Coaching Team Performance, a Case Study

A Team Coach's First Masterful Experience

For a German article on coaching organizations

The team coaching experience related below occurred around 1995 with a client in the hospitality industry. It is not a modus operandi for coaching team performance. It relates what may occur within a network or project team in an organization which has developed a delegating management culture over years. It also relates what may occur when coaching team performance with a truly masterful attentive coaching presence and posture.

This team coaching event took place with a roomful of motivated regional managers, all members of a large European corporation, all intensely working on their common operational issues. They did not constitute a formal team as the participating managers belonged to about five different country teams and reported to five different country managers. The focus of their work was to develop performing cross-country transverse support systems to better achieve their individual and collective goals. A coach was asked to accompany this fifteen-member network team in the course of a two-day off-site operational team coached meeting.

The Context

First a few words concerning the larger organizational context. The executive team and top management teams of this company had already been through several team development, team coaching and organizational coaching processes over the preceding years. Their excellent work and commitment on the executive team level had been followed-up and replicated with team coaching events within other echelons of the organization, all the way to lower management levels, Europe-wide. Through team coaching and over several years, the whole organization had successfully implemented a major management culture shift to increase initiative-based delegation and facilitate goal-oriented responsibility and empowerment on all levels. One could safely state that this corporation was quite mature, and its bottom line results were there to prove it.

The meeting organized by the network-team of regional managers was totally in keeping with the organizational management culture and operational strategy, and in keeping with their previous team coaching experience.

If the winds of change were blowing strong, however, some old habits die hard. The day after the team coach had been contacted by one of the regional managers to come and coach the above mentioned team meeting, the company Human Resource Executive Director called the coach and spilled out his doubts and fears:

_“I’ve just been informed about this regional managers team coaching meeting. What is going on? What is the real object of the meeting? What do they really intent to achieve, deciding to meet without their country managers? This team coaching configuration is not respectful of the company’s structure. How can we be sure the regional managers will really focus on achieving organizational goals? We can’t afford this waste of time and money. What if they agree to implement actions that are in total contradiction with corporate vision and country objectives?” Etc.

The team coach took time to listen, and then explain that the proposed team coaching process seemed to be totally in keeping with the corporate vision to encourage initiative and empowerment at all levels, that there were no indicators that the regional managers planned to conspire or to question defined corporate vision or country goals, that the team coaching meeting’s explicitly stated objective was to focus on developing better transverse collaboration between the regional managers. The meeting was not focused on vertical interfaces with the executive team or country managers. There were indeed no indications of any resistance towards country managers, the executive team, policies or structures.

The team coach had apparently successfully reassured the Executive HRD, maybe the country managers that he seemed to represent. The network of regional managers met with for two days of team coaching in an appropriate off-site location.

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The Experience

In situ, the operational maturity of the organization was immediately observable in the network team's collective processes and behavior. The performance-focused team coaching meeting started on time with all the regional managers present. A precisely timed team agenda for the full two days had already been defined by all the meeting members through a collective preparation process. Each of the agenda items had been prepared and pertinent pre-reads had been distributed three days prior to the team coaching meeting. A number of team members were ready to assume rotating meeting roles that had been assigned to keep the group on time and focused on the subjects at hand. Each team coaching participant's energy seemed to run high.

After letting the network team roll on for their first twenty-minute meeting sequence, the team coach asked if he could intervene and the group concurred. The team coach focused on eliciting a clear team coaching client agreement by asking for clarification as to what were the expected team coaching outcomes in the course of the two day team work.

_"Well, just do your team coaching job" answered one team member half jokingly.

The team coach clarified his question by proposing options:

_"Well, I can be more precise.

- Do you want me to ask you questions focused only on your process, or also on your content?
- Do you want me to do this team coaching during your meeting sequences, by interrupting so you could adjust right away, or do you want me to wait until you're done with a sequence so as to avoid being interrupted while you work?
- Do you want me to announce when I'm putting a team coaching question to reconsider your process and when these are focused on your content before I do it, or does it matter?"

Another group member responded:

_"Well, whatever you think is best. You're the team coach. And I think we should now proceed with our work and focus on our issues."

So the team coach got the hint and let go of his team coaching agreement issue, or protection and control issue, and got out of the way to let the network team proceed with its intensive agenda.

Over rest of the next two team coaching days, the coach occasionally offered a number of perceptions and put a few questions to the group. Some of these were pertinent enough to open reflections, provoke some meeting process adjustments, change perspectives, result in some operational improvements and open avenues for some future team development.

The task, however, was not so easy for the team coach. The team coaching group's maturity demonstrated a high capacity to focus on desired outcomes, think creatively, formulate decisions, design action plans, commit to deadlines, stay focused on their own issues, confront unproductive attitudes and behaviors, keep a dynamic pace, etc. This group's effectiveness was very clearly out of the ordinary.

