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Leaders as team coaches? Insights from an Australian study

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Publication Details

Milner, J. & McCarthy, G. (2014). Leaders as team coaches? Insights from an Australian study. Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management Annual Conference (pp. 1-14). Australia: Australian & New Zealand Academy of Management.

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Abstract

We will draw on recent findings from a study with 580 managers in Australia on team coaching from a managerial perspective. Managers who coach their teams are seen as part of the team instead of being on a superior level. By using coaching skills, a more collaborative, trusting environment is created in which teams feel empowered and engaged, and deliver results. These positive outcomes can have a positive impact on team members, the manager and the whole organisation. The study also revealed potential shortcomings of the coaching approach e.g. the difficulty of balancing coaching with other leadership styles. Future studies should focus on the team member perspective as well as comparing individual and team coaching approaches used by managers.

Keywords

team, study, leaders, coaches, insights, australian

Disciplines

Business

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Leaders as Team Coaches? Insights from an Australian study

Milner, J. and McCarthy, G

Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management Annual Conference, Sydney, December 2014.

Abstract: *We will draw on recent findings from a study with 580 managers in Australia on team coaching from a managerial perspective. Managers who coach their teams are seen as part of the team instead of being on a superior level. By using coaching skills, a more collaborative, trusting environment is created in which teams feel empowered and engaged, and deliver results. These positive outcomes can have a positive impact on team members, the manager and the whole organisation. The study also revealed potential shortcomings of the coaching approach e.g. the difficulty of balancing coaching with other leadership styles. Future studies should focus on the team member perspective as well as comparing individual and team coaching approaches used by managers.*

Coaching is used more and more in organisations, whether in the form of external coaches coming into organisations to work with a coachee (client) or internal employees within the organisation acting as coaches. In terms of internal coaching, there seems to be an increased demand for managers to coach their team members (Hagen, 2012; Tonhäuser, 2010). Despite these organisational expectations, we have little insight from a research perspective as to what it actually means to be a coaching manager and what outcomes can be achieved with a coaching approach (Hagen, 2012). While more research has begun to emerge about the role of manager as coach, there is as yet little research about the role of managers coaching their teams. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on how managers use coaching skills within a team context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The managerial team coaching role differs from that of the external coach in several respects. Managers may use coaching skills with employees, but also have to ‘manage’ the team. In contrast, an external or internal coach might act solely in a coaching capacity with employees and would not have a managerial role when coaching the team. The different allocation of power within the relationship also needs to be taken into consideration, e.g. a manager having influence over the promotion of team members (McCarthy & Milner, 2013). In the literature, it has been recommended that external

coaches should meet individuals beforehand (Britton, 2010). However, this would not apply directly to the coaching manager who has already built relationships with team members. The aspect of confidentiality is important for the group coach (Scamardo & Harnden, 2007), as a high level of trust is needed to ensure topics under discussion remain confidential. It may be difficult to explore certain topics collectively where such topics relate to individual team members. Regardless of the nature of the issues under discussion, it is important for each member of the team to be clear on the need for and extent of confidentiality in relation to matters discussed in both team and individual team member coaching sessions.

Group and Team Coaching

Coaches either work with individual coachees or groups of coachees. Group coaching refers to a wider classification where a coach and at least two coachees come together and individual members of the group are coached together, although they may not share goals or work together in any other context (Brown & Grant, 2010; Scamardo & Harnden, 2007). In team coaching, the “primary client is the whole team” (Hawkins, 2011, p. 54). For both modalities, it is helpful if the coach has insights into the dynamics and functioning of groups (Brown & Grant, 2010). We define ‘managerial team coaching’ or the ‘manager as team coach’ as managers using coaching skills with their teams in the workplace.

The purpose of this paper is not to compare team coaching, facilitation and other forms of group work, as others have already done this (Hawkins, 2011). In particular, a blurring of the roles of coach and facilitator has been identified in previous research (Brown & Grant, 2010; Clutterbuck, 2007).

Group Coaching Models

Table 1 presents four common group and team coaching models. For example, Brown & Grant (2010) put forward the GROUP model, (goal, reality, options, understand others, perform), which they based on the GROW model (goal, reality, options, way forward). The coach asks different questions in each phase to get everyone involved and to ensure a collaborative working style for the group. Ives and

Cox (2012) use the same GROUP acronym, with the GRO again standing for goal, reality and options, while the U in this model stands for ‘Unpick’ (clarifying the group goal and what needs to be done within and by the group) and the P stands for ‘Personalise’ (ensuring that group tasks allocated to individuals are appropriate).

