

Will ethics sink or swim team coaching?

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Upon the horizon, the wave that is team coaching is beginning to build further momentum. Team coaching has become a significant growth area in the global coaching market (e.g. Passmore, 2021).

The demand for team coaching is partly rooted in increased pressure to demonstrate return on coaching investment, with an emphasis on teaming as a way of working effectively while applying diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in the day-to-day work of teams. Another shift occurring is the trend for organisations to evolve the one-to-one coaching model to one that broadens access to coaching for a wider population, contributing to coaching results at scale. This movement could truly democratise coaching at the enterprise level.

If the old adage ‘history repeats itself’ is true, then the team coaching market is in the same place as the one-to-one coaching market was more than 20 years ago - rushing to establish the need to standardise, certify and qualify coaches (in this case, team coaches) and training programmes. If it’s taken more than two decades for one-to-one coaching ethics to be taken seriously and considered an explicit and fundamental part of one-to-one coaching work, will it take another 20 years for team coaching ethics to also be taken seriously? At present, little attention has been paid to the ethics surrounding team coaching which leaves them conspicuous by their absence.

The aim of this article is to get to the crux of team coaching ethics in a way that compels and equips team coaches, buyers and sponsors of this service to commit

to a provocative, purposeful and productive partnership in team coaching. By so doing, the Integrity of team coaching will sit front and centre in all conversations with interested parties to ensure that the work is fit for purpose, appropriately contracted-for and ethically considered to positively advance the coaching profession.

Why team coaching ethics?

The conspicuous absence of a team coaching ethics code

The cornerstone of any professional endeavour is a code of ethics. Where is the team coaching ethics code?

According to the Ethics and Compliance Initiative™ (accessed June 2022), “A well-written code of conduct clarifies an organization’s mission, values, and principles, linking them with standards of professional conduct. The code articulates the values the organization wishes to foster in leaders and employees and, in doing so, defines desired behaviour. As a result, written codes of conduct or ethics can become benchmarks against which individual and organizational performance can be measured.” The initiative goes on to assert that a code can also serve important purposes to the external world including compliance, marketing, and risk mitigation.

Team coaching code of ethics – a beacon

Professional coaching practitioners typically adhere to a coaching ethical code, whether that be one published by a coaching membership body or professional

association or one established from their own set of ‘rules’. Our message to the world here is professional team coaching must be conducted professionally.

At the time of writing, there are no published team coaching ethics. A lack of explicit team coaching ethics means they’re only present by assumption, contributing to both the inability to identify and attend to blind spots which doesn’t provide conditions for safe or ethical work.

We argue that an established team coaching code of ethics would act as beacon to guide us to a safe port of call and ensure we can ground our behaviours in appropriate ways of working.



Team coaching ethics – everyone swims at their own risk

Given the ever-changing business, organisational, social, leadership, team, and individual level complexities present within any team coaching landscape, prudent professional practice calls upon organisational stakeholders to consciously design an ethical partnership to engender transparency, clarity and coherence for all parties. There's clearly much to be gained by an enhanced understanding and appreciation of the systemic benefits generated by an aligned team coaching ethics endeavour.

Figure 1: Navigating team coaching ethics

Essential Components of Team Coaching	Unclear ethics engenders risks	Inclusion of ethics promotes rewards
<p>Designated Team Coach</p> <p>Identifying the designated team coach(es) is a critical success factor. This could include: External coach(es), internal coach(es), team leader coach, peer coach(es).</p>	<p>A potential risk is an underlying assumption that there is only one team coach fit for the team engagement. Unexplored alternatives could result in creating a singular dependency on one individual.</p>	<p>By expanding the deliverers of team coaching beyond that of a single (1) team coach, the organization could leverage the benefit by scaling the team coach's capability to the team; making the team more self-sufficient and transferring agency back to the team.</p>
<p>Clear Contracting</p> <p>Understanding the nature and aim of the work shapes the assignment to be fit for purpose. Areas to contract might include: Team launch, team offsite, team skill building, higher performing team, team coaching for the team leader and team members, information sharing, confidentiality parameters, progress reviews and metrics.</p>	<p>Without a contract, stakeholders and the team do not have clarity on what the work will involve; how it will be structured, who is responsible for what or what it will deliver which creates unnecessary and avoidable uncertainty.</p>	<p>Collaboratively designed and aligned temporal touchpoints (early, midpoint, closing) for progress monitoring and measurement, maximizes transparency and alignment of the experience, positively impacting the business, organization, leadership, team and coach. The contract becomes a shared responsibility between the team coach, leadership and organizational sponsor(s) and team members to align behind desired measurable outcomes as well as establishing the informational reporting and tracking systems which serves the team coaching field and provides ethical good practice.</p>
<p>Team Coaching Stakeholders</p> <p>Clarifying and navigating a wider system is an integral factor in team coaching success. These stakeholders may include the recipients of the team's output and/or services, the team members, the team leader, leadership outside the team, the organization, the wider team ecosystem at cross country and planetary levels.</p>	<p>An ethical tripwire is that the coach unconsciously biases their work toward satisfying the agenda of the most prominent, powerful and/or authoritative stakeholder(s) in the room. This could lead to inputs from the whole team as a collective client being under valued and/or misrepresented.</p>	<p>Multiple stakeholders bring multiple agendas (business, organizational, leadership, team, individual) stemming from competing commitments to mission critical priorities. Giving due attention to the many stakeholders enables the creation of a 'wholeistic' agenda which serves the wider system.</p>
<p>Methodologies</p> <p>Essentially in any team coaching engagement is to have an appropriate methodology which may include a combination of the following interventions: Behavioural, developmental, educational, consultative, motivational, skill building, agile, process consultation, group dynamics, conflict resolution, team facilitation, systemic, culture change, eclectic.</p>	<p>If the team coach is unclear as to which interventions are the most consistently reliable, relevant and proven, there is a risk that they could do harm to the team.</p>	<p>An experienced practitioner becomes skilled to discern, design and deliver (often in real time) a portfolio of processes that not only meet but exceed the client's expectations in addressing team motivation, learning, effectiveness and performance thus increasing psychological safety among the team.</p>

Grounding team coaching ethics?

