

Quarterly Reflections on Leadership

July – September 2025

10 **more** debates about team coaching



Introduction

In *The Wise Team Coach* we outlined ten debates in the world of team coaching, ten areas where different people hold quite different views as to how best to coach teams. There are no definitive answers to any of these debates - it is up to us as curious, committed, practitioners, to explore the evidence that does exist, and decide for ourselves where we stand on these debates. Where we stand will depend in part on our personal experiences of team coaching, our values, beliefs, and purpose. In this QRL we detail ten *more* debates, ten more themes to consider in further clarifying our approach to the work we do.

10 more debates

Are team coaching and group coaching different?



It's more than 30 years since Katzenbach & Smith differentiated between working groups and teams, one distinguishing factor being the team's commitment to a specific and common purposeⁱ. In the same vein Christine Thornton says "*All teams are groups, but not all groups are teams. A team has an explicit shared purpose and/or task ...*"ⁱⁱ One of Ruth Wageman's characteristics of a real team is that team members are interdependent for some common purposeⁱⁱⁱ. But

is this an around-and-about logic? We are all engaged in various tasks, projects, and endeavours. We often work with different people on different tasks. To define a team in terms of it having a single common purpose may not well reflect its activities. Mark Mortensen points out that today's work environment is more dynamic and complex than it has ever been^{iv}. Which means that organisations must be nimble and fast moving in the way they allocate their resources. Which means that the extent to which a particular group of people are likely to be working on a single common purpose at any one time, is unpredictable.

The distinction between team and group coaching then, whilst neat and simple, may not always be helpful. I have worked with learning groups who have suddenly identified a common area of focus. That task may occupy all or some of their time together. Am I still team coaching, or am I now group coaching, or is it a mix of both? How meaningful is the distinction? If some members of a group of people who identify themselves as a team, find themselves no longer working toward a common purpose, because some of them have appropriately reprioritised their time, does this mean they are no longer a team, or are they now a team in some conversations and a group in other conversations? There is clearly a problem in trying to definitively label a particular group of people as team or group. Mortensen suggests we define teams in terms of objectives and not people, such that teams may emerge, disappear, and evolve on a regular basis in response to an ever-changing work environment. What do you think?

Does the membership of a team need to be stable?



This is the second of Ruth Wageman's three characteristics of a real team – real teams have at least some stability of membership which give members time and opportunity to learn how to work together. Building on the previous debate however, what if people need to gather and disperse at speed in order to best navigate the demands of the work environment? When I started out as a team coach, I

attempted to abide by this mantra – that teams should have stable membership. I would have conversations with team leaders about upcoming changes to the team; people due to soon arrive, others due to depart. How long should we wait for the newbies to arrive before commencing the work? Should the departees be included in the team coaching process, or omitted on the basis they wouldn't be with the team much longer? I encouraged team leaders to do their best to ensure every team member was available for every session, to facilitate task and team alignment. But if we were to wait for the membership of some teams to stabilise then we would be waiting forever. Does that mean teams where people are constantly coming and going are not 'real' teams, and that we should decline to work with them? Or are we better off flexing our approach to the work to align with the ever-changing nature of work today? What do you think? How would you respond to an invitation to work with a 'team' whose membership was constantly changing?

Does it need to be clear who is on the team?



The third and final characteristic of Ruth Wageman's real team - a real team has clear boundaries. What is your view? If the CFO wants to bring their Chief Accounting Officer to all team meetings, do you insist upon the team making it clear to everyone else in the organisation whether or not that person is a fully paid up member of the team? If the CEO brings their Executive Assistant to all meetings,

to take notes and ensure everyone is organised, again – how important is it to clarify that person's membership? And if you believe it is important to clarify these people's roles, then what is your response to a team where team members are constantly coming and going as the nature of the team's work changes? What if the team wants to form a couple of sub-teams to work on specific tasks, bringing in a couple of people from outside the leadership team to participate in one or two of these groups?

I worked with a team recently, and asked everyone on the team, and a selection of stakeholders – who is on this team? About a third of the team agreed with the CEO as to who was on the team. Of the 14 stakeholders I spoke to, just one agreed with the CEO, and that was a person in HR who helped the CEO to fill vacant roles in the team. To what extent then is it important that team boundaries are clear? If you do believe boundaries are important, then you may be asking the team to dedicate serious energies toward ensure boundaries are clear for everyone amidst ongoing change and transformation. To what extent is that work adding value?

