

Beyond Competence: Rethinking Team Coaching as a Plural Practice

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Abstract

In this paper the results of a meta-review of 423 peer-reviewed articles on team effectiveness, plus books and book chapters, are reported. The study was conducted in search of evidence to support the idea there exists a single particular approach to coaching teams. From the study emerged a model comprising 11 themes, different aspects of team effectiveness. The model underwent preliminary testing with a group of 50 team leaders. The results of this study provide no support for the idea that there is one best way to help teams become more effective, indeed the rationale for such an approach is challenged conceptually. Implications for future research are discussed, including research and critical analysis at the individual practitioner level.

Keywords

team coaching, team effectiveness, competency, pluralism, critical thinking

Introduction

Team Coaching Is Becoming More Popular

Team coaching in organisations has become increasingly popular in recent years as evidenced by the number of books and articles published on the subject. Figure 1 shows the number of books and articles retrieved from a search of the Oxford Brookes University library searching for the term ‘team coaching’ as either a title or a keyword. Numbers grew slowly between 2000 and 2009, before growing at a faster rate between 2010 and 2023, accelerating again since 2024.¹

The Emergence of Team Coaching Competencies

Team coaching is still a relatively new discipline with the three largest global coaching associations each having published their first team coaching competencies in 2020/2021. The recent emergence of these coaching competency frameworks raises the same issues as those that have been discussed for several years in the coaching world. The three largest coaching associations not only have coaching competency frameworks, but these frameworks are graduated, implying (usually) three different levels of competence.

Barnett (1994) suggests that ‘the notion of competence is concerned with predictable behaviours in predictable situations’. Bolden and Gosling (2006) list five problems with such frameworks:

1. The reductionist nature of such competencies makes them inadequate to deal with the complexities of many roles.

2. The generic nature of competencies means they are not sensitive to specific contexts.
3. They represent a view of past performance rather than as a predictor of future behaviours.
4. They tend to exclude subtle qualities, interactions and situational factors.
5. They create a limited and mechanistic approach to learning.

Nevertheless, as Garvey (2011) points out, most professional bodies call for regulation, control, standards and competencies in order to appease the management mindset. Jackson and Bachkirova (2019) argue that coaching cannot be viewed as a direct application of generic methodologies and techniques because the contexts in which coaches work are so complex. Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015) say that a ‘reliance on competency frameworks oversimplifies coaching practice and expertise and stultifies more creative solutions ...’ before going on to question whether coaching competency frameworks are fit for purpose.

The three largest global coaching bodies are the ICF, EMCC and AC, and their respective team coaching competency frameworks are quite different in various ways

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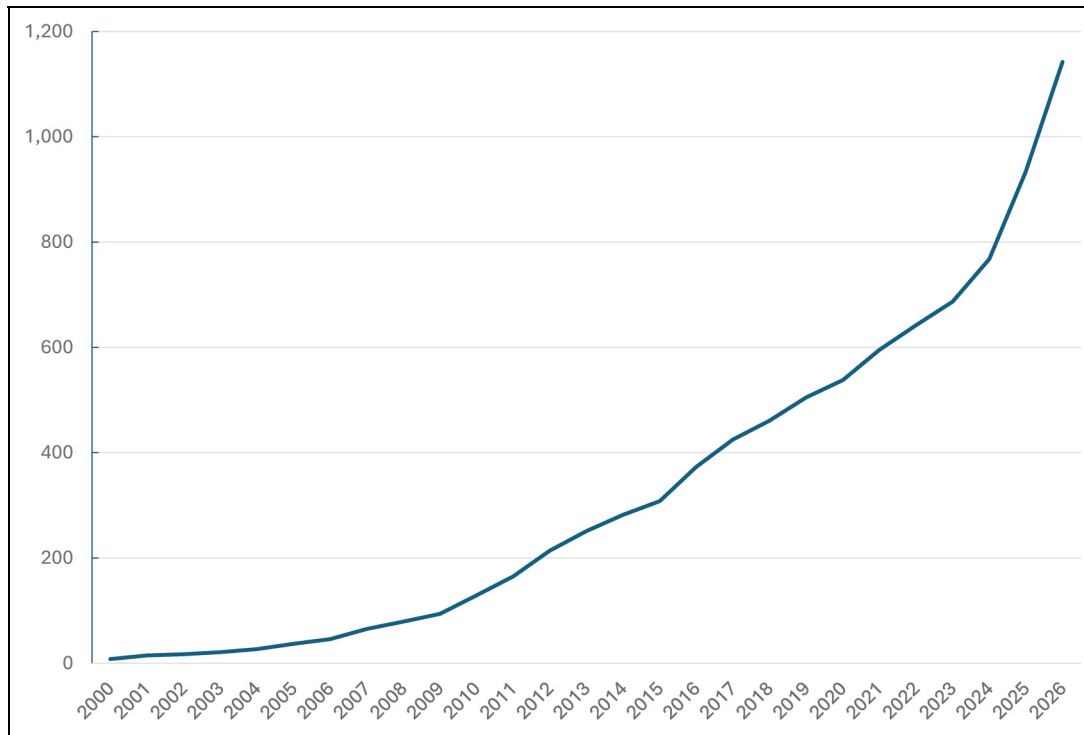


Figure 1. Articles and books published on team coaching 2000–2026.

