

# Coaching Beyond the CEO – the Challenge of Building Business Teams



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**A**s coaching within companies becomes more popular, especially for very senior executives (i.e. GMs', MD's, CEO's), an interesting dilemma is being created. Senior leaders take on a coach for one of two main reasons – either remedial, or generative. This distinction is discussed in an earlier article titled “To Coach or Not to Coach”.

For the purposes of this article, suffice it to say that remedial coaching is used when you “hit bottom”, and generative coaching is used when you are at the top of your game. In either case, of course, when a senior leader makes the changes needed to go to the next level he gets better. And that's where the dilemma gets created. Once you begin enhancing the top, what do you do with the rest of the organization?

Before senior leaders make significant strides themselves, the issue of developing the next level of managers is left somewhat on the back burner. However, when a senior leader improves, an increasingly large gap is created between the leader and the next level. This is inevitable. And, just as inevitably, the question must be asked: “How do we develop the next level?” And then, “Do we use coaching?”

## One Coach or Many?

If the answer to the coaching question is “yes, you also have to coach the next level” you are faced with another quite thorny problem. Do you use the coach who is working with the CEO to coach his (or her) direct reports? Or, do you get different coaches engaged with the direct reports?

In the work I do, I frequently hear a number of reasons for selecting different coaches to work with the different levels within an organization. Even different levels within the management team. The main reasons can be summed up as “confidentiality” and “chemistry”.

### Confidentiality

The issue of “confidentiality” centres on whether or not people feel that their issues and concerns will be kept within the confines of the coaching relationship, or allowed to get back to the “boss”. It's easy to think that if a coach is working with the “boss”, as well as people reporting to the “boss”, then there is a real danger that there will be “leakage” of confidential information. Because of these concerns about leakage, often a decision is



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taken to use one coach for the boss, and one or more different coaches for the boss' direct reports.

## Chemistry

“Chemistry” is also used as a very important filter when deciding on a coach. Clearly, if a coach and the person they are coaching are unable to communicate or unable to work together, then the relationship won't be a very productive one. However, falling back on the chemistry argument is fraught with some danger. For instance, when the “chemistry” filter is used, often you end up with a situation where the “boss” has one coach, and the direct reports choose different coaches because the “chemistry is better”. This may not be a very healthy outcome, either for the individuals or the organization.

Let's look at the individual case first.

Often, “chemistry” is used as a euphemism to describe “comfort”. Now, people don't really like to go outside their comfort zones. This is as true when you are selecting a coach as it is for any other area of endeavour. Because of this principle, however, frequently people will select coaches with whom they feel comfortable and then end up with a situation where they are not challenged. The relationship is pleasant, but generally unproductive.

Some years ago I knew of a middle level manager who was asked to take on a coach. She was quite skilled at crying at just the right time and, whether consciously or not, she ultimately selected a coach who sympathized

with her each time she cried. Now while there are occasions that call for sympathy, getting the best out of someone often requires that you do not sympathize when a person falls back on old patterns. In the case of the lady mentioned here, the willingness of a coach to sympathize was used as evidence of whether or not there was chemistry. Ultimately, the individual concerned was not well served by this. Neither was the company.

In the context of a senior team an additional problem gets created when you only use the chemistry (comfort) filter. People often think that the coach who is working with the “boss” will make them uncomfortable because the coach is working to the boss' agenda. So they select somebody different. In fact, they go beyond this. They make friends with their own coach. Before you know it, you have the boss' coach working with the boss' agenda, and the direct reports' coach working with the agendas of the direct reports. Individually people feel comfortable, but as a team you have increasingly complex multiple agendas. What's worse is that the different coaches can end up taking sides. And that in itself is an important problem.

You can overcome this problem, of course, by having some way of coordinating the efforts of the different coaches. This might involve having the coaches meet together occasionally to ensure that they are all on the same page vis-à-vis organizational goals. Or, a central coordinating figure (possibly from HR) can meet with the coaches frequently to ensure that they are all working to the same underlying goals and principles.

