

Critical Mistakes in Coaching Teams

Coaches who are expert in working with individual business leaders are often drawn to expand their work into working with teams, assuming that the skills they will need to be effective with groups are the same ones they have already mastered. Wrong!

There are three common but critical mistakes made by coaches who may be very competent in working with individuals, but who have never been trained in group dynamics and can unknowingly do more harm than good.

These mistakes are assuming:

1. Group needs and dynamics are just the sum of the individual needs and behaviors of team members.
2. The goal of a group intervention is always the same - create a high performing team that has highly interdependent goals and very high levels of trust and collaboration – regardless of the team’s business purpose or team members’ levels of sophistication and maturity.
3. Once a team has been assessed, the team’s needs will remain the same throughout the coaching process.

Mistake #1: Group needs and dynamics are just the sum of individual needs and behaviors.

As a result of this assumption:

1. Coaches do not develop their understanding of group dynamics and do not have a framework or model to help them know or prioritize what to look for in groups.
2. Team assessments are often the result of combining scores of individual assessments (360s, MBTIs, etc.), rather than assessing the team’s dynamics as a whole.
3. Coaches view all behavioral problems as caused by individual dynamics (not group dynamics). Thus, dysfunctional behavior is caused by either one person needing to be “fixed” (i.e., coached one-on-one) or some interpersonal problems between dyads (i.e., requiring that the coach work with individuals within the team, not with the team as a whole).

To assess or diagnose a team, a coach needs a model or theory of what good looks like. How else can you tell what is and isn’t working? There is nothing wrong with 360s or the Myers-Briggs. But, for example, the Myers-Briggs is for measuring personality preferences, not the dynamics in a team.

A team assessment should, at a minimum, measure some common team dimensions such as:

- Goals (are they clear, measurable, aligned with supporting their strategic purpose?)
- Roles (are they clear, understood?)
- Membership (are participants engaged, committed, how do people gain/lose influence?)
- Norms (what are they, how are they reinforced, do members give each other timely feedback?)

- Climate (what is the level of trust, do people feel heard, is there a lot of unresolved conflict?)
- Leadership (how are decisions made, is leadership shared or rotated, are ideas solicited?)

This list is not meant to be complete, but to serve as an indication of why assessing individuals on their competencies or personalities does not give a coach insight into how the group is functioning **as a team** on critical factors.

The focus on individuals as opposed to seeing the client as the team as a whole can also lead to misinterpreting critical data and observations.

For example, maybe there is feedback that team meetings are often unproductive because Javier and Mary are always fighting. Coaches who only use the individual psychology lens will interpret the data as an expression of either a person's personality or style (Javier and/or Mary are too aggressive, don't listen, etc.) or as an expression of the interpersonal dynamics between two people in the group (Javier and Mary dislike each other, are vying for power, etc.). As a result, the common response is to coach Javier and/or Mary. After all, the data identified them as the problem.

However, in group situations there are at least two other important lenses for looking at the data.

As Wells (1985) points out, a person's behavior can be explained by a combination of the following four factors:

1. Intrapersonal
2. Interpersonal
3. Group-as-a-Whole
4. Intergroup

Intrapersonal Factors

At the Intrapersonal level, the assumption is that a person's behavior is impacted by his/her needs, character, personality, etc. These are the traits and characteristics that an individual brings to the group situation. These traits and characteristics rarely change and are typically the same in any group the individual may be a part of. At the Intrapersonal level, one-on-one coaching often is the proper solution.

Interpersonal Factors

At the Interpersonal level, an individual's behavior reflects his/her interactions with other individuals in the group. The focus is on the relationship between two members of the group. At the Interpersonal level, facilitating conflict management may be the proper coaching intervention.

Group-as-a-Whole

At the Group-as-a-Whole level, a person's behavior is expressing or enacting a dynamic on behalf of the team (the group-as-a-whole). Members perform different roles in the group with each role playing a particular function needed by the group. For example, a person may act as the scapegoat by expressing negative feelings that others feel but do not express. If the normal scapegoat leaves the group, often someone else will take up the role since that function is needed by the group. It should be noted that the roles people play are often driven by unconscious dynamics and that the team is usually unaware of them. At the Group-as-a-Whole level, the coach needs to facilitate one or more sessions with all team members present to help surface and work through these hidden dynamics.

Intergroup

At the Intergroup level, people's behaviors are an expression of one or more of the identity groups to which they belong. For example, their behavior might be due to their gender, ethnicity, age, or function, and the dynamics in the group are an expression of the history and tensions among these identity groups. Here, a coach needs to facilitate sessions involving the entire team that surface and work through any possible intergroup dynamics.

