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Action, reflection and learning in team coaching

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Introduction

The aim of the chapter is to examine the role of a coach in supporting reflection, learning and taking action in a team or a group. The chapter will begin by exploring the role of a coach or adviser in learning groups such as action learning sets where the role of the coach is to ask questions to encourage the team to consider and reflect on their current situation. (Marquardt et al., 2009). This is compared and contrasted to the role of a team coach working with a team to achieve common team outcomes in a way that combines performance and processes (Hackman & Wageman, 2005). The concept of learning as a social process in both interventions and the role of the coach in supporting the process of reflection and dialogue for the purpose of gaining new insights are explored. Hence, one of the purposes of the chapter is to develop a sharper understanding of what distinguishes action learning from team coaching, as well as some of the overlaps between them. It must be noted that as the action learning facilitator is commonly referred to as the 'coach' this term has been used here interchangeably with group coaching. The distinction between the two interventions are addressed later in the chapter.

Learning in groups

The process through which groups promote individual learning and change are widely discussed, but little comprehended (Thornton, 2016). Why and how groups learn can be traced back to our origin as creatures who survived by being part of a group for survival, security and well-being. As a result we are well adapted to understanding non-conscious, non-verbal communication in groups and most of our responses tend to be automatic. Stern (2004:76) defines our 'non-symbolic, non-verbal, procedural awareness' as implicit knowing which enables us to 'feel it in our body and sense it in

our minds, together.’ He suggests that our ‘nervous systems are constructed to be captured by the nervous system of others ... we resonate with and participate in their experience, and they in ours’.

Thus as multiple perspectives of the individual members are shared in a group setting, aspects of knowledge, previously unobserved are brought into the conscious realm, providing the group members opportunities for a deeper learning experience. For this reason, in the interpersonal arena, groups score heavily over every other kind of professional development (Thornton, 2016). From this perspective, it can be established that group learning opportunities such as team coaching where the team is supported to maximise their collective talent and resources to accomplish the team task (Hackman & Wageman, 2005; Hawkins, 2011) and action learning where individuals are supported to reflect on their work to resolve issues and gain new insight (Dilworth & Wills, 2003) offers the group members a far wider range of perceptions and responses.

However, it requires a skilled group coach or facilitator to ensure effective group learning in the context of both team coaching and action learning. When communicating in such groups, individual perceptions are always influenced, and sometimes distorted, by personal previous experiences. In addition, content messages may be loaded with cues about the person and their feelings (Kolb et al., 1984). Sometimes, individuals project positive aspects of themselves and at other time projection can be a defensive mechanism in which one can attribute parts of self that they do not like to others unconsciously. Whether projection is positive or negative, they reduce self-awareness. Here, a group facilitator and a team coach can address and resolve such issues as and when they arise to maximise learning within a group. (Thornton, 2016). However, not all group processes are the same, and nor are the roles of the coach or facilitator within them. Next we will explore action learning group processes and the role of the coach/facilitator before turning to the more recent phenomenon of team coaching.

Action learning and the role of the coach

Action learning is a method for individual and organisation development based on small groups of individuals meeting over time to tackle real problems. Originally developed as an approach specifically for developing managers by Revans (1980) action learning

sees learning as a social process in which managers who are faced with complex problems learn best with and from others. It is also a process of reflecting on one's work in the supportive as well as confrontational environment of one's peers for the purpose of gaining new insights and resolving real business problems (Dilworth & Wills; 2003). This emphasis on learning and taking action is one of the challenges frequently debated in the action learning literature (Rigg, 2006). For Revans (1998:14), the two cannot be separated as he noted, "there can be no action without learning and no learning without action". Other authors such as O'Neil and Marsick (2007) and Pedler (2011) also highlight this balance suggesting that action learning enables participants to use work project or problems in organisations to learn.

More recently, Leonard (2015) in clarifying the relationship between action, learning and solutions within the action learning process, argues that the first purpose of action learning should be to achieve effective and creative solutions to complex, critical and urgent problems. Sofu, Yeo & Villafañe,(2010) also confirm that action learning seeks to promote double-loop learning through ill-structured and complex problems. Such problems are common in organizational contexts, and the type of learning that ensues is often a precursor to an action that can affect both the learner and his or her environment (Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; McLoughlin, 2004).