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## Creating Breakthrough Performance

While there may be good reasons for having one coach working with the boss, and different coaches working with the boss' direct reports, in this article I argue for taking a more holistic approach. Much more value can be created when you have one coach working with the entire executive team. This is especially needed if your goal is not just to get marginal improvements, but to create breakthrough performance with an executive team and the business that they lead. If you believe in synergy, and the ability of teams to create extraordinary results, the one coach approach is definitely worth seriously considering. And, there are many precedents.

Take great football teams for example. You generally don't find different players on a football team all working with different coaches. Rather, you have one coach who works with the whole team. And the team coach also does work with each of the individual players. That individual coaching is intended to make each player better while, at the same time, helping all the players to fit together much better in a team.

The individual coaching also extends to the team leader. In coaching the team leader, the focus is somewhat broader than the coaching for team members. There is some focus on the tactical skills needed for the game, but in most cases the team leader has the role because of a basic level of mastery at the tactical and physical level. The coaching for

the leader needs to go beyond that – to issues of strategy, group dynamics, motivation and other aspects that the leader alone needs to pay most attention to.

### An Organizational Intervention

Why do football teams have one coach for the whole team? It's because, when you really analyse it, coaching creates much more value when it's used as an organizational intervention rather than simply as a tool for individual development. When you coach a whole team, you are working to improve the functioning of the team as a whole, as well as each and every individual on the team.

It's important to realize that, while there are aspects of performance that can be addressed by working just with individuals, we are all profoundly affected by the context in which we find ourselves (see Deixis Vol 7, December 2004: "Bound to Not Change"). So, the behaviours and patterns that you see in any group of people are NOT just caused by the individual personalities of people. Rather, there are "emergent properties" of every group that dictate the behaviour of the group and the individuals within the group. Certain communication patterns, unspoken rules, double binds, beliefs that the group uses, are all "emergent properties" and they can affect the individuals quite profoundly. Trying to "fix" individuals without addressing the context is fraught with difficulty and quite likely to fail.

In order to help individuals improve, and the group as a whole, these "emergent properties" need to be addressed directly.

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To give an example, many performance issues in a senior executive team are caused by the nature of the relationships between the different team members. You know, of course, that certain business problems can ONLY be solved by people working together. It goes without saying, then, that enhancing the quality of relationships and communication on a team will underpin any improvement in performance of the team.

Obviously, you can't address these issues of relationship by just coaching one person. You need to coach each of the individuals to master their own part in the dynamic AND you need to coach the entire group to understand and master the rules of effective communication and shared action.

Simultaneously, of course, the way that each individual thinks, speaks, acts and reacts also contributes to the group dynamic. Hence, ignoring individuals and working just with the group is also not an option. You need to work at both the individual and the group level.

## What Creates Breakthrough Performance?

To create breakthrough performance, you first need to understand what creates such performance. As mentioned above, this is a function of both individuals AND of emergent phenomena in a group.

### The Individual:

On the individual level, performance is generated by the skills, knowledge and

attitudes that a person has accumulated. Skills can be technical or business, as can knowledge. For instance, in the finance industry, data collection and organization is a valuable skill, and knowledge of financial tools and techniques is also very important. Individuals who have high level of mastery of all of these can add significant value to the company of which they are a part.

Attitude is slightly more complex. The word "attitude" is not particularly useful because it is a general description used to cover more specific things that are generally not well understood. For instance, the beliefs that someone has will "cause" certain behaviours and reactions. The same is true of values. Then you have automatic emotional patterns. These are often more important than consciously chosen beliefs and values, and frequently drive the behaviours that you see in an individual.

Now, when you have a person who has transformed their own automatic reactions, who has aligned their internal values and beliefs, and who has mastered the key skills and knowledge of their chosen field you have a very powerful combination. It probably sounds too good to be true, but it's not. With focused coaching it is very possible to rapidly develop most people to have mastery of all the key elements of personal excellence.

### The Group:

In a group context, of course, looking only at individual performance is by no means enough. You need to create the conditions

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for the group to excel. At the group level, the conditions underpinning breakthrough performance can be placed into two major categories: Team Hygiene, and Alignment.