Applying All Four Lenses.

Let's revisit the example of Javier and Mary. A coach who is using the Group-as-a-Whole lens would look at what roles Javier or Mary might be playing for the group. For example, Mary may feel that Javier, as the highest ranking person in the group, often doesn't get his ideas challenged in the meeting. He isn't aware that after his meetings, everyone complains (especially to Mary) that they feel steamrolled. Thus, Mary is expressing the concerns of the group, not just her own. To get Mary to keep quiet or for someone to try to reduce the conflict between Javier and Mary without addressing the concerns of the team would not solve the problem.

Looking from the Intergroup perspective, it could be that Javier and the five other people on the team are from human resources while Mary is the only one from operations. Mary is trying to represent the point of view of people in operations when she objects to something the others in the team are proposing. Javier and his peers in human resources have a history of frustration with people from operations and view Mary's concerns as just another example of how operations "doesn't get it." The tension between Javier and Mary is rooted in the history between human resources and operations. If Mary and Javier were replaced and their spots taken by other people from their functions, most likely the same dynamics would happen.

Of course, the tensions between Javier and Mary could be due to tensions between other identity groups such as gender, ethnicity, etc. These sources of tension also need to be explored. Giving Mary feedback that she needs to back off because her aggressiveness is causing a problem will not improve

the team's performance if the issue is in part or in whole caused by issues of gender or function. In fact, it may be destructive to tell Mary to back off.

It takes an experienced and trained coach to know how to go beyond the individual feedback data and look for the root causes of an issue. This is especially true in team situations since so many dynamics are not revealed from the data typically collected on teams.

Mistake #2: The goal is always the same - create a team that has highly interdependent goals and very high levels of trust and collaboration.

Coaching a team should focus on helping a team execute its strategic purpose, not on fulfilling some fixed notion of what all teams should look like.

One widely used framework for categorizing a company's or business unit's purpose is the three value propositions of Customer Intimacy, Operational Excellence and Product/Service Leadership, as described by Treacy and Wiersema in their bestselling book, *The Discipline of Market Leaders*.

These three strategic approaches emphasize different ways to win customers:

- Companies that pursue customer intimacy aim to provide customers with customized solutions and charge a premium for the added value of the high levels of service.
- Operationally excellent companies aim to provide customers with low prices and/or convenience.
- Product leadership companies aim to provide customers with new products and services with superior performance and/or quality and charge a premium for giving customers the latest and greatest.

It is important to note two things:

1. The goal is not to be in one of the extreme corners of the triangle. In fact, most companies aim for some combination of all three value propositions. However, it is important to have one primary proposition that defines your competitive advantage and your overall strategy.
2. While the overall value proposition for a company may be, for example, operational excellence, individual functions or departments may primarily add value through product innovation or customer intimacy. For example, a company whose strategy is to beat the competition through operational excellence may have a basic R&D function whose primary goal is to provide product or service innovation. But in this example, the R&D work would be in support of the overall value proposition of operational excellence and their function would have different priorities than an R&D function in a company whose value proposition is product/service innovation.

Each value proposition has implications for a team's purpose and goals. For example:

1. A customer intimacy approach (i.e., Ritz Carlton) requires that teams must be able to cooperate across functions and be flexible enough to adapt quickly to changing customer needs or to a specific customer. Decision making is shared and everyone on the team has access to critical information about the customer. There is a high level of interdependency among teams and team members since they all must coordinate what they are doing to provide a unique solution for the customer.
2. In an operationally excellent environment such as McDonald's, processes are standardized and teams are expected to follow guidelines and rules. Teams are highly dependent on the rules given to them by their bosses to get their work done. Decisions are made centrally by the people at the top and information is shared with team members only on a "need to know" basis.
3. In a product/service innovation environment, such as the research department in a pharmaceutical company, teams and team members are often highly independent of one another. They are on the team because of their individual expertise and are not expected to have much interaction with each other. Decision making is highly decentralized and information sharing is controlled by individual teams and/or the individuals on the teams.

As a result of these differences, what makes for a high performing team in one context will not be the same in another.

For example, striving for high levels of trust and interdependent goals are appropriate top priorities for a team supporting a customer intimate strategy. But trust in an operationally excellent company like McDonald's depends more upon knowing your colleague on the grill is reliably following procedures and will not mess up the assembly line than upon feelings of interpersonal intimacy or warmth for other team members. In an operationally excellent environment, having interpersonal warmth for team members is nice to have, but is secondary to making sure everyone knows their narrow role and does that one thing exceptionally well. On the other hand, in a customer intimate environment, roles are often shared and are changing in the moment in order to best satisfy the customer. For some teams the coach must help facilitate getting and maintaining a clear, top-down structure, while in others they must help build a fluid, collaborative structure.