While traditional models of action learning describe the role of a facilitator in helping group processes, more contemporary versions discuss the role of the coach. Hence, the action learning coach helps individual group members perform their tasks better and more quickly (Rimanoczy & Turner, 2008). The coach also sensitively and clearly establishes structure, rules and the pace of the session (e.g., Marquardt *et al.*, 2009; Rimanoczy & Turner, 2008; Sanyal, 2017). O'Neil & Marsick (2014) strongly advocate the role of an action learning coach, in getting participants' to challenge their own assumptions and patterns of thought and behaviour (Boud & Walker, 1996), and to question their own practice (Cho & Bong, 2010).

Thus, the primary focus of the action learning coach is not to teach or provide an expert perspective but to create conditions under which participants might learn from their project work and from one another. The coach tries to primarily use questions, rather than give answers, as the way of working with the team (O'Neil & Marsick, 2007). The coach also plays an important part in the creation of opportunities for

learning from critical reflection (O'Neil, 1999) as well as encouraging and empowering other action learning members to engage in this social learning process for solving problems (Sanyal, 2017). For example, when action learning is used as a method of leadership development, an action learning coach who is not a group member and comes from outside the culture, can be freer to ask questions from an outsider's perspective as he or she is not immersed in the organization's norms and is not constrained by political issues. Casey (2011) emphasises the need for the coach to challenge the group members in order to help them to think differently. Thus, the coach's capability to 'hold' difficult conversations is indispensable in promoting learning (Winnicott, 1965, 1971; Thornton, 2016).

However, before learning can happen, sufficient trust is needed for participants to feel they can take risks such as exposing personal information, questioning themselves and others in the group, engaging in reflection, and challenging the organization (Casey, 2011; O'Neil & Marsick, 2007). The action learning coach ensures equity among members as well as efficiency and accountability for results in both process and outcomes. The coach is not a teacher or training manager delivering classroom-based problem solving or interventions, nor a work supervisor who has accountabilities in terms of productivity and efficiency. Rather, the coach ideally is an independent person who has the capacity to guide group members in how to learn, listen, use empathy, identify and challenge assumptions, reflect critically, reframe the issues, receive and give feedback effectively, and think reflectively (Bruner, Beaty & Frost, 1997).

The role of the action learning coach also requires assisting members to focus on what they are achieving, what they are finding difficult, what processes they are using, and the implications of these processes. Without a coach, all of this would be left to chance and to the accidental or serendipitous application of process skills by group members (Marquardt et al., 2009). Sofo, Yeo & Villafañe,(2010) suggest that the action learning coach should be sensitive to and allow time for group members to understand the external as well as internal environment. Hence, the coach helps the group to reflect on the possible performance and problem-solving levels they can attain as individuals, teams, and as an organization (Sofo, 2006).

Overall, the interaction of the ‘action learning coach’ seeks to open minds to a deeper level, aimed at self-discovery through one’s own experience and critical reflection (O’Neil & Marsick, 2014). Rigg (2006: 199) makes the case for what she terms ‘bilingualism’ in executing the role of facilitator, and argues that there is value to be had in shifting the balance between process and expert facilitation: ‘in the sense that facilitators, especially in a public sector context, speak both a public policy language as well as that of learning and development’. For Rigg (2006: 200), the ultimate value is a facilitator or a coach who is skilled enough to combine these twin capabilities and who becomes able, potentially at any rate, ‘to generate knowledge about the wider organisation or wider system they are working with’. Hence, in practice, the idea of questioning insight to complex emotions, unconscious processes and offering up challenges to existing power and a more active facilitation role is an essential requirement in critical action learning (Vince, 2008). Reynolds (1998) also distinguishes critical reflection from other forms of reflection by being concerned with questioning assumptions, having a social rather than an individual focus, paying particular attention to the analysis of power relations and being concerned with emancipation. Thus, the role of facilitation marks a key distinction, especially for critical action learning as it puts more emphasis upon the role of an expert facilitator or a coach.