Team Hygiene refers to all elements that lead to a sense of comfort and ease in a team. It includes high levels of mutual trust (up, down, sideways, diagonally); the ability of the team to address difficult issues openly and reasonably; and active, ongoing feedback.

Alignment refers to having a commonly agreed goal, a commonly understood language, shared protocols (beliefs and values) and group disciplines such as creative processes, rigorous idea testing, error checking procedures and the like.

A team which has high levels of alignment, and good team hygiene, can pack a real punch. When that team is made up of individuals all of whom are masters in their own right then you have an explosive and powerful combination. And, once again, using appropriate developmental approaches it is very possible to create such a team.

models of all the team members and create a shared understanding of both the challenges being faced, and the best approach to dealing with those challenges. This is not a trivial exercise. Rather, it is probably one of the most important, and difficult, tasks for any team to take on.

The team also has to create an effective way of communicating that assists understanding rather than blocking it. And, quite frequently, it has to address and resolve contentious issues. Often teams are stuck in certain patterns of ritual behaviour that prevent the creation of either hygiene or alignment. A coach can play an invaluable role, working with the dynamics of the team as a whole to create the conditions for breakthrough performance. The role is a complex one, and involves a mix of many things. For instance, often the coach needs to facilitate conflict resolution on the team. Later, there is a training role, helping the whole team to be able to observe, in real time, the team dynamics. And, the coach continues to act as a mirror and source of feedback to the whole team on most aspects of the team's performance.

## Coach the Team

One of the quickest ways to create a team with breakthrough performance is to coach the whole team, both at the team level AND at the individual level. At the team level the coaching is focused on a number of critical elements. In certain cases there is an immediate need for conflict resolution. In every case the team needs to explore the mental

The work with the team naturally extends to the individuals. Often, the automatic reactions of the individuals help contribute to less than optimal performance at the team level. The coach' work with individuals often begins with helping each person modify their own automatic reactions so they are better able to handle the changes that are happening at the group level. Beyond that, the coach works in different ways with each individual on the



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team, helping each person develop their own strengths.

At the same time, attention is being given to the “interfaces” between the individuals. We are all different, and working together isn’t that easy. In a high performance team, however, the ability to work together seamlessly is key to success. So, as the coach works on the individual level a great deal of attention is given to how each person can work more effectively with all the different people on the team.

## The Leader-Coach Partnership

It’s important to understand that when a coach works with the whole team, the leader included, the role of the coach and the leader are very different. In many ways, the work of the coach frees up the leader to focus on the more critical elements of the leadership role.

The leader’s role is to be a source of passion, and a holder of the vision of the group. The vision may or may not come from the leader, but the leader has to be the person who ensures that the vision is clear, focused, and always visible to the group.

The leader is also called upon to be an “icon” of the standards to which the group aspires. When the leader lives up to standards that are needed and expected, others will find the energy to drive for those standards as well.

The coach’ role, at least in part, is to support the leader in achieving and maintaining the personal state and charisma needed. The

coach works with the leader to build presence, personal power, and confidence. Attention is also given to issues such as messaging, so that the leader is more able to engage and create alignment in the wider team. And, the coach provides feedback to the leader on the overall group dynamic, helping the leader get the necessary perspective to make what are often difficult choices. The ability of the coach to remain neutral in terms of content, and focus on the process, is extremely useful to the leader who (very naturally) has a stake in specific outcomes.

The coach also works with every individual on the team, playing a very complementary role to the leader. The leader is expected to, and needs to, work with the team to set goals and outcomes and ensure that the team’s efforts are focused and coordinated. Often, of course, to meet the goals individuals need to change and grow. Generally it’s better to have the coach support individuals on the changes needed to achieve the goals. This is because it’s too easy for people to see the leader as having a vested interest when advising on the changes that an individual needs to make. The coach has a unique advantage in that the advice is truly given for the benefit of the individual, and is perceived in that way. It may be exactly the same advice that the leader would give. The difference is that, when the leader gives the advice, there is often a perception of conflict of interest. This is generated simply by the role definition of the leader. The coach does not have this problem.