The point is, what makes for a high performing team varies depending upon the team's purpose, and coaches need to vary their definition of what good looks like accordingly. Just as one's leadership style needs to adjust to the situation at hand, so does one's coaching. The goal of coaching a team is to maximize performance by helping the team become better aligned with its strategic purpose, not to make every team fit the coach's narrow image of an ideal team.

Mistake #3: Once a team has been assessed, the team's needs will remain the same throughout the coaching process.

When coaching an individual, it is unlikely their strengths, development needs or personality will change to any great extent during the coaching process. However, with teams, their needs are constantly changing. In fact, a team's dynamics and needs can change dramatically between the time of a formal assessment and a coach's next meeting with the team or even within the space of a 2-hour meeting or workshop. The trigger may not even be something that happens within the team. Something as "simple" as a company announcement about a new service or product or the latest earnings report could have a significant impact on the energy and focus of the team in the moment.

As a result, the intervention the coach designed between sessions may have been the right for the team as they left the last workshop, but is now totally inappropriate for the team that is walking into the workshop a week later (or even just coming back from a workshop break).

A team coach needs to be able to decide, on the fly, the pros and cons of sticking with the original plan or going to "Plan B."

As Richard Diedrich said in the *Consulting Psychology Journal*:

At every moment there are exciting interactions within each individual, between individuals in their relationships, within the group itself, and in the various external forces playing on the thinking and operations of this group. An awareness of these dynamics is based on a deep theoretical and practical understanding of group dynamics and team development, as well as significant coaching experience with individuals and groups. However, that awareness is only as useful as the coach's ability to decide on the fly what really matters and to draw attention to it properly. (Diedrich, 2001)

Many consultants resist changing their designs in the moment. Maybe they may have spent a lot of time analyzing what was needed and are wedded to their conclusions. Maybe they are also reluctant to abandon a design they have had success with in the past and switch to something not completely thought out.

However, sticking to an ill-timed intervention can be dangerous. As Richard Hackman at Harvard says, "Indeed, ill-timed interventions may actually do more harm than good because they can distract or divert a team from other issues that *do* require members' attention at the time they are made." (Hackman, 2002)

It is usually better to go to Plan B than stick with the original design, especially if the coach is transparent with the team. For example, the coach can state that a short break is needed in order to adjust the agenda to meet their current need. Not only does this model openness and good leadership, but most

teams will prefer a less than perfect intervention that targets the right need over a beautiful design that deals with the wrong need.

One of the factors that gets coaches into trouble is the notion that teams go through certain stages in a set chronological order. While models such as Tuckman's forming-norming-storming-performing can be helpful in gaining insights into what teams may need at different stages, teams do not necessarily go through each stage in its entirety before moving on to the next. In addition, their most pressing needs may not follow the order implied by the model. For example, if conflict needs to be dealt with early on (even though you think the team is in the "forming" stage), it needs to be dealt with. Conflict may be handled differently in various stages, but just because they are not in the "storming" phase does not mean a coach should not design interventions around conflict.

Diagnosing a team's needs is a never ending process. A coach's interventions should be determined by the team's needs at that moment, what they can handle at that moment and the coach's levels of confidence and competence.

Recommendations.

1. Be sure team coaches are trained in diagnosing team dynamics and making team-based interventions. Being a great one-on-one coach does not necessarily mean the person is also a great coach for a team. Learn about a potential coach's framework for diagnosing teams. Ask about his/her training and experience.
2. Make sure the coach bases the process on: 1) the strategic purpose of the team; and 2) the needs of the team as a whole, not the coach's pre-determined ideas of what a high performing team should be. Ask how prospective team coaches help teams develop better alignment with their strategic purpose. Find out how their interventions change according to the purpose and goals of the team, the organizational culture, etc.
3. Team coaches should always have plenty of "Plan B's" readily available to them. They should have a repertoire of interventions so they can adjust, on the fly, to a team's needs. A good coach is not a one-trick pony, but an accomplished diagnostician who knows when to stick to a design and when to pull back and re-design. Ask for examples of when and how they went to a "Plan B." Find out about what told them to abandon their original plans, what did and didn't work and what they would do differently if they had to do it over again.

Coaching teams requires highly skilled and experienced facilitators. It takes more than having a few good exercises in your pocket to coach a team.