(Lawrence, 2025). The practitioner must decide which framework is best, based on the quality of evidence presented. This is problematic in itself, since these bodies generally require applicants to hold an accreditation in their individual coaching scheme to be eligible for a team coaching accreditation. Given the costs involved, this will tend to encourage practitioners to seek accreditation from the coaching body they are already associated with, regardless the quality of evidence.

In any case, none of these frameworks present compelling evidence linking any of their respective competencies to outcomes. The main source of evidence gathered in constructing these frameworks is information gathered from ‘experienced’ coaches on their previous experiences, problem three listed above (Lawrence, 2025). Moreover, there is little, if any, evidence provided by the associations to support the idea that there exists one best way to practice, problems one and two above. As Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015) point out, building policies and procedures based on old and unchallenged paradigms of knowledge is to adopt a linear and simplistic approach to the task.

Though these competency frameworks are based on little, if any, empirical evidence, they imply a degree of certainty as to what team coaching behaviours will prove to be most effective. Yet a cursory examination of the literature makes it clear there exists significant debate around quite fundamental aspects of team coaching.

The underlying philosophy, purpose, and practice of team coaching are all subject to debate. These debates include quite

fundamental questions, including aligning on a common definition of team coaching, how it is different from other forms of intervention and even what we mean by a ‘team’. There are other debates, as to where the team coach should focus in their work with a team to have the greatest impact, and more tactical debates around specific areas of practice. Just eight of those debates are reviewed here, to illustrate the degree to which there exist significant areas of contention.

Debates Around Definition and Scope

What Is a Team? Hackman and Wageman (2005) suggest that a real team has (i) clear boundaries, (ii) stable membership, and (iii) a common purpose. There appears to be little debate as to the third criterion; the first two criteria are more contentious. Mortensen (2015), for example, says:

... a problem remains as long as ... our theories are built around a conceptualisation of a team as a social structure. A benefit of this approach is its simplicity – it allows us to easily point to and label a team in much the same way as we might point to the set of chairs its members are sitting in. Boundary change, overlap, and disagreement, however, suggest a different reality, in which teams may be far more fleeting and ‘teams as things’ is a less accurate portrayal of the way team members think of them.

This is an important debate, the answer to which determines the extent to which the team coach is prepared to

engage with teams that don't have clear boundaries or stable membership.

What Is Team Coaching? Murphy and Sayer (2019) are not untypical in asserting that a team coach, by definition, works only with a team once formed. Clutterbuck et al. (2019) say that 'for an intervention to qualify as team coaching, it must ... engage with an entire work team, as a collective process'. Through this lens team task, team selection and team size, are predetermined. Peters and Carr (2019), on the other hand, include team design within the scope of a team coach, implying that the coach may work with a team leader before the rest of the team is appointed. Wageman and Lowe (2019) also include team building as a potential aspect of the team coach's role, suggesting that getting team selection right determines 60% of a team's effectiveness. This again would appear to be an important debate in terms of determining the extent to which a team coach is likely to be helpful.

How Is Team Coaching Different to Other Forms of Intervention? People had been working with teams long before the emergence of team coaching. Advocates for team coaching are now keen to explain what is different about team coaching, what additional value it can bring to an organisation. This is particularly true of those eager to see coaching established as a 'profession', with its own purpose, knowledge base, skills and competencies. Clutterbuck et al. (2019) compare and contrast team coaching with team building and team facilitation. The purpose of team coaching, they say, is always performance improvement, while the purpose of team building is to build greater engagement and trust, and the purpose of team facilitation is to improve team collaboration. The team coach engages with the team through dialogue, while the facilitator provides structure and content, and the team builder asks the team to engage in non-task related activities. Both team coach and facilitator work with the team across multiple interventions, while the team builder works with the team only in one-off interventions relating to a specific issue. These distinctions are highly contentious, and of limited value in any case given that the authors go on to suggest that team coaches in practice may move between all three functions. In the ICF's introduction to their team coaching competencies (2020), they differentiate team coaching from team building, team training, team consulting, team mentoring and team facilitation in terms of time frame, process, growth area, team dynamics and ownership. Again, these distinctions are contentious, and again, it is stated that 'team coaches may use additional modalities beyond coaching when necessary'.

This again is an important debate, for if I agree in the importance of always differentiating team coaching, I must also commit to establishing a consensus as to what those differences are, not only with fellow team coaches, but with others who identify with different practitioner groups. And it is implied that I ought to forever be informing my client as to

what form of intervention I am engaging in at any moment in time.

Debates Around Focus and Impact

How Important Is It to Manage Team Dynamics? Thornton (2016) describes an approach to working with teams and groups based on an understanding of group dynamics and analysis. She says that the achievement of team goals requires that interpersonal obstacles to successful cooperation be identified and minimised. Her approach to group and team coaching encourages the practitioner to become adept at understanding the 'secret life of groups', the 'subconscious and non-verbal processes through which people learn and communicate in groups and teams'. Hackman and Wageman (2005), on the other hand, argue against an emphasis on interpersonal process:

The pervasive emphasis on interpersonal processes in the team performance is based on a logical fallacy. It is natural to infer that observed interpersonal troubles are causing performance problems and, therefore, that a good way to improve team performance would be to fix them. As reasonable as this inference may seem, it is neither logical nor correct. Research suggests that, in some circumstances, the causal arrow points in the opposite direction – that is, performance drives interpersonal processes rather than vice versa.