In a different model, Scamardo and Harnden (2007) describe their Manager Group Model consisting of an initial meeting (introductions, overview, confidentiality, goal-setting) followed by further meetings where managers work on specific topics. To ensure rich discussions, participants reflect on difficulties and achievements in regard to the topic. Furthermore, the attainment or modifications in regard to the goals that managers have set for themselves are reviewed.

In Hawkins (2011) the Clear model Hawkins and Smith developed in 2006, comprising Contracting, Listening, Exploring, Action and Review, is prefaced by three initial steps: a preliminary contracting phase with the team gatekeeper, team leader and possibly team sponsors, an exploration of the team’s current way of working and its coaching needs, and a diagnosis about possible coaching objectives.

In sum, all the group coaching models listed above follow a similar process, clarifying goals, and then developing action plans. In order to apply any of these team coaching models, the skills identified as important in individual managerial coaching are needed, for example questioning, active listening and goal setting (McCarthy & Milner, 2013). Furthermore, Thornton (2010) stresses the need for team coaches to have a solid understanding of group dynamics.

Research gap

A growing number of studies of individual coaching have been proffered in the last two decades, which have provided valuable insights into the field of coaching. However, a research gap exists in regard to team and group coaching (Brown & Grant, 2010; Hackman & Wagemann, 2005; Hawkins, 2011). Hawkins (2011, p.47) describes team coaching as being “20 years behind” compared to individual coaching, both in regard to the practitioner as well as the research side. This research gap is

even more evident if we look at team coaching from a managerial coaching perspective. Whilst practical tips for group and team coaching can be found (Britton, 2010; Thornton, 2010) as yet, there is little research about managerial team coaching.

The contribution of this paper is to share the findings from a survey of coaching managers which revealed the extent of this practice in Australia today and highlighted some of the key features of this approach to team leadership. Our research question is: How do Australian managers use team coaching in their work environment?

METHOD

Our study focused on understanding more about how managers in Australia use coaching skills. Our online survey received responses from 580 participants. Whilst this is a low response rate of 6.6 %, the managers provided us with lengthy comments to our open-ended questions which gave us insights into the role of the (team) coaching manager. The survey contained closed and open-ended questions and used thematic analysis to analyse the free text responses. We did not specifically ask about team coaching. However participants described unprompted how they use coaching skills with teams and the strength of their language indicated the importance of this coaching modality for managers. We therefore decided to scan all 24 questions of our survey for descriptions of team coaching, using a qualitative approach to identify themes which as recommended later in this paper should be confirmed in future studies via a quantitative approach.

RESULTS

61% of the 580 managers in Australia in our study coached both individuals and teams. Whilst some managers only coached individuals (38.6 %), it was rare for anyone only to coach teams (0.4 %). Furthermore, 72% stated that one purpose of using coaching was for team development.

What is Managerial team coaching?

Participants distinguished using a coaching style with their team from other leadership styles, describing coaching as helping to create a collaborative approach.

“I do not believe a "dictatorial" or aloof management style will deliver the harmony that is necessary to harness the efficiency of a team.

“Coaching can be more encouraging, more focused on a skill or goals set together. Other styles may rely on charisma, ego or demand and is more manager centric than team or other centric.”

Due to the collaborative nature of team coaching, participants associated it with better team dynamics than more directive leadership styles.

“A coaching style has a lot more success in developing a collaborative, cohesive team as well as realising the full dynamics of a team.

No effective leadership style can exist without strong coaching skills.”

Others cautioned that coaching is only one part of leadership, indicating that managers need to have different approaches in their leadership toolbox.

“Leadership is broader than coaching. You can lead people you do not specifically coach. Coaching is a more personal "one on one" or "one on one team" exercise.”

How does Team Coaching work?

Similar skills for individual and team coaching were listed by participants such as active listening, questioning, goal setting and feedback. For example, instead of telling people what to do, the manager as team coach applies listening as one key element which can lead to groups being able to come up with their own answers.

“I invest my time in listening to, and coaching my team and they rapidly progress to problem solving and thinking in different ways.”

“It promotes a higher level of involvement with people rather than being task focussed. I listen much more when coaching and it assists my understanding of the issues of my group.”

The setting of goals or objectives for teams as well as feedback was also mentioned.

“Sets goals for both the individual and the team, reviews performance, provides constructive feedback and criticism, sets an example.”

“I also run team coaching sessions now and again to assist teams function better as a team and clarify their shared objectives and strategies.”

