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Academic Paper

Team Coaching: A thematic analysis of methods used by external coaches in a work domain

Ross Hastings (University of East London)
William Pennington (University of East London)

Abstract

This paper aims to provide insight into the methods being used by external team coaches in the workplace, the need for which is highlighted by the sparsity of team coaching research in Executive Coaching literature. It is important that we better understand team coaching practice, in order to provide much needed validation and clarity. Thematic Analysis was used to identify methods used by six experienced external team coaches, practising in UK, USA and Australia. Results suggest that three philosophies determine the methods used, and methods are utilised for three main purposes. Significant support was found for previous research.

Keywords

Team Coaching, Coaching Psychology, external coaches, Executive Coaching, Thematic Analysis,

Article history

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Introduction

Executive coaching in the workplace has become significantly more prevalent over the last two decades, with a total of 53,300 coaches operating globally in 2016 versus 47,500 in 2012 and just 2,100 in 1999, turning coaching into a USD$2.356 billion, global business (ICF, 2016; ICF, 2012). There has also been significant research in the area, providing useful techniques, knowledge and frameworks (Grant, 2012; Brown & Grant, 2010; Hackman & Wageman, 2005). The majority of this has been focussed on individual coaching, with relatively little research on the coaching of teams in the workplace. Grant (2009) identified 515 articles on coaching published between 1937 and 2009, however, only 14 of these referred to the coaching of teams (Hauser, 2012). These numbers clearly demonstrate that team coaching has had very little focus when compared to individual coaching (Clutterbuck, 2007) and is subsequently about 20 years behind (Hawkins, 2017).

Interestingly, there has been no lack of focus on teams themselves. In fact, there is a significant body of research exploring the relational characteristics of high performing teams in the workplace (Hultgren, Palmer & O'Riordan, 2013). This makes the lack of team coaching scholarship all the more concerning, particularly if you consider the view that developing relational dynamics is not useful in its own right, without interventions aimed at improving performance of processes or objectives (Clutterbuck, 2018).

So, although research in the fields of individual coaching and high performing teams is strong, and while team coaching is emerging in practice, the literature is limited (Grant, 2009). Furthermore, much of the literature that does exist, on the subject of coaching of teams, is not comprehensive or research-based (Carr & Peters, 2013).

The purpose of this research was to build on the existing, but sparse, team coaching literature, by exploring what methods experienced team coaches are using in practice, with a particular focus on the work domain. The aim was to provide further clarity on the meaning and methods of team coaching. From an academic perspective, it is hoped that this will contribute to further understanding and validity of team coaching as a genre, a point of some debate (Clutterbuck, 2018), including how it differs from other team interventions. From a practical perspective, the intention is to aid team coaches during contracting, as well as providing transparency and consistency for potential buyers of team coaching.

The following review of literature explores the function and process of team coaching as well as role of the team coach, then factors specific to external coaches, and finally, relevant contributions from individual coaching literature, presenting key findings, limitations and opportunities for further exploration. Following that, the methodology and epistemological rationale are presented, then analysis of the data. Results are discussed, particularly in relation to how they support existing research and address the gaps and opportunities identified in the literature. Finally, a summary of the study, including limitations, and recommendations for future research, is presented.

Review of the literature

The function of Team Coaching

The first notable work in Team Coaching literature was by Hackman and Wageman (2005), who suggested that team coaches should take a developmental approach, focusing on task performance processes such as effort (motivational), skills & knowledge (educational) and strategy (consultative) rather than the interpersonal relationships of the team. When done without organisational constraints, and at the right time in the team's development, it was suggested that this would lead to significant improvements in the team's effectiveness. The study adopted Gersick's (1988) developmental framework, which challenged the forming, storming, norming, performing (Tuckman, 1965) and adjourning (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) model of team development, instead presenting a pattern of "punctuated equilibrium" (Gersick, 1988 p. 17). This highlighted the initial meeting of the team, the midway point of its project (transition) and the end of its time together as critical periods where it is open to influence. Hackman and Wageman suggest coaching for effort is particularly effective at the initial stage, strategy at the transition stage and skills and knowledge at the end point.

A limitation of Hackman and Wageman's theory is that it isn't grounded in empirical evidence. In fact, its aim was to propose a theory to serve as a platform for testing and adaptation. Therefore, research by Liu, Pirola-Merlo, Yang and Huang (2009) is notable, as it applied the theory to 137 Research & Development teams in Taiwan. While they reported that team coaching directly affected effort (motivational) and skills & knowledge (educational), and that both effort and strategy (consultative) had positive impacts on team effectiveness, they did not report on the impact of timing in terms of the teams' development. Furthermore, while the research provides some empirical evidence for Hackman and Wageman's theory, whether the findings can be generalised across other teams and cultures is debatable.