Not only do the two authors emphasise different aspects of the work, but one set of authors explicitly suggests that the alternative emphasis is based on a 'logical fallacy'.

What Does It Mean to Work Systemically? Hawkins (2017) includes both a focus on collective goals and a focus on internal connecting in his 5Cs team coaching model and places most emphasis on coaching 'systemically'. He describes three levels of team coaching advancing from level I (traditional) to level II – coaching the team as a system, and level III – systemic team coaching, the implication being that the practitioner becomes more capable by enhancing their capacity to relate to a team 'systemically'. But there exist more than a hundred systems theories, and different theories would tend to steer a team coach toward quite different ways of working (Lawrence, 2021).

Debates Around Practice and Process

Team coaches disagree as to how best to go about the practicalities of team coaching. Here we consider just three aspects of practice around which there exists disagreement.

How Directive Is a Team Coach? Clutterbuck et al. (2019) suggest that for an intervention to qualify as team coaching, it must employ a non-directive, exploratory approach. Others highlight the importance of education as part of the team

coach's role, providing teams with frameworks around which to build their intentions, including some of the team coaches interviewed by Lawrence and Whyte (2017). Cavanagh (2006) says of individual coaching:

... the solution is claimed to lie within the client. The coach's role is to merely facilitate the client's discovery of what the client already has within himself or herself. 'Ask, don't tell' is the catch cry. Yet sometimes no matter how long we ask the solution does not emerge, because it is not 'in' the client, nor are the raw materials available for it to emerge via a process of questioning.

If this is true of individual coaching then we might expect it to be true also of team coaching, given that team coaches can be expected to have the deepest conceptual understanding of how teams work. However, the debate remains.

Is It Appropriate to Coach Individual Members of the Team at the Same Time as Coaching the Team? Graves (2021, 2024) interviewed 10 team coaches asking them whether it was appropriate to coach individual members of the team at the same time as coaching the intact team. Some coaches said it was *essential* to coach the team leader while coaching the team, and others said they would never do it, citing ethical issues. Some coaches said they were happy to coach other team members too, so long as they contracted with everyone concerned clearly and transparently. Others said they would work only with the intact team; coaching individuals at the same time confused relationships and potentially threatened the establishment of psychological safety. Other coaches were still experimenting and hadn't yet decided.

Should a Team Coach Always Work in Partnership With a Second Team Coach? Graves (2024) also asked team coaches if it was appropriate to conduct the work alone, or if it was important to work in tandem with another team coach. Some said they always worked in tandem with others, others said they would only work by themselves because they felt challenged by the added dynamic between coaches working together. Widdowson and Barbour (2021) list some of the benefits of working with a co-coach, and some of the drawback. Sills and Knights (2024) point out the need for coaches working in tandem to take their contracting to a new level.

Purpose, Aims and Objectives of This Research

We have highlighted eight debates in the team coaching domain, by no means an exhaustive list. One of the key drivers of debate is the notion that there is a single best way to practice as a team coach, a position for which there exists no evidence of which the authors are aware. The purpose of this study was to discover what the literature has to say as to how teams can become more effective and how external practitioners can help teams along that journey. This in turn may help coaches overcome a theoretical reluctance to

explore creative approaches to their work, as posited by Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015), which the author often comes across in practice, in his role as team coach supervisor. To achieve that purpose a comprehensive meta-analysis of the broader team effectiveness literature was conducted. This is therefore a primarily theoretical paper, not an empirical analysis. Nevertheless, as an adjunct to the primary research the emerging model was tested with 50 practising leaders, people who work with teams on a regular basis as an intrinsic aspect of their work.

Methodology

Part I

For the first part of the study an integrative review methodology was deployed to examine the concept of team effectiveness and identify evidence-based factors relevant to team coaching practice. An integrative review approach was selected because it allows the inclusion of empirical, theoretical, and practitioner-oriented literature within what is an emerging interdisciplinary field (Whitemore & Knafl, 2005). The review focused primarily on the concept of team effectiveness rather than team coaching because there is no universally accepted definition of team coaching. Team effectiveness was therefore chosen as the more stable organising construct through which implications for coaching could be explored. The review was designed to explore what factors are associated with team effectiveness, and what implications do the results have for team coaching practice.

Search Criteria. A structured search was undertaken using the Oxford Brookes University library's LibrarySearch function, which provides access to multiple academic databases. Initial searches used the term team effectiveness, followed by iterative searches using related terms emerging from the literature. Those terms included team coaching, team diversity, team size, task interdependence, virtual teams, hybrid teams, team cohesion, team identity, team collaboration and multi-team membership.

Sources were included where they:

- Were peer-reviewed journal articles
- Addressed teams in an organisational setting
- Were evidently relevant to the research question

Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, followed by a full-text review where appropriate. A total of 423 peer-reviewed articles were retained for detailed analysis. In addition, more than 20 books were reviewed on the topic of team coaching, excluding self-published texts.

Analysis and Synthesis. Analysis was conducted concurrently with the search process using an inductive coding approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Studies were compared for

recurring constructs and themes. Initial open coding identified repeated concepts across the literature which were then grouped into broader thematic categories through ongoing and recurring comparison. Two researchers conducted the analysis, comparing findings periodically, from which process ultimately emerged 11 themes. Themes were retained only where supported across multiple sources.