The role of the coach in team coaching

Team coaching is now a growing trend and service in the field of coaching. It is defined as a comprehensive and systemic approach to support a team to maximise their collective talent and resources to effectively accomplish the work of the team (Hackman & Wageman, 2005; Hawkins, 2011; Carr and Peters, 2013). As Gray, Garvey and Lane (2016) comment, team coaching in organisations typically addresses issues such as:

- Getting agreement and commitment to organisational strategy
- Improving inter-group and intra-group communication
- Resolving conflict
- Managing communication, information and expectations upwards, sideways and downwards

As in action learning, the role of the coach is critical in team coaching. Reddy (1994: 8) defines this role as a “reasoned and intentional intervention, into the on-going events and dynamics of a group, with the purpose of helping that group effectively attain its agreed-upon objectives”. Hackman & Wageman (2005) also places a key focus on team task and suggests that team coaching enables direct interaction with a team, intended to help members make coordinated and task-appropriate use of their collective resources in accomplishing the team’s work. Hawkins (2011) agrees that the team coach works with the whole team to improve *collective* performance by engaging with their key stakeholder groups.

Clutterbuck (2009: 97) on the other hand, defines team coaching as “helping the team improve performance and the processes by which performance is achieved, through reflection and dialogue”. According to this perspective, a team coach is more emergent within the team and helps with the quality of thinking rather than leading towards a specific realisation. The coach helps the team build their longer-term skills and capacity to manage new challenges from their own resources (Clutterbuck, 2009). He offers a useful distinction between facilitation and coaching, noting that facilitation creates a space for dialogue (as in action learning) whereas team coaching requires additional assessment, feedback, consultative direction and a focus on team performance. Clutterbuck (2009, 2010) addresses the tension between whether a team coach focuses on relationship or structure in an inclusive and balanced way and suggests working with relationship factors in the service of performance goals may be a wise direction for team coaches to follow.

These definitions show that the purpose of team coaching is to support and help the team members over time; so team coaching involves meeting on a number of occasions with the opportunity to sustain and build on previous learning. What is distinctive here is that the relationship is multiple. Each team member can relate to the coach, to each other as team members or the team as a whole. This adds to learning choices, opportunities and possibilities.

However, the definitions also highlight that the emphasis of team coaching may vary, such as accomplishing team tasks with use of their collective resources (Hackman & Wageman, 2005), improving individual and team performance through reflection and

dialogue (Clutterbuck, 2009) and learning and development of new skills and capabilities (Thornton, 2016). Thus, the purpose of coaching may vary and will determine the role and task of the coach.

Team coaching and action learning coaching – a comparative analysis

Overall, team coaching and action learning are both relationally based developmental processes. Both occur over time and often over many months to support consolidation and integration of learning into practice. Hence, there are some core themes that are common to action learning and team coaching.

Similarities between action learning and team coaching

1 Building a learning environment and a trusting relationship

In both interventions, the role of the coach to establish and maintain a trusting relationship with and amongst the members, and to create a mutually satisfying environment of respect, trust, and freedom of expression (Flaherty, 1999; O’Neil & Marsick, 2007)). The coach achieves these aims by remaining politically neutral (Goglio *et al.*, 1998), approaching the members (with unconditional positive regard (Eggers and Clark 2000) – by enabling them to recognise their own assumptions, diagnose patterns and create new responses through questioning and reflection (O’Neil & Marsick, 2014). Thus, the personal qualities, knowledge, experience and skills of the ‘coach’ are essential to the creation of the learning environment in both interventions. Considerable importance is also given to the relationships with other group members in both team coaching and action learning processes.

2 Enabling learning and action

In both approaches, the coach is primarily concerned with the creation of a supportive process for learning through questioning, reflection and taking action. Vaartjes (2005) refers to the ‘intentional action’: action that is informed, designed, and undertaken with a view to achieving a specific purpose or outcome. Grant

(2001: 29) highlights action orientation as one of the constructs underpinning a psychology of coaching. Whitworth *et al.* (1998: 79) propose that sustained change arises from the “cycle of action and learning, over time,” and action is central to the purpose of coaching because it is the mechanism by which the client maintains their momentum toward desired outcomes. In action learning, real learning is not considered possible unless action is taken (Revans, 1982; Marquardt, 1999). The coach must intervene in and accelerate the learning of participants by confronting, challenging, questioning and complimenting (Dotlich & Noel, 1998). Questions are not intended to find answers, but rather to encourage deeper reflection to raise awareness to implicit assumptions and surface tacit knowledge, by a conscious process of connection and meaning-making (Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt 1999; Passfield, 1996).