When the two-day team coaching meeting came to a close and before leaving, the team coach approached a small group of regional managers and voiced his personal problem:

_"Congratulations. You were all very performing. I am truly impressed with your collective performance and productive results. I must admit, however, that I have some difficulty evaluating my team coaching added value. I feel i have not brought much to your meeting: for most of the two days, I have not felt very useful."

Three quick and creative responses were offered by different team coaching meeting participants, in a half-joking manner:
"We don't pay you for what you do, but for what you don't do"
"If you hadn't been here to witness our work, we would not have been so good. Without your team coaching presence, I'm not sure we would have achieved this same level of performance".
"If you had done any more than just be present, we wouldn't have had the opportunity to give our best and realise we were this good".

Comments

In a nutshell, the three comments spontaneously offered by the participants gave the team coach some essential information about the true nature of his team coaching job.

- “We don’t pay you for what you do, but for what you don’t do”.

This comment must not be confused with the idea that a team coach offers nothing through his or her attentive team coaching presence.

Coaches often cannot help wanting to be useful, to propose brilliant options, to share experiences, to distribute knowledge, to participate in client success, to show empathy if not sympathy or just to justify their team coaching presence and fees. This need may explain the extraordinarily high number of so-called coaching tools, processes and gimmicks which regularly appear on the market in the form of team coaching questionnaires, team coaching exercises, team coaching models, team coaching procedures and games. Numerous are the team coaches who routinely propose these team coaching tools to their clients to appear to be providing value for their money. This reveals how many team coaches try to fill the void with their team coaching presence, when they should actually be providing a truly empty space for client development.

The above team coaching client says that coaches are paid for what they don’t do. They are consequently paid for the help they don't provide, for what they don’t propose, for what they don’t sell and for what they don’t try. Team coaches are paid to stay off the tennis court, keep their hands off the racket, avoid handling the ball, and often for just keeping quiet. Team coaches are paid to be attentively present, in the bleachers, without any intention of influencing the team coaching client's game. Team coaches are paid to forget everything they think they know. They are paid to provide clients with a team coaching learning environment free of tools, gimmicks, games, communication theories, Powerpoint slides, theoretical models and all the rest.

A team coach needs to be aware that offering clean, open and uncluttered team coaching time and space within which clients can grow is the utmost luxury. Team coaching time is like a blank screen, an empty billboard, and a turned-off computer, all in one. Team coaches offer team coaching clients the rare luxury of having space and time with and for themselves. This is so uncommon and priceless that at first, some team coaching clients don’t know what to do with it. Team coaching clients indeed need time to learn to hear and recognize their own voice, to tune in to their own inner music, to elaborate, design and follow up their own personal projects.

- “If you hadn’t been here to witness our work, We would not have been so good. Without your team coaching presence, I’m not sure we would have reached this level of performance”.

This comment illustrates the importance of true presence when coaching team performance. It immediately dismisses the idea that if team coaches do nothing, they might as well be absent.

A team coach is fully present and attentive to all the team coaching client’s difficulties and successes. Deep listening to the meaning and motivation between client words and emotions, profound respect of client singularity, full acceptance of all client trials and errors, successes and shortcomings, intense concentration to each and every client moment, complete presence to the client and client environment are a few of the non-actions a team coach provides. Intense team coaching focus on client action doubles or triples their own focus on themselves and on their goal-focused work. Real team coaching presence accompanies real client performance. This team coaching presence could be described as a profound, silent, intense witnessing role.

Notice indeed that witnesses are necessary at key moments of our lives. During weddings and trials, as children and on our deathbeds, witnesses accompany growth, passages, key moments and departures. Very few of us know how to be a witness to ourselves, so we need coaches. Without witnesses, our actions could loose their depth of meaning.

Consequently, team coaches witness team coaching clients as these develop, unfold and grow. Team coaching presence simply multiplies the meaning of a team coaching client's work to help them develop width, breadth and depth. Profound team coaching presence serves to amplify client intentions and accompany their transformation into actions.

- “If you had done any more than just be present, we wouldn’t have had the opportunity to give our best and realize we were this good”.

A witness cannot be responsible for the witnessed wedding, the jury’s decisions, nor the client’s achievements. A team coach is not an involved business partner, a good Samaritan, helping hand, a knowledgeable expert, a technical instructor. A team coach does not moderate a team meeting, cheer lead, push decisions, motivate, offer operational solutions, nor step on the basketball field to compensate for a team member’s temporary shortcomings.

A team coach lets individual and team coaching clients own their responsibility for their actions, need for adjustment, capacity for growth and results without ever influencing the score, creating dependency nor stealing client total responsibility for success. Team coaching presence and attention simply adds to and multiplies the individual or collecive team coaching client's own presence and attention to what they are and what they are achieving.

Consequently, to be a master team coach one must unlearn some deeply ingrained reflexes, seize every opportunity to shed layers of useful experience, know nothing and just completely be there, with and for the team coaching client.

A special thanks to Barry Stevens for her book "Don't Push the River (just let it flow)"

For an extensive article on systemic coaching attentive presence

To know more about our team coaching approach

For a German article on coaching organizations

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