Part 2

To assess the practical resonance of the emerging conceptual framework, exploratory interviews were conducted with 50 experienced organisational leaders. This phase of the study was intended to be illustrative only, enriching the conceptual model through informed practitioner reflection. Seven executive coaches invited former or current clients to participate voluntarily in the study. Fifty leaders from 46 organisations across Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom took part. Participants represented public, private and governmental sectors and all had substantial leadership experience. Semi-structured Zoom interviews lasting 25–40 min were conducted by a single interviewer. Participants were asked the following questions:

- What do you find most challenging about leading teams?
- What are your reactions to the eleven themes that we developed from the literature?
- Which themes appear to you to be most important in practice?
- Are there any important dimensions missing?

Participants also provided indicative ratings on a five-point scale regarding perceived importance and degree of challenge. These ratings were used descriptively to enable reflection and comparison rather than to suggest statistically significant differences. Interview responses were reviewed for recurring observations, illustrative examples and areas of agreement or challenge to the framework.

Results

Part 1

From the thematic analysis we identified 11 themes (Figure 2).

Dialogue and Trust. At the heart of the model sit *dialogue* and *trust*. The word *dialogue* can be broken down into its constituent parts. ‘Dia’, meaning ‘through’ and ‘logos’ translating to ‘meaning’. Isaacs (1999) positions dialogue as a particular type of conversation in which the participants of that conversation are able to suspend their ‘noble certainties’ such that they can understand better what others are trying to say, and they can express what needs to be said, free of judgment.

This form of conversation allows meaning to flow through the collective, enabling shared meaning, the emergence of new insight and the ongoing development of trust (Bohm, 1996). Other relevant readings include Bushe and Marshak (2015), Caploa et al. (2020), Feitosa et al. (2020) and Stelter (2019).

We divided the other nine themes into three categories:

Future Direction

- *Task alignment* is the alignment of team members around the work that needs to be done - vision, purpose, strategy, objectives, roles and responsibilities. There is a body of work highlighting the significance of mental models, a recognition that members of a team bring to the conversation existing constructs as to the team’s purpose. Effective work in this space may start with surfacing these existing frames (e.g., Hensel & Visser, 2019; Kneisel, 2020; Toader & Kessler, 2018).
- *Team alignment* is the alignment of team members around rules of engagement; how they will behave with each other and with others. Again, work around team mental models highlights the need to recognise that team members come to a new team with previous experience of working on teams, and pre-existing beliefs as to how an effective team should behave (e.g., Mathieu et al., 2000; Mohammed & Dumville, 2001; Tesler et al., 2018).
- *Stakeholder relationship* is about understanding who the team’s key stakeholders are, and how to best manage them. It is in this space, particularly, that systems theories are particularly relevant in framing different ways of thinking about social networks and how best to approach attempting to influence those networks. Includes aspects of systemic thinking. Relevant readings include: de Haan (2025), Lawrence (2021) and Stacey and Mowles (2016).

Internal Relationships

- *Team dynamics* is about the team noticing and naming their interpersonal dynamics and shifting those dynamics when appropriate, in service of team performance. Thornton (2016) writes at length of the significance of team dynamics and how to manage those dynamics. Bratt (2020) describes the SNOW model, a simple mnemonic to encourage team members to pay attention the dynamics of the team and to name those dynamics. Kantor’s theories of structural dynamics (Kantor, 2012) offer a language whereby team members can discuss and address relational dynamics that may get in the way of team functioning and underpin interpersonal conflict.