3 **Building capacity for change**

Vaartjes (2005) suggests that both coaching and action learning demonstrate a similarity in their underlying paradigm in that both are underpinned by belief in the human capacity for self-directed change. This implies that in both team coaching and action learning, individuals have the innate capacity for change and that change can be facilitated through processes that support inquiry into their individual constructions and social interpretations, together with processes that support experience of alternative constructions. The coach is clearly accountable for effective application of process; however accountability for the achievement of results belongs to the members of the action learning group or the team members. In this way, individuals may be active in creating alternative (and preferred) realities. The coach supports the achievement of change by enhancing the capacity for, and commitment to, purposeful action to achieve desired outcomes (Vaartjes, 2005).

Thus, there is considerable similarity in the underlying features, paradigms and praxis of team coaching and action learning. Both interventions can be applied to personal and organisational development and share the intention of improving both capacity and capability within a supportive relational environment. However, there are some key differences in the two interventions which offer clear distinctions.

Differences between action learning and team coaching

1 Individual verses group or team issues

In action learning, individual members bring their issues or problems to the group process. Action learning seeks to make “meaning from experience” (Raelin, 1997: 26) with emphasis on surfacing the honest accounts of individual participants, relative to their current context to facilitate individual and social development (Marquardt, 1999). In team coaching, the group is the team and they work with each other on team issues. Individual issues may be brought to the surface through this process but the ultimate focus is on resolving a collective issue faced by the team. O’Connor and Cavanagh (2016) suggest that team coaching occurs when it is focused internally (at a skills level), and is only interested in those internal dynamics of the team that are relevant to the team’s goal attainment.

2 Inside-out verses outside-in

The theoretical framework of action learning is founded on the assumption that ‘knowledge is socially constructed and created from within’ (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002: 5) which is an ‘inside-out’ process facilitated by questioning insight and reflection on action (Passfield, 1996). In team coaching, however, the coaching conversations may be intentionally pragmatic (Flaherty, 1999), effective in surfacing the right things at the right time and may incorporate a feedback process (Crane, 1999; Dotlich & Cairo, 1999). This is mainly initiated by the coach often using pre-defined model/s and tools that generates information and, when well administered, insight. Vaartjes (2005) suggests that this is the ‘outside-in’ process which is actively facilitated by the coach. Thus, in action learning, individual issues are raised from within the action learning set and then addressed in the group. In contrast, in team coaching, the outcomes to be achieved or addressed may be pre-defined or outlined at the start of the intervention although underlying issues may come to the surface later through the coaching process. Thus, team coaching ‘is a reasoned and intentional intervention, into the ongoing events and dynamics of a group’ (Reddy, 1994: 8) and the coach supports the group to achieve its agreed objectives.

3 Questioning insight and critical reflection

The emphasis on questioning insight and critical reflection is a distinguishing feature of action learning. O'Neil & Marsick (2007) suggests that action learning coaches engage teams at the process level and then seek to open minds to a deeper level of questioning. O'Neil (1999:128) also argues that: "It's different. As a process consultant you are floating with the process. You are helping people to stay in it and be aware of what is happening. As a learning coach you are on many more levels". In contrast, in team coaching, tools and models are often used to enable team analysis and address difficult team conversations (although experienced team coaches avoid over reliance on such tools). Thus within team coaching, any focus on the team's internal conversation is only relevant to the extent that it is important for team goal attainment (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2016), thus, at least potentially, limiting the level and depth of reflections to achieving its collective goal.

Conclusion

In examining the role of a coach in supporting reflection, learning and taking action in a team or a group, such as action learning, it is clear that there are both similarities as well differences in these interventions. An integrated model of coaching and action learning can draw on the strengths offered by the practices of both (Vaartjes, 2005). Thus, the role of the coach in developing the relationship within the group and the environment for learning is essential for both interventions. The emphasis on 'intentional action' will ensure both individual and group outcomes and enhance learning and development of all participants. Finally, as action learning offers additional strengths in questioning insight and critical reflection, this element can be adopted in team coaching process to enable deeper insight and learning. Such practices are fundamental to experiential learning and therefore offer a rigour, structure and emphasis to enhance team coaching and action learning outcomes.

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