Who is the client?



Many team coaches I speak to tell me that their primary client is the team leader. The team leader is often the person who makes initial contact with the coach and engages in the initial contracting. Some coaches insist on coaching the team leader individually whilst coaching the team, to ensure the contract remains clear. Other practitioners define the team coach's role in broad terms, to include the initial recruitment of the team^v.

The ICF however, in their team coaching competencies, suggest that *'the client for a team coach is the team as a single entity'*, which presumably means that the team coach cannot engage with others in the organisation before or after the team is formed, or must at least call themselves something different while performing those roles. We spoke to 51 team coaches in writing *The Wise Team Coach*, asking them who they considered to be their primary client. Some coaches named the team leader, others the team, and some said that their primary client was the organisation. Your answer to this question will determine to a great extent both how you think about your work and the way you choose to engage with all the different stakeholders you are likely to come across in an assignment.

How do we decide if we're doing a good job?



Many of us look to accrediting bodies to tell us if we're doing what we're supposed to be doing with reference to a competency framework. If we pass that accreditation process it gives us confidence we are doing the right thing. But many academics and practitioners believe that the work we do as team coaches (and as coaches and leaders for that matter) is too complex to be reduced to a set of generic rules^{vi}. Where then do we look to determine how useful is the work we're doing? We asked the

same 51 team coaches as above how they decided whether or not they were doing a good job. Many talked exclusively in terms of client satisfaction. For example, *"Measurement against agreed outcomes with team and sponsor."* But what if different stakeholders hold different views as to whether a piece of work was successful? Or what if a client changes their mind (as they do) over the course of an assignment as to what constitutes success? Some coaches defined success wholly in terms of internal criteria. For example, *"I know if the team is being successful if they are not only working on their task but are also discussing their vulnerabilities ... with each other and (are) able to provide feedback to each other in a psychologically safe way."* How you define success will depend to an extent on your underlying philosophy (a systemic philosophy may steer you toward a more organisational perspective, for example) and your purpose as a team coach – why do you do the work? How do you decide if you are doing a good job?

What does 'dialogue' mean?



The Oxford English Dictionary defines dialogue as “*a conversation between two or more people as a feature of a book, play, or film.*” The word ‘dialogue’, in other words, means the same as the word ‘conversation’. The ICF appears to be using the word dialogue in this way in its team coaching competencies when it says, for example, that the effective team coach ‘*moves in and out of the team dialogue as appropriate*’ and ‘*the team coach should enter into the dialogue only as necessary to enhance the team process and performance.*’ But others use the word ‘dialogue’ to mean a very specific form of conversation, a form of conversation in which participants suspend their ‘noble certainties’ and engage in a very particular form of listening and voicing^{vii}. Team coaches who use the word ‘dialogue’ to differentiate this form of conversation from other types of conversation point to the role of dialogue in fostering trust, innovation, and thinking together. Some such coaches even define the purpose of their work solely in terms of enhancing a team’s capacity to engage in dialogue. This type of conversation is effortful and challenging, and is only likely to be achieved through resolute collective purpose. What do you mean when you talk about dialogue?

How planned/structured should we be?



In a 2017 study of 36 experienced team coaches, we asked participants the extent to which they planned a team coaching session^{viii}. Some described a highly structured process - for example, “*I was working with a team whose line manager thought they were low in EQ. We set up five sessions of four hours each to do skills development followed by coaching on how they would take the skill and apply it over the next week.*” Others described a much more emergent process – for example, “*I don’t go in with a set curriculum or program. It’s about getting a brief from the leader, then getting started with the group. Starting a conversation about what people would like to work on. I have lots of processes and activities I can call upon. It’s very organic and natural free formed.*” Straightaway, some of you will be decrying the first example – that’s not team coaching – that’s facilitation! But that presumes we can clearly differentiate team coaching from facilitation. Certainly people have tried. David Clutterbuck and colleagues suggest that team coaching is about performance improvement, whilst facilitation is about improving the process of team collaboration^{ix}. Does everyone really agree with that distinction? They say that team coaching is dialogue related to the team task, whilst facilitation is about providing procedural, task and content-focussed interactions to the team. They say that team coaching is a medium-term multiple intervention relating to a raft of issues, whilst facilitation may take the form of multiple interventions based on team process. I’m not sure I understand that distinction at all. The ICF differentiates between team coaching and team facilitation differently. Confusingly the ICF suggests that *facilitation* is about dialogue, whilst team coaching is an unspecified type of process between team and coach partner.