Because the coach understands the direction

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that the organization is going, the overall “culture” of the group, and the issues and problems faced by each individual, he (she) is able to advise each person on the best ways to enhance performance in the context in which they find themselves.

## The Benefits of a Common Coach

There are a number of benefits for having a single coach working with the entire group.

### Neutral Perspective:

One aspect that can't be overstated is that, when a coach works with the whole group, there is an understanding of the subtle dynamics that are playing out in the group. Any group has conflicts and differences of opinion which, if not addressed properly, can get out of hand. The coach is able to take a neutral, constructive position around these sorts of issues.

During the coaching process the coach is then able to work with each individual to help them gain the necessary perspective to resolve the differences that exist on the team. The coach does NOT take a position, but rather helps everybody expand their own awareness in order to be able to work with multiple perspectives.

Just as importantly, because the coach is seen to be neutral, in group situations input from the coach can help to bridge differences and move the group as a whole to have a broader, more integrated perspective about

the situation. This allows the wisdom to come out of the group, and overcomes the problem whereby one or two strong individuals hold the group hostage.

### Controlled Leakage:

Another benefit of having one coach for the whole team is what I call “controlled leakage”, necessitated by a fascinating dynamic that happens in most groups. You will find that, while people say they want confidentiality, often they really do want to communicate what they feel. They need confidential information to be released. The issue is whether or not this communication is going to be safe. For instance, there are times when a team member has feedback that they really do want to give to the boss. However, because of social taboos and the natural fear level created by differences in status they choose not to do so.

In these situations the coach plays a unique role – the controlled leakage of relevant information. On understanding the situation, the coach is able to provide feedback to the boss in terms of how he or she might change certain communication patterns. Or, it could be the other way. In the case of a team member, certain stylistic issues can be addressed in more general terms rather than being simply something that the company or the boss want to happen.

In the same way, issues raised with the boss can be positioned as being of general relevance, thereby protecting people's identities as necessary. In a slightly different

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approach, the coach can recommend that the senior person initiate a conversation about a certain topic with one of the team members. Safety is maintained because frequently the senior person is already thinking about the issue concerned, but feels that it is not appropriate to broach the subject. The coach provides input on how best to begin addressing the issue, using knowledge of all the different people and their positions on the issue.

## Layers of Trust:

Another benefit that comes from everybody in the team working with one coach is that trust is built up around the organization. The coach comes to be a trusted confidante in the group. When this is done well, people make use of the coach to work through their thinking on certain issues before going public. With the coach they can test ideas as passionately as they want, knowing that they will be able to refine those ideas without criticism.

Subsequently, the ideas can be presented more widely in the group, and are much more likely to be accepted because many of the bugs have already been ironed out.

## Ease of Management:

From a practical point of view for the people responsible for managing the process, having a single point of contact is also very useful. A coach who knows and understands all the personalities and the politics, but who is not beholden to any particular position, is able to

provide neutral advice on people management issues that can contribute to the overall health of the group.

## What about Chemistry?

We've discussed the issue of confidentiality, and concluded that controlled leakage is actually an important part of the process. The key is that everyone's safety is always kept in mind.

But, what about the chemistry issue? As with other elements of the coaching relationship, when you approach the situation on a team level and as an organizational intervention the chemistry question becomes much less important.

For one thing, it doesn't necessarily matter if one individual chooses not to engage. The engagement of other members of the team will always change the context, and this in itself can often be enough to move any recalcitrant participants. Some people learn from the changes in others, and some decide that they want to engage anyway. In some cases, when the boss and other key people change, the need for certain "difficult" people to be coached sometimes evaporates. That's when you know that the symptom was actually a consequence of organizational dynamics. As soon as the organizational dynamic changes, the symptom disappears.

Another aspect to consider is that, when you approach the situation as a team development intervention, group work gives everybody the opportunity to witness the coach acting

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neutrally and in the best interests of the entire group. Often this will remove the “chemistry” block, if there is one.