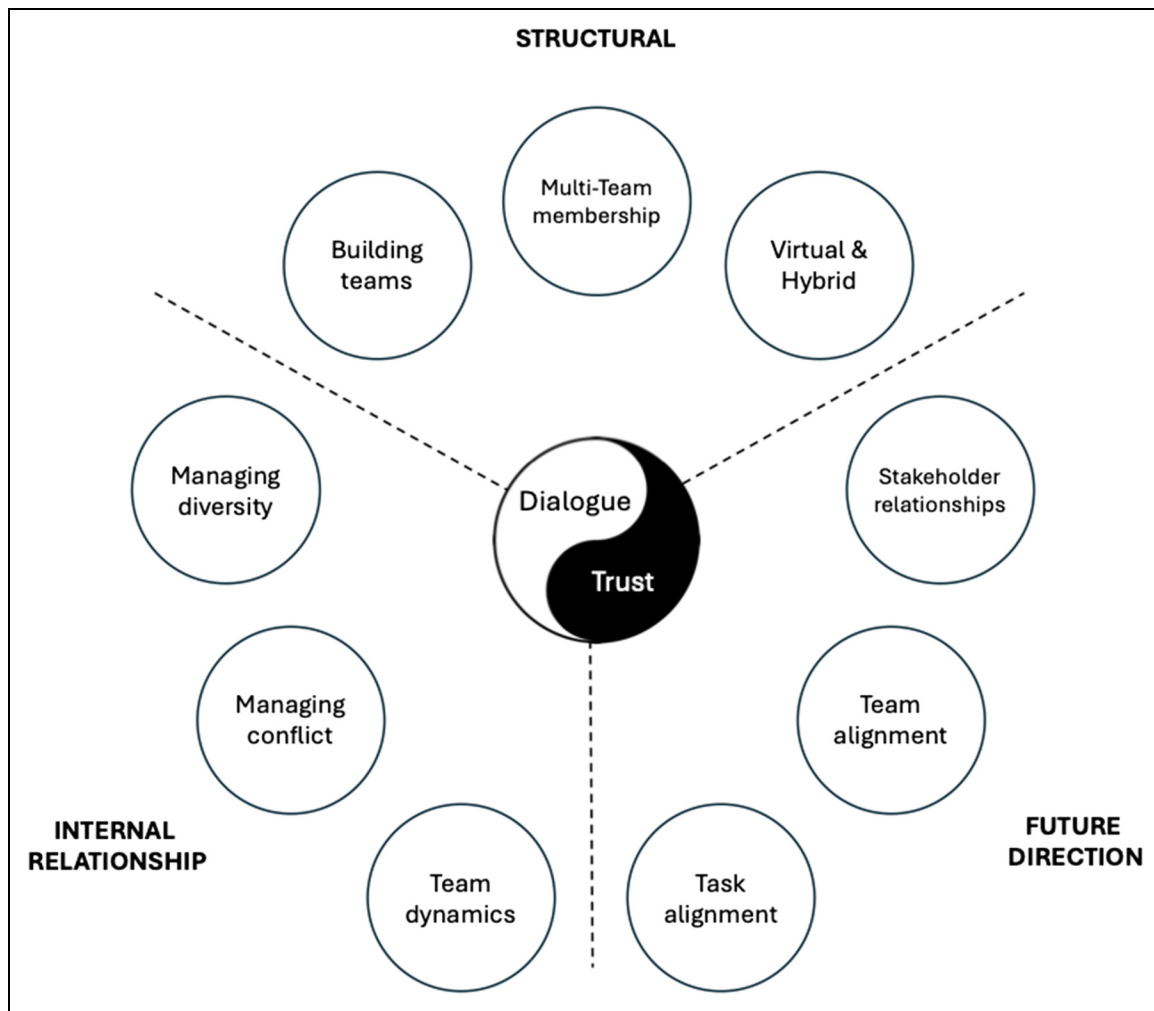


Figure 2. Team effectiveness – 11 themes.

- The literature around *Managing conflict* differentiates between task conflict, which is disagreement about the work to be done; and relationship conflict, which is personal conflict due to differences in personality, values and beliefs (e.g., Adamovich, 2021; Liu, 2022; Tu & Zhang, 2021). The challenge for the team is to embrace task conflict without those tensions morphing into relationship conflict.
- *Managing diversity* is about recognising and leveraging interpersonal differences, whether they be deep-level/invisible (e.g., different beliefs, perspectives, personalities) or surface-level/visible (e.g., age, race, gender). There is a body of thought that suggests surface-level diversity is relatively easy to manage because it is visible and people are aware of it, while deep-level diversity may go unnoticed and be more likely to lead to difference and discrimination. Relevant readings included: Abbott and Ludlow (2024), Feitosa et al. (2018) and Nawaz et al. (2022).

Structural Factors

- Traditional models around *building teams* focus on crafting a job description detailing individual skills and competencies. More holistic approaches discuss the need to consider the way people think and their behaviours, as well as their skills; and the need to consider the needs of the team and of the organisation, not just the needs of the role. Relevant readings included: Mathieu et al. (2014) and Bell and Outland (2017).
- *Multi-team membership* is about recognising that in today's world around 95% of people in organisations are members of more than one team at a time (Mortensen, 2015). Multi-team membership has advantages and disadvantages but often needs to be managed if the team is to be most effective. Relevant readings included: Chen et al. (2019), Margolis (2020) and Van de Brake et al. (2019).

- *Virtual/hybrid working* is the about the need to proactively manage aspects of team functioning in a virtual environment. Based on their research of virtual team functioning, Costa et al. (2025) suggest three principal areas of focus. First, the need to recognise working virtually is different. Second, a focus on building trust, and third, a focus on building the capacity of team members to engage in effective communication.

Part 2

Respondents' ratings of both importance and challenge are shown in Table 1. These ratings are provided only to illustrate a high-level comparison between degrees of importance and challenge. It is not suggested that differences between ratings are statistically significant.

Many leaders when asked, said they rated 'importance' higher than 'challenge' because they felt they had learned over time how to manage some of these areas.

Dialogue and Trust were both rated highly in terms of importance. One leader said of the importance of trust:

Absence of trust is a killer. When the organisation makes promises it doesn't keep, that erodes trust. If you go back on your word, or don't treat the team properly, disrespect them or don't value their efforts.

Another spoke of the challenge in encouraging others to communicate effectively:

It takes a lot of effort and work to get people to have the robust conversations because ... people don't want to hurt each other's feelings. If those conversations don't happen, it can cause catastrophic consequences.

The location of dialogue and trust in the model implies that time spent on encouraging dialogue and building trust enhances performance in other areas. Leader verbatims appear to support this relationship. These verbatims connect dialogue and trust with seven of the other model dimensions:

Everyone must be aware of what the purpose, vision, objectives and goals are. It's not overly difficult if you communicate the right way.

[Team alignment] is just about your willingness as a leader to have a critical conversation.