Many people have sought to clearly differentiate facilitation from team coaching. Georgina Woudstra suggests that facilitators design an agenda and manage a meeting process, while the team coach holds the space, contracts, creates awareness, and checks progress^x. This captures the essence perhaps of how many of us view the difference between facilitation and team coaching – one is more structured and the other more emergent. But do not both approaches have their place in a team coaching assignment? In our own team coaching programs we find that many coaches adopt a highly structured approach to designing their sessions, at least initially. Some adopt highly emergent approaches, and most go about their work with a combination of structure and emergence. To what extent then is it helpful to label ourselves as facilitator or team coach? That would mean us having to be explicitly shifting roles at least in our own minds from moment to moment. The ICF goes further perhaps, in suggesting as one of its team competencies that the team coach is always *'maintaining the distinction between team coaching, team building, team training, team consulting, team mentoring, team facilitation ...'* and explains to the team *'the difference between team coaching and other team development modalities.'* This sounds very logical, but I haven't met many team coaches who say that they do this, nor that they think their client would value it.

The distinction between structure and emergence feels useful, indeed some coaches refer to this distinction, or something similar, in explaining why they like to coach teams with a partner, dividing the role accordingly. But this implies that both functions are integral to the role of the team coach. Our own approach to all this is to not concern ourselves with trying to define more generic distinctions. Instead we ask team coaches to define for themselves their own approach to team coaching, and their own approach to facilitation. Both can be characterised with reference to the 3Ps (see below). The difference between the two sets of 3Ps is the difference between team coaching and facilitation – for that individual. This may be helpful in further enabling the practitioner to be purposeful in their work. But that's just us talking – what is your view?

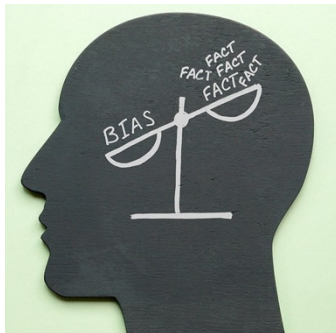
Should I conduct a pre-assignment diagnostic?



The EMCC team coaching standards suggest that you should. Their second professional core standard says that the team coach *'develops and implements a team diagnostic that includes input from key team stakeholders in order to generate systems understanding of how the team is currently performing'*. This is a popular perspective, with many experienced practitioners advocating for the importance of doing lots of work upfront, work that enables you to establish the extent to which everyone is committed to a team coaching process and means you can walk into the work with your eyes wide open. The initial analysis gives you data you can use with the team to decide for themselves where they want to focus their efforts. This all makes a lot of sense, but it isn't the only perspective. A minority of team coaches are reluctant to establish individual relationships with team members at any point of the process. They want all communication to be channelled through the team, and resist playing any kind of mediating role between team

members. They focus on co-creating the space in which team members feel comfortable sharing perspectives directly, and encourage teams to build their own relationships with stakeholders. If you *are* of the majority, and insist on conducting some form of diagnostic, what diagnostic do you use? Many coaches use particular diagnostic tools as are available in the market place. If you use an external tool, then have you considered the extent to which the design of the tool maps to your beliefs as to what makes a team most effective? Is the tool *supporting* your approach to the work, or it is *defining* it?

We need to be objective – right?