Finally, any coach with the necessary skills to work with a team should be able to interact effectively with a very wide range of people. One of the basic components of a coach’ toolbox is the ability to create rapport and understanding with most people. This means that, in terms of ability to relate to another person, a good coach would most often not be faced with “chemistry” issues. And, if “chemistry” became part of the discussion, both the coach and the team would be looking very closely at whether this was a genuine problem, or an attempt to avoid responsibility. Depending on the answer to that question, effective solutions would be found.

publicly test and evolve those mental models, adds even further value.

The end result is a group of people, individually powerful and collectively brilliant, who consistently communicate and act seamlessly. Together, they do the right things more often than not, and the rate of value creation – in all senses of the word – begins to accelerate. Stakeholders and shareholders alike have good reason to smile. As for the competition – be afraid!

## Promise of a Seamless Team

In conclusion, having a coach to work with a whole team, collectively and individually, can create significant value. The coach supports people to grow personally and professionally, and also has an active role in helping to create the context that will support that growth. The value of creating context while simultaneously working with individuals should not be underestimated.

Over time, using this approach, you build what I have come to call “gossamer ware” – the invisible threads of connectivity in a group that ensures everybody works for the same ends, and people increasingly start bouncing off each other to generate emerging value. Shared mental models, and the ability to

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## A CASE STUDY

In one situation where team coaching was used to very good effect, we started with what turned out to be a tense and somewhat dysfunctional situation. The group concerned was responsible for business throughout the Asia-Pacific. Revenues were flat, and no matter what people tried, the group was not able to get anywhere near the double-digit growth targets that were being imposed.

The situation had a number of characteristics associated with it. On the one hand, the boss had a rather directive style that erred on the side of micro-management. There were many historical conflicts between people in different parts of the region, and e-mail “wars” were not uncommon. And, different individuals in the group had different personal and leadership issues. One manager was prone to emotional outbursts, whereas another tended to avoid conflict at all costs. Yet another was the quintessential politician, and a fourth was basically viewed as “too nice”.

Clearly, every manager on the team had different needs for development. So, this was approached as a team coaching process.

Initially, I worked with the boss and one other manager who was labelled “problem child”. The coaching with the boss focused very much on the role he was playing in creating problems

in the team. For instance, in team meetings he would cut people off without hearing them out, and this led to a general unwillingness for people to contribute. Live observation of the boss in action, coupled with behavioural and “mental model” feedback, led to a gradual softening of the boss’ style. He began to become more participative, and the team responded by stepping up to the plate.

The “problem child” was actually a very intense, creative person who was generally misunderstood throughout the management team. The coaching with this person initially focused almost entirely on “acceptance”. The coach’ role was simply to understand and accept this person, and help him to get clear on his own strengths. At the same time, problems that he had which related directly to the boss’ style, were fed back (in general terms) to the boss. Also, the boss was encouraged to engage in a more constructive way with the “problem child”. Ultimately this led to a much stronger relationship between the two, which then led further to the “problem child” beginning to address fundamental issues with his own style and approach.

From there the coaching moved towards the group as a whole. A series of business meetings were held, focused on getting the entire team aligned around management protocols and

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the goals of the business. A number of outcomes were achieved. For the first time in many years, everybody knew what the goal was, and their role in getting there. Immediately many conflicts and misunderstandings simply evaporated.

Communication dynamics in the team that were contributing to problems were quickly highlighted. With input from the coach, the group agreed to a number of conflict resolution processes and began to use these tools as an integral part of their daily business. The energy released was then focused on building more business.

The coaching then looped around to several other individuals. In each case, individual work focused on helping each person overcome personal barriers and developing new skills for their leadership role. A tailored programme was developed for each person. Some people focused on how best to think strategically as leaders. Others focused on the problem of “defensiveness” and “posturing” in front of their peers. Yet others focused on the thorny problems of building excellence and succession in their own teams. All were exposed to information and tools that supported them to work much more effectively with their peers, thereby creating synergies throughout the group.

Within nine months the group had become a

seamless team that was able to talk and work together very effectively. Problems with execution that had existed in the group for a long time were resolved, and projects were completed. And, the double-digit growth goal was achieved and exceeded. ●