Stakeholder management can be really difficult without communication, trust and managing conflict.

[Team dynamics] comes back to communication and trust.

When you're looking at multicultural audiences, communication styles don't always translate. It's about providing an environment

in which people can speak out, and people are willing to listen and give them respect.

I'm working in an environment that's incredibly complicated and everyone's in multi-teams and everyone's got different KPIs. I don't think it's that hard to manage if you have communication and trust.

If a team is to work well when team members are dispersed such that most of their time is spent engaging with each other through virtual media, the focus once more is on communication and trust. Indeed, the capacity of the team to engage in dialogue may be challenged a lot more in such circumstances.

Leaders talked about the importance of **task alignment** in enabling people to perform their roles:

If you do not have a common purpose, you cannot set clear goals. If you don't have clear goals, you can't possibly begin to figure out whether people have the tools and resources they need to do their job or whether they're supported in their role.

And suggested that this is most challenging in a matrix organisation:

Where I work because there are so many matrices, swim lanes and siloed behaviours. To bring people along a journey with the same kind of purpose ... in a large organisation, it's almost impossible.

Those that rated **team alignment** high, spoke about the importance of the team holding itself accountable to agreed norms:

The challenge is getting people to hold each other to account. Nobody's got the guts, unless it's a super safe space, to challenge people. You can do all the team charters you want, but is anyone paying attention to them?

The majority of leaders rated the importance of **stakeholder relationships** high. For example, this verbatim highlighted the dynamic nature of stakeholder relationships and the need to be paying constant attention:

Stakeholders change all the time. They've got very different perspectives. The issues change and it requires constant maintenance and repair.

Rating for **team dynamics** were lower overall. Some leaders rated it as important, highlighting the complexity of intra-team relationships:

If you can't get the interpersonal spiderweb to connect, it's like pulling on the rope in different directions. The team dynamic, who's good at what? How do we respect that? How does that

Table 1. Importance and Challenge – Average Ratings Marked Out of 5 and Variance.

Importance			Challenge		
1	Dialogue	4.9 (4.0–5.0)	1	Building teams	4.0 (2.0–5.0)
2	Trust	4.7 (3.5–5.0)	2	Stakeholder relationships	3.7 (1.0–5.0)
2 =	Task alignment	4.7 (2.0–5.0)	3	Dialogue	3.5 (3.0–5.0)
2 =	Stakeholder relationships	4.7 (3.0–5.0)	3 =	Managing conflict	3.5 (0.5–5.0)
5	Building teams	4.6 (2.0–5.0)	3 =	Managing diversity	3.5 (2.0–5.0)
6	Managing diversity	4.4 (2.5–5.0)	6	Trust	3.3 (1.0–5.0)
7	Managing conflict	4.3 (2.5–5.0)	6 =	Task alignment	3.3 (1.5–5.0)
8	Team alignment	4.1 (1.5–5.0)	6 =	Team alignment	3.3 (1.5–5.0)
8 =	Hybrid working	4.1 (2.0–5.0)	9	Hybrid working	3.2 (1.0–5.0)
10	Team dynamics	4.0 (2.0–5.0)	9 =	Team dynamics	3.2 (1.0–5.0)
11	Multi-team membership	3.8 (2.0–5.0)	11	Multi-team membership	3.0 (1.0–5.0)

translate into action or lack of action? How do we hold each other accountable?

Other leaders said it was less important, believing that team members work can manage their relationships without outside intervention:

I'm a good old-fashioned roll up the sleeves, get on with it type of a person. To a large extent ... I try not to worry about that or care. If they want to have lots of relationships and chat away and talk to each other about stuff, that's fine by me.

Some leaders said they find managing team dynamics challenging. Others said they manage those dynamics by taking a structured approach, or leveraging the prevailing organisational culture:

Those people who sit back from the conversation, or are pissed off, or those people pushing - we make sure that we get onto that as a team. We've gone through a couple of team profile things.

My organisation has been really deliberate in its development of its organisational wide culture and really references this idea that we're not little countries going to the UN and arguing for our own causes. If the wider team can see that team number one is united, then it removes those factions and infighting.

The majority of leaders said **managing conflict** is important because many people don't know how to have a confronting conversation without the risk of relationships breaking down:

There is a need to be open and call out conflict when you see it. I think it's challenging, having that frank and open conversation because sometimes they just don't want to go there. And when you've had that challenging conversation, how do you move on? How do you rebuild trust?

Those who see it as less important see some degree of relationship conflict as inevitable:

Sometimes people just need to learn to get more comfortable with it instead of seeing it as a problem to fix. I think it just exists and it should be there if people are openly sharing what they think about things. I think people overmanage it often thinking every little conflict needs resolved.

Some people focussed on surface-level/visible aspects of **managing diversity**. As suggested in the literature, others placed more emphasis on deep-level/invisible aspects of difference. For example:

Diversity of thought is really important across the team. You have different qualifications, different personality types. All of that stuff contributes to good decision making. Diversity of a team in terms of what they look like is largely irrelevant. Paying attention only to the visible stuff is counterproductive – it doesn't lead to diversity of thought.