In exploring team coaching ethics, one needs to consider what ethical topics are being discussed. There will be varied ethical perspectives on what should be included in team coaching. The team (individually and collectively), the broader organisational system and the team coach will all have a view on what is and is not ethical. Conspicuous by their absence is the professional bodies' stance on the ethics for team coaching - a gap we hope will soon be filled.

The purpose of this article is not to define a team coaching ethics code but rather offer some ethical pointers for consideration in this work. Our hope is that the gap between the aspirations and the reality of team coaching ethics can be brought closer together by paying attention to the following areas:

Establish a clear programme design

Accounting for team coaching ethics in the design phase allows ethical principles to be woven into a programme from inception to completion. When the outputs of

the team coaching, the resources required to deliver and support it, the timeframes involved and the equality, diversity and inclusion aspects are viewed through an ethical lens, the design will be created with integrity at its core.

Assess fitness for purpose

Being fit for purpose sits at the centre of ethics and has key indicators that require scrutiny. Firstly, it's important to establish if the coach is appropriately trained, qualified, accredited, supervised and a good fit for the team/organisation before embarking on any programme design or delivery. A 'one size team coach' doesn't fit all team coaching assignments.

A second consideration is the team itself. Are the team participants briefed, prepared and ready for the work? Team coaching isn't for the faint hearted and requires commitment and effort from the whole team. Ensuring the team is engaged and enrolled in delivering upon team coaching goals is vital to success. More fundamentally, organisations must ensure they're exercising duty of care and therefore, it's crucial to assess if team members are mentally and emotionally available for this work.

Spell out the consequences

Once the team has clarity on the team coaching task, it's important to spell out the consequences of the team coaching being a success or a failure. Clarity on the 'carrot' and 'stick' means the team has greater engagement with what's in it for them, individually and collectively.

Engage team member participation

Experience demonstrates that team coaching works optimally when team members feel their participation and level of engagement is a choice. This ethical issue pertains to team member autonomy and how the team coach manages expectations and potential resistance to the team coaching work.

Define and assign roles

There are multiple roles in team coaching which require clarity if the work is to be conducted ethically. Roles to define are the sponsor of the team coaching, i.e. the person who's championing or commissioning the coaching, the team leader (who may also be the sponsor), the team coach, the consultancy the team coach is working through and HR, L&D, etc. A team coaching programme will be touched by many hands.



Ensure secure data sharing policies

It's commonplace for data gathering to form part of a team coaching assignment. This may include psychometric results, diagnostics, surveys or interview data. The team should be given clarity on the purpose of the data gathering, who it'll be shared with and when and for what purpose. Sensitive information must be collected, held and shared in line with compliance requirements if it's to have any ethical defence.

Define confidentiality

The statement, 'I have promised confidentiality' is often considered singular 'proof' of ethical due diligence. Confidentiality is a complicated topic in one-to-one coaching and becomes more systemically complex in team coaching. Contracting confidentiality within a team is involved and important. It's easy to say, 'We have agreed that the team coaching will be confidential' but what does that actually mean? What can team members speak to each other about outside the session? What is the team permitted to say and message to people who are not part of the intact team? How are the team confidentiality parameters extended to the team coach's participation?

Manage ethical breaches

The rigour of ethics is tested in how well a breach is handled, the outcome of which can result in the whole team coaching assignment sinking or swimming. The team coach and the organisation would be well advised to consider how to handle various scenarios so that if there's a tidal change the process

to resolution is clear. A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor.

Conclusions and recommendations

We've highlighted the absence of published team coaching ethics and a focused conversation about this topic and suggested ways to ground team coaching ethics by presencing and applying important considerations.

We hope we've achieved our aim of getting to the crux of team coaching ethics in a way that compels and equips team coaches, buyers and sponsors of this service to commit to a provocative, purposeful and productive partnership.

To finish, we include some key recommendations for team coaching stakeholders below:



Recommendations

- Team coaches secure appropriate supervision on this topic. As with any coaching, team coaching could also benefit from supervision. Accessing an appropriately qualified and/or experienced team coaching supervisor to support a team coach maximises the rewards and minimises the risks of team coaching ethics in their work.
- Buyers and sponsors of team coaching revisit their team coaching due diligence. Assuming that existing one-to-one coaching ethics equally transfers to team coaching assignments portends risk. Utilising the considerations in this article could provide initial guidelines in the selection and appointment of a team coach.
- Team coaching training providers include a team coaching ethics component in their curriculum. In the current absence of explicit professional standards, team coach training organisations can address the gap by highlighting this topic and the risks and rewards associated with team coaching ethics.
- Coaching professional bodies develop a robust set of team coaching ethics. The challenge is to go beyond a code of practice with competencies and instead develop useful and value add processes a team coach should follow to ensure their work is ethically considered thereby positively advancing the coaching profession.

Team coaches can swim at their own risk, however, entering the water unprepared carries intended and unintended consequences that may impact self, others and the system while the buyers and sponsors of team coaching need to be equally informed and educated so they can understand what's at stake.

Reference

J Passmore, Future Trends in Coaching, Henley Business School, 2021



To find out more about team coaching please contact:



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