In regard to team coaching models, the GROW model (goals, reality, options, way forward) was specifically named by many participants. This indicates that managers are using their knowledge of one-on-one coaching situation and applying it to group situations. A more open process of sharing and discussing issues with the team and allowing members to express their thoughts was also mentioned.

“I recently used GROW and a ‘values’ model to assist my team in developing our 12 month action plan. ... Previously, the team would have looked to me for the answers and direction, but this way we had more buy in.

Whilst I knew in theory that coaching is effective, it was a revelation to me to discover how effective the investment in coaching as a manager could be. “

Impact of team coaching

A highly positive impact was reported by participants using a managerial team coaching approach, including, clearer outcomes, development, trust, engagement and empowerment as well as team cohesion were mentioned. The organisation also benefitted by getting better outcomes, people who aligned with the organisation’s values and a more engaged workforce. As the remarks for team coaching arose unprompted in our survey, it could mean that those managers who had positive experiences with team coaching were more likely to comment and therefore the overwhelmingly positive impacts of team coaching need to be evaluated with caution.

Better outcomes and high performing teams: One key benefit associated with a team coaching approach was that it could lead to high performing teams who then produce better outcomes.

“Some of the other benefits are high engagement, excellent outcomes, happy workers, low turnover and fantastic recruitment because everybody wants to come and work in a high-performing team.”

“From my experience managers that coach have more productive teams.”

“A talented, highly motivated, passionate and committed group of staff...with a strong reputation for delivery and quality.”

Development: Managers were able to bring out the best in people through applying a coaching approach with the team, resulting in personal and professional development for team members.

“The coaching role focuses on providing skills and resources to the individual or team to help them develop.”

“Taking time with individual team members as well as small teams to bring out the best of the individual and team.”

Empowerment and Engagement: Managers reported that their teams were more engaged and empowered when managers used a coaching approach.

“A manager coaching has more engagement from their team, better succession plans in place.”

“A coaching style facilitates teamwork, engagement and empowerment of staff.”

Empowerment through coaching can include allowing people to try out new approaches and learn from mistakes. The importance of clear boundaries was also acknowledged.

“Employees are empowered to make their own decisions; they learn and are more willing to make mistakes because they know they are supported; they understand the direction and have boundaries but room to move within those boundaries; increases sharing of knowledge and ideas across the team; as a manager I don't know everything.”

Being empowered is not only motivating for the team members themselves, but also the manager benefits from this. Several managers mentioned that coaching empowered the team to take ownership which in turn freed up time for the managers to focus on other tasks.

“Managers, who adopt effective coaching as part of their style, tend to have more empowered teams. Generally this means the manager spends more time working on the business rather than in the business.”

“The more the Team are capable of doing, the more time I have to look at other opportunities for the Company.”

Trust and co-operation: By applying a coaching approach, trust and a connection within the team as well as with the managers were created.

“Yes, much more inclusiveness and willingness by the team to engage in a conversation and express their thoughts and feelings.”

“Better team performance, increased trust within the team and between team and manager.”

In line with creating more trust within the team by applying a coaching approach, participants commented on building more cohesive teams who worked collaboratively with each other.

“Better for team building and increases motivation and retention.”

Preferred modus operandi for managers: Several managers described a coaching approach with their team as their preferred style. As mentioned earlier, by applying a coaching approach, managers empowered teams which could then become a time-saver for the manager. Others explained that they simply enjoyed using managerial coaching as a leadership style, as they could see teams develop and also people around them commented positively about the coaching approach.

“I have achieved great pleasure in seeing the development of both individuals and teams that I have coached and seen them progress to assured and professional employees.”

“I enjoy and get a lot of satisfaction from Coaching my Team for success and from the results that we produce.”

“A coaching style delivers an energy to the work group and as a result is my preferred style.”

Beneficial to the organisation – values, outcomes and culture: Whilst several benefits for the manager as well as for the team members were named, positive outcomes were also mentioned for the wider organisation, suggesting that team coaching can be beneficial even outside the boundaries of an existing team. For example, it was reported that a team coaching approach helped with creating a positive organisational culture.

“Team building across all staff - coaching rather than criticism has developed as an organisational culture at all levels - the organisation has increased resilience - innovation is expected - both wins and losses are shared.”

“Better for team building and for sustaining a sense of shared organisational values.”

“The organisation will benefit from a stronger team and also assists with succession planning.”

Perceived difficulties

Despite the many benefits associated with team coaching, difficulties were also described by the participants. In particular it was important for the coaching manager not to be perceived as having favourites within the team. Thus managers need to ensure a truly inclusive approach so that everyone is involved and nobody feels left out.