Multi-team membership was rated least important of the 11 themes overall, but scored high y leaders working in matrix organisations:

In my previous role for a large global corporation, it was a disaster. Everyone was on a different team. Reporting lines were all over the place. You'd spend a lot of time talking about things and people nodded their heads but then went away and did nothing because another taskmaster was telling them to do something else.

Those in less complex organisations and/or organisations with good systems, particularly in professional services, said this theme is less of an issue:

Back in the day it was more of an issue. We have scheduling systems to help us now. Now, with a click on a dashboard, I know where the team is and what they're working on. It tells me how busy they are in reality and how much time they're booking as well.

Some leaders said that paying special attention to the needs of **virtual/hybrid** teams is important, while others said they believe people have now adapted to working virtually:

We haven't worked it out yet. We're still working through that and it's going to take some time. And that's why you see a lot of big businesses now forcing people back to the workplace. I don't think that's the answer. My biggest concern is that young people coming through aren't learning that proper work ethic and how it is to be in a team and how you learn from those side conversations by the water cooler.

I think people have generally become adaptable to the different ways of working just through the act of going through the whole COVID thing. I think it would be harder if you were trying to talk to someone who didn't go through COVID and try to explain the difference, but we've all done it.

Building teams was rated high in terms of importance. Those who rated it lower tended to be leaders in government or board members, with little influence over staff recruitment. Those leaders who rated the importance and challenge of building teams high, spoke not only of there being a general shortage of candidates, but also in terms of flawed recruitment processes:

I think anyone can present themselves well, but it's difficult to prove sales acumen, past performance, all that kind of stuff. It's difficult to gauge that in interviews and panels so you have to trust your gut. Even after you think you've made the right choice, they have to settle into the culture and feel like they can perform.

None of the leaders interviewed named themes that were not already included in the model, or else named themes that sit across different themes. For example, some leaders suggested that team culture might be missing, before going on to say that they thought that good culture was a function of dialogue, trust, diversity management and team alignment.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was twofold. First, to explore what the literature has to say about team effectiveness and to extract themes from that analysis. Second, to test the emerging thematic analysis with team leaders. The results of the research illustrate the breadth of knowledge required to work effectively in this space, and a lack of definitive evidence to direct the practitioner towards a particular approach or competency framework. A picture emerges instead of different teams facing different challenges, in different contexts, requiring a tailored and specific approach to assist them in becoming more effective.

Pluralism

The results of the study suggest that a specific team may require support in one or more of 11 different areas, as conceptualised here. Advocates of an approach based on the primary importance of establishing collective purpose, goals and objectives will recognise the significance of *task alignment*, as defined by Hackman and Wageman (2005), for example. Those who have undertaken their team coach training with those who advocate most strongly for thinking systemically (e.g., Hawkins, 2017) will identify with the theme of *stakeholder relationships*. The theme of *team dynamics* will resonate strongest with those who focus primarily on the nature of intra-team relationships (e.g., Thornton, 2016). The first contribution of the model is to highlight the potential breadth of team coaching, and the importance of contracting with a team to work out the most appropriate area of focus.

The conversations with leaders affirmed the importance of all 11 themes and highlighted how each theme may present as more or less challenging in different contexts. The results may encourage team coaches to take a more pluralist view of the work that they do. Debate as to the importance of team dynamics, for example, as described in the introduction to this paper, may reflect too binary and linear a perspective. Instead of debating whether clear objectives foster healthy team dynamics or vice versa, the practitioner may take a more pluralist approach, acknowledging the importance of both domains and seeking to understand where best to focus in a specific situation and context. Different team coaching programmes in the marketplace tend to be constructed upon quite different philosophies, embracing perhaps only one or two of these 11 themes. Any such programme may be useful *and* there is a risk that the practitioner may then recommend to every team they work with that the team focusses on those one or two themes.

Diversity of Approach

Historically, many of those advocating for a single set of generic competencies have cited a Harvard paper by Sherman & Freas (2004) called 'The Wild West of Executive Coaching'. The authors of that paper noted that barriers to entry to being a coach were non-existent, that many so-called coaches knew little about coaching, and that bad coaching was widely available, wasted money, and could do harm. Accordingly, those seeking to establish a single set of standards and competencies were encouraged in their work. It is important, however, that this was not the authors' view. They suggested that accomplished coaches relying on widely varying techniques, can produce similar results. They declared themselves sceptical of efforts to introduce universal standards and high barriers to entry. The most important qualifications to be an executive coach, they said, are character and insight, distilled from personal experience as much as formal training.

The results of this study do nothing to suggest there is one single best way to coach. We cannot prove that there is no single best way to coach of course, but to assert that there is would require a significant body of empirical evidence that does not so far exist. In the author's view such empirical evidence is unlikely to ever emerge given the unpredictable nature of human behaviour in attempting to navigate a wide variety of complex, ever-changing problems and dilemmas.

The leaders we interviewed appeared to validate the 11 themes that emerged from the research. They also said which of the themes they thought to be most important and most challenging, but for many of those themes, their responses were highly variable. One might look at the data and conclude that leaders think dialogue is the most important issue facing teams, followed by trust, task alignment, and so on. But that would be to overlook the diversity of response. Some leaders said they didn't believe multi-team membership to be at all important. Others said it was a fundamentally important. Further, the issues leaders said are most important are not necessarily the issues their teams find most challenging. All of which highlights the demands upon the team coach to respond most effectively to specific situations and contexts.

