leaders to do so in a "preventive" spirit.

Contractual Relationship

Employing a temporary external team coach in a smooth way contributes to high coach performance. The aim of an external team coach is, by nature and professional standard, to secure trust and psychological safety, as a condition for the team to grow to a higher-performing status. In this context, the coaching literature commonly emphasizes the so-called three-cornered contract (e.g., Turner & Hawkins, 2016; Baek-Kyoo Joo, 2005; Napper & Newton, 2014).

Fig. 2 Three-cornered contract for effective coaching



The reciprocal lines in the triangle in Fig. 2 represent the relation between the stakeholders. The lines between the team coach and the organization constitute the formal contract between the team coach and the people who are asking for or are subject to coaching on behalf of the organization. Contracting is an important aspect in effective internal and external coaching because it aligns the responsibilities, targets, roles, relations, and communication and therefore defines the bond among the actors involved. In the perspective of trust and psychological safety, effective contracting ensures clarity and a maximum of openness about goals and intentions. Every stakeholder in a contract has his own set of tasks and responsibilities. The members of a team, including the team leader, are committed to the endeavor and the enhancing of a team's performance. In practice, this commitment is imperative for effective coaching. Practice has shown that if team members do not expend sufficient effort toward this developmental aim, or have no fierce desire to learn and grow (Robertson, 2003), the team coach cannot work effectively with the team member's reflections and profections. Such lack of commitment would negatively affect the attitude toward giving and receiving feedback and feedforward as an aspect of team learning.

Trust, confidentiality, and clarity are key success factors in terms of the relations between participants in team coaching (e.g., De Haan et al., 2011; De Haan, 2008; De Haan & Sills, 2010; Stober & Grant, 2006). The three-cornered contract shows that multiple relations or the responsibilities of one person can contribute to a conflict of interest and thus undermine the potential effectiveness of coaching. The team leader, as a team coach, experiences barriers in obtaining full openness. When under pressure from time or dropped results, the team leader can be easily tempted to switch to his executing role in which case the goal of developing the team will take second place. This can be especially the case if the team leader implicitly coaches his team members in their regular daily tasks instead of the planned sessions that are solely dedicated to team development.

A team coach must thus be careful in the contracting phase and has to: withstand the pressure of time or appeals of speeding up results or worse; mixing the roles of coach and leader, at the same time; or disclosing confidentialities about team members to the organization. He would then run the risk of losing his independency and therefore jeopardize trust, openness, and significant team learning. This independency namely enables effective coaching interventions. That is why an effective leader is restricted as a team coach.

An increasing number of studies suggest that the level of mutual trust and respect in team-member relations has an impact on a coach's performance (e.g., Boyce et al., 2010; Clutterbuck, 2014; Duckworth & De Haan, 2009). We suggest that working

conscientiously with these relations, relations that are well-conditioned by the three-cornered contract, is therefore a key to effective team coaching.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, we have compared the characteristics of effective external team coaches and team leaders. The key distinguishing point relates to trust and the coach's contracted roles in the organization. It is important for both the leader and the coach to be consistent (Robertson, 2003) and to create a secure base (Kohlrieser et al., 2012) for the members of a team: by being self-reflective and by stimulating reflexivity and proflexivity. Both modes of behaviors could create awareness and accountability for each team member's own part in the success or failure of the team's development and interdependent task execution, especially in the face of continuous change.

Under certain conditions, a transformational leader, if properly trained, will be able to coach a team as well. By being part of the team and representing the organization as a whole, he will be able to share their commitment to visions and goals with his team members. Being a part of the system is an advantage for the team leader. Yet, when things get tough and become conflictual, the independency of an external professional coach is an advantage. A coach's experience in group dynamics, his knowledge and good judgment, combined with independency, will make him become of added value in the development or maturing of a team. In practice, the external coach will often not only work with the team but will also engage in empowering the team leader into becoming a more effective team coach, also by being a good role model.

In contrast to the growing amount of research on individual or executive coaching, research on the effect of team coaching is scarce (Dimas et al., 2016). We plead for further research in this growing field of coaching (Passmore & Fillery Travis, 2011; Grant, 2016), in light of the increasing demands for organizational and team-based changes and opportunities. In addition, the empirical research on the efficacy of managerial coaching is still underdeveloped. Also, attention to ineffective coaching by the team leader (Ellinger et al., 2014) must be dealt with more seriously: by both managers and coaches, with respect to their own roles. Academic research could play a role here, so that ineffective coaching can be eventually banned more easily.

We did not elaborate on the different characteristics of a team (e.g., Clutterbuck, 2014) or the various team developmental phases (e.g., Tuckman, 1965; Hackman & Wageman, 2005). Clutterbuck (2014) names a few distinguishing team features, including the degree of task interdependence; the nature of relationships; and the content of and readiness for the tasks, per member. In this spirit, an interesting future research question is for example: in what ways do team characteristics affect effective team coaching in the context of organizational change?

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