“Team dynamics - perception of favourites.”

“When someone in the team offers up an idea and/or solution which is ignored or shouted down by the manager coach as being a silly, stupid idea it will result in the individual staying quiet and resentful and isolated from the group.”

“Can be seen as do as I say mentality and can also be used as power play over others and in some instances lead to issues within the team. (...) Teacher’s pet syndrome, bully tactics on less confident individuals.”

Furthermore it was noted by some that it can take a long time for the outcomes of coaching to be realised. In this context, managers raised the issue of not receiving recognition for the work they put into a coaching approach.

“Coaching is invisible work and it can take a lot of years to bear fruit. You don’t necessarily get recognised by the organisation for coaching, but the organisation does benefit in the growth of the individual / team.”

As described earlier, some participants saw coaching as only one part of leadership. Thus it was stated that managers need a variety of approaches for different situations.

“Getting the balance right and modifying the style for each interaction, whether individual or team.”

Ensuring beforehand that new employees fit into a coaching conducive environment that is in line with the values of the team and organisation seems to reduce potential difficulties associated with team coaching.

“I think difficulties will only arise with coaching if for some reason the employee is not a good match to the environment of the team.”

The perceived challenges of team coaching raises the question of the need for specific training in team dynamics and team coaching approaches to prepare managers for these issues.

DISCUSSION

The push towards having more managers coaching their teams requires us to understand what this role actually means. Managers can either directly coach their whole team, for example when working on projects, or by using a coaching style in any team interactions. Most often, in our survey, a coaching style was used for individual team members as well as for the whole team. There were however some different interpretations of the nature of team coaching. Whilst many participants associated team coaching with being part of the team and using a collaborative leadership approach which allows team members to come up with their own answers, some participants in our study described coaching as giving advice.

It seems beneficial for managers to use coaching skills with their teams – for the team itself, for the manager as well as for the whole organisation. The participating managers listed several benefits and also reported that people around them commented on the positive outcomes that could be achieved via a coaching approach. For example, basic coaching skills such as active listening, questioning, feedback and goal setting can help managers to build high performing, empowered and motivated teams which deliver positive outcomes for the organisation. By empowering their team, ownership is shared (Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999; Heslin, 1999) which can be motivating for the team, but also frees up the time of the manager who can then focus on other important goals of the organisation.

Although using the same label 'coach', there are differences between external/internal coaches and managers who implement coaching skills with their team. Hence it needs to be emphasised that the manager as coach role can be an important part of leadership but is not the only part (Hackman & Wagemann, 2005). It may be appropriate to frame managerial coaching as a leadership style rather than the manager as a 'coach' per se.

Limitations and Recommendations for further research

Trends around team coaching emerged when we analysed the responses to our survey of managerial coaching. Future studies should shed more light on this emerging trend. Knowledge about team coaching models and also group phases and dynamics might be helpful to managers and should be covered in coaching training programs, particularly those aimed at managers. If organisations want to spread a coaching leadership style throughout their organisation, support for managers needs to be provided in the form of training but also ongoing support (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 2006) such as peer exchange opportunities. Furthermore ethical issues in regard to the distribution of power between the manager as coach and the employee as coachee cannot be overlooked. Specific ethical guidelines for managerial team coaching may be useful to ensure that trust and confidentiality are maintained.

CONCLUSION

The push towards having more managers coaching their teams requires a more in-depth understanding about the nature of this role. Whilst on a conceptual level, it seems that the application of coaching skills and models in this context may be one way to bring high performing teams to life, we need to know more about how this actually operates in practice and the benefits as well as difficulties associated with this approach. This study provides valuable insights into the experience of managers in using a managerial coaching style. These initial findings will be further tested in larger research projects to understand in more detail how coaching contributes to high performing teams.

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Table 1: Overview of Group Coaching Models

CLEAR Model (Hawkins, 2011; Hawkins & Smith, 2006)	GROUP Model (Brown & Grant, 2010)	GROUP Model (Ives & Cox, 2012)	Manager Group Model (Scamardo & Harnden, 2007)
C – Contracting 1			
I - Inquiry			
D – Discovery, Diagnosis and Design			
C – Contracting 2	G - Goal	G - Goal	initial meeting (introductions, overview, confidentiality, goal- setting)
L - Listening	R - Reality	R - Reality	Work on specific topics
E - Exploring	O - Options	O – Options	
A- Action	U - Understand others	U - Unpick	
R - Review	P - Perform	P - Personalise	