Stepping aside from the topic of team coaching competencies, we ought to recognise there is no single way to conceptualise a 'team', nor the role of a 'team coach'. These issues are not even about the existence or otherwise of empirical evidence. This is about different people making sense of the world differently, where there does not and never will exist a single united mental construct. Why do we need a single mental construct of these terms at all, and why do we need to be able to point to a single best practice model? As Garvey (2011) suggested, the professional bodies appear committed to this approach in order to promote 'coaching' and 'team coaching' to potential buyers of those services, many of whom may share the 'management mindset'.

Defining a Personal Approach

If we don't subscribe to a generic competency framework, then how do we determine if we are engaged in effective practice? The 3Ps framework is a simple framework that many coaches find helpful. The original 3Ps framework was first described by Lane (2006) with reference to supervision. It was subsequently further developed by Bachkirova (2016) and Jackson and Bachkirova (2019) with reference to coaching and coaching supervision. The 3Ps framework invites you to define, in this case as a team coach:

- 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?
- Your **practice**. What would a fly-on-the-wall see you doing when you're working with a team?

The 3Ps framework has been maligned in some quarters, if not in print, as encouraging the creation of esoteric or enigmatic articulations as to what constitutes effective coaching, but as with all models, the outcome of the framework depends on its application. If you are a team coaching practitioner you will not find definitive answers to the questions you are asking, now or likely in the future. The terrain in which we operate is too complex. To look for definitive answers to these questions is to seek for simplistic rationale that will not serve us well. Used well, the 3Ps framework encourages critical analysis, a questioning of all we are told, and demands that we recognise there is no one single best way to go about the work, no 'gold standard'.

Use of the 3Ps framework, or a similar framework/process serving the same function, enables us to define for ourselves our own personal approach to team coaching, to probe, test and challenge that approach, and to go about our work with greater confidence. Myers and Bachkirova (2019) conducted a fascinating piece of research in which one group of coaches observed another group of coaches working with their clients. Coaches and coachees were generally happy with the work. The observing coaches were much less happy, because the coaches they were watching didn't coach the way they thought they should coach. This suggests the prevailing narrative around coaching competencies, and a single best way to coach, is a dominant one.

Implications for Future Research

Team coaching in organisations is still a relatively new discipline, though people may have been performing similar if not the same services for a long time before the emergence of team coaching, albeit in a different guise and with a different title. If team coaching is to continue to be framed a distinct discipline, then it behoves those who endorse its value to advance our understanding of the work. This might include:

Deepening the Analysis

The effective team coach understands how teams function. In this paper the 'team effectiveness' literature was explored and themes identified. Future research will first, further explore existing knowledge pertinent to team functioning, areas of knowledge that may lie beyond typical definitions of team effectiveness. And, second, explore in greater detail those themes than was attempted in this paper. Were we to hone in on, for example, conflict management, then we would undoubtedly reveal further insights and findings relevant to the work of a team coach.

Understanding the Practitioner Perspective

The practitioner survey conducted as part of this research was rudimentary. Future research will adopt more rigorous methodologies, in terms of sampling, empirical analysis,

relationship between variables, including variables not considered in this research, such as industry, organisation type, and size.

Clarifying the Nature of Evidence

Some of those coaching bodies advocating particular competency frameworks make claims that these frameworks are research-based, or evidence-based, without making explicit the nature and assumptions of that research, nor its limitations. Bachkirova and Lawton Smith (2015) suggest that approaches to the accreditation of coaches developed by the professional bodies are consistent with a modernist view of the world, based on theories implying a simple linear cause-effect relationship between inputs and outcomes. It would be helpful were the coaching associations themselves to expound the nature of the evidence that is available, and those forms of evidence which are not yet available, based on our current levels of understanding. This might include reference theories of complex adaptive systems, for example (Bachkirova & Lawton Smith, 2015), a very different way of seeking to understand the world, more suited to the complex nature of team coaching.

The Individual Practitioner

The individual practitioner can contribute to a collective effort to learn more by, for example:

1. **Challenging everything.** Those advocating for a particular approach to team coaching do so on the basis of their experience, beliefs and philosophy. If they have lots of experience in the team coaching space, then their perspectives will be interesting and useful. Global coaching associations build their competency models based on what practising team coaches tell them is important. This is useful and interesting too, but beware people telling you their perspective is the best perspective. Ask questions, challenge, explore, all in service of seeking to understand better a highly complex discipline.
2. **Doing the work.** We learn through doing, and reflecting on that doing. The next time you coach a team, stop and make time to explore: (i) What did you learn from that experience? (ii) What did you learn about yourself in relation to the people you worked with? (iii) What did you learn about your purpose in doing the work? What gave you most satisfaction? What did you least enjoy? (iv) What worked? What didn't work? What will you experiment with doing differently next time? And who will you reflect with? Reflecting by yourself is fine, but how will you introduce another perspective into the process, a challenging voice?
3. **Making the time to stop and think.** The 3Ps is not a set of questions to answer once, then decide – that's who I am as a coach. Such an approach doesn't reflect a commitment to learning. The 3Ps is one framework that enables you to engage on an ongoing exploration as to who you are as a team coach. The moment it is finished is the moment you stop learning. If you don't like the 3Ps framework, choose another simple process or structure to enable your ongoing development.

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