The ICF team coaching competencies say so. They say that the team coach ‘*must remain objective in all interactions with team members, sponsors, and relevant stakeholders,*’ and ‘*remains objective and aware of team dynamics and patterns.*’ But how to interpret these rules through a complex systemic lens? Lots of coaches describe themselves as ‘systemic’ without elaborating as to what they mean by ‘systemic’ – which of the hundreds of different ways of thinking about systems are they referring to?^{xi}. If I look at the world through

a complex systemic lens, then I believe meaning making to be a social process. We influence and are influenced by others through every interaction we engage in, whether we realise it or not. As such, as team coach, I am influenced by everyone I engage with. I am not always, or indeed often, aware as to the impact of an interaction on how and what I think, but I know I am part of a collective meaning making process. The notion that I should attempt to ‘remain objective’ may therefore seem to me to be quite counterproductive, because if I believe I can remain objective then I may be less likely to reflect upon how I am being influenced (and how I am influencing) and therefore paradoxically *fail* to recognise some team dynamics and patterns, particularly those of which I am a part. Hmmm. What does it mean to you to be objective?

Can I work by myself?



Team coaching can be very demanding, to the extent that some team coaches will only coach in tandem with another coach. Other team coaches, on the other hand, coach only by themselves because they don’t want to add new complexity to the dynamics between team members and coach(es). And other coaches choose to coach by themselves with small teams, and with a co-coach when working with larger teams^{xii}. Lucy Widdowson and Paul Barbour list some of the benefits of working with a co-coach, and some of the

drawbacks^{xiii}. In my own team supervision practice I have encountered some of the problems that can emerge when coaches partner on an assignment. As Charlotte Sills and Ann Knights point out, co-coaching requires both coaches to engage in a new level of contracting. The coaches will need to check they are aligned on their approach to the work, on the purpose of the work, on their respective roles, and how they will contract and re-contract in the moment^{xiv}. This takes time and effort. All three global coaching associations suggest that effective team

coaches work with co-coaches when to do so is of benefit to the client, without specifying the conditions under which two coaches are better than one. When do you insist to the client that two coaches are required and not one? Or are you happy always to work on your own?

The 3Ps of team coaching

I have referred to the '3Ps' and to those 3Ps by name – **p**hilosophy, **p**urpose, and **p**ractice. You may be wondering what I'm talking about. The 3Ps is a framework we first came across in coaching supervision^{xv}. It enables us to clarify our own approach to team coaching. It asks you to define:

- Your **philosophy**. Which theories, models, and frameworks do you subscribe to? What does your own experience tell you? How do your own personal values and beliefs show up in the work that you do?
- Your **purpose**. Why do you do this work? It's not easy, after all – and not always fun!
- Your **practice**. What would a fly-on-the-wall see you doing when you're working with a team?

And based on those reflections a 4th P:

- What is your **plan** for becoming an even better team coach?

The 3Ps framework is not in itself evidence-based, but used well it encourages the practitioner to think rigorously about the work that they do. The 3Ps also enable us to be humble and curious as to the way in which other team coaches operate. We don't suggest you use the 3Ps to establish a single, best, way of working with teams. Rather the process enables you to clarify why you like to work the way you do. It encourages you to challenge and think critically about what others are saying. It enables you to be curious and to learn from others, rather than instantly agree or disagree with what others suggest. You might not agree with everything Sally Coach says, but one or two things she says may intrigue you, and may end up embedded in your own, evolving, perspective on coaching. You might resist the idea of abiding rigidly by the doctrines of a particular coaching association's team coaching competencies, but what is there to learn from the process that organisation went through to come up with those competencies? Holding the 3Ps as an ongoing and evolving reference point enables us to continue to explore our approach to team coaching and to hold ourselves accountable for continuing to learn, develop, and contribute to the field.

In conclusion

Many coaches first venturing into the world of team coaching have previous experience as individual coach and/or facilitator. Many look for the book or course that will tell them what team coaching is and how it is different from individual coaching, facilitation, training etc ..., and what extra skills they need to learn. Hopefully this can be achieved within one or two or three days at a team coaching program.

We believe the task of team coach is more complex than that. We need to commit to an ongoing learning journey of learning, experience, and reflection. Over time we will become increasingly aware of how we think we can add most value to the clients that we work with. The 3Ps is a neat little framework to use as an ongoing reference point. We believe also in the value of collective learning – learning with others embarked upon the same journey. Others who will challenge us to be always reflecting upon our 3Ps and to be experimenting with new ways of being and doing on every assignment we choose to challenge ourselves.

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Notes

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- vi For example, Bachkirova, T. & Lawton Smith (2015). From Competencies to Capabilities in the Assessment and Accreditation of Coaches. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 13(2), 123-140.
- vii For example:
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