There are at least three prominent, contrasting perspectives to Hackman and Wageman's work. Thornton's (2016) position aligns somewhat, in suggesting that team coaching be applied to solve a defined problem. However, fundamentally, Thornton's approach is psychodynamic, prioritising both relational dynamics and the systemic context of the team. Clutterbuck (2018) also counters the view that interpersonal relations are unimportant for team performance, suggesting that increasing elements such as trust and respect can be impactful. Clutterbuck (2007) suggests that behavioural interventions are more effective when aimed at specific team processes or objectives. Key to Clutterbuck's theory is that team coaching is fundamentally a learning intervention, which improves team capability and performance, rather than focussing on short-term task performance. Hawkins (2017) also proposes that interpersonal dynamics and the learning of the team should be a focus and agrees that the intention of team coaching is collective team performance. Like Thornton, central to Hawkins' theory is a systemic focus for team coaching, whereby a consideration of relationships with all key team stakeholders and the wider business is key. Team performance, therefore, includes developing the leadership capabilities required to transform the wider business.

The role of the Team Coach

Reich, Ullmann, Van der loos and Leifer (2009) focussed on the roles of team coaches, as opposed to the functions of team coaching, using product development teams of mechanical engineering students. Through literature review and surveys, the study identified five key coaching roles: consultant, supervisor, instructor, facilitator and mentor. These findings are intriguing, particularly the apparent alignment with Hackman and Wageman's proposed educational and consultative approaches, however, there are at least two key limitations. Firstly, Reich describes the coach having "authority over the coachee" in the supervisor role and "strong influence and control over the coachee" in the instructor role (Reich et al, 2009 p. 26), which brings into question whether these are roles that could, or would, be adopted by an external coach. Secondly, the coaches who participated in the study were industry experts and former PhD students with no formal coaching experience, training or accreditation. It would therefore be useful to determine which of these roles are being used by experienced team coaches, in practice.

Team Coaching process

Using a dual case study of a government and a corporate leadership team, Carr and Peters (2013) developed a team coaching specific, six-step model: Agreement with team, Pre-coaching assessment, Team Offsite, Team Coaching Sessions, Re-assessment and Review, Research Interviews and Validation. The study found that use of the model, with two leadership teams, over the course of six to 11 months led to improvements in: collaboration and productivity, relationships, personal learning, communication and participation, impact beyond the team and peer coaching. The step made to identify a process model specific to team coaching is an intriguing one, in terms of clarifying the practice. Furthermore, to identify improvements in team performance as a result of its use certainly enriches the literature in this area. However the study is not without its limitations. The results were taken from self-reports of the participants so could be seen as subjective and limited by recall. Being conducted by the practitioner-researchers may have had an effect on these results also. Furthermore, it is a comparison of only two case studies, so generalisability is limited, a point raised by the researchers themselves.

External coaches

Interestingly, the studies and theories reviewed thus far have either focussed on internal leaders or managers as coaches or didn't explicitly refer to external coaches. This causes some concern, as internal coaches would often have some form of direct authority over the team (Hackman & Wageman, 2005). Furthermore, given that 83% of coaching is provided by external coaches (ICF, 2016), it stands to reason that there should be more focus on the role and function of the external coach in research moving forward.

Hauser's (2014, 2012) research specifically explored the experiences of external team coaches, resulting in a shape-shifting model which identifies four different coach behaviour categories: Advisory, Educational, Catalytic and Transitional. The research demonstrates initial support, from the practical experiences of external team coaches, for some of the theories discussed thus far: the four behaviours show some elements of the coach roles outlined by Reich et al. (2009); the educational behaviour aligns closely with Clutterbuck's position; coaches reported changing their role behaviours depending on the stage of the coaching assignment, supporting the findings of Hackman and Wageman (2005); key outcomes of team coordination, team learning, team cohesion and team transition were suggested, drawing parallels to some of the stages of the coaching process identified by Carr and Peters (2013) and also aligning with the interpersonal and educational intentions of Thornton, Hawkins and Clutterbuck. While Hauser (2014) addressed many limitations of the literature presented thus far, the result is another model that requires further empirical testing, a point highlighted by the researcher. The sample of US based coaches begs the question whether the findings are generalisable across a global population.

Contribution from individual coaching literature

So far, prominent theories of team coaching have been reviewed, but it may be useful to consider the contribution that individual coaching theory could make. As stressed by Hauser (2014), better alignment of research in these two separate coaching contexts would further scholarship and deepen our understanding of coaching and coaching psychology.

Whitmore (2009) suggests that the behavioural-based GROW model can be utilised in team coaching to improve task performance. Similarly, Hultgren et al (2013) proposed a model for Cognitive Behavioural Team Coaching (CBTC), to increase well-being and prevent stress, and suggest that the PRACTICE model (Palmer, 2007) provides a suitably solution-focussed approach that could be effective for use with teams. Both offer the opinion that well-grounded, individual coaching models may be of use in team coaching. Yet again, whether team coaches are using these in practice, and their subsequent effectiveness, is yet to be tested.

While there are a number of theories positioned, there is still an apparent need to (i) discover more about which of these theories (if any) external team coaches are using, or have used, in practice and (ii) explore the efficacy of these approaches for team coaching. This is a pressing issue, not only for research but also for practice. During contracting, it is of vital importance that the coach and organisation fully understand what the processes and purposes of team coaching are. Indeed, the coach is obliged, from an ethical perspective, to ensure that the meaning of team coaching is clear and understood (Farmer, 2015).

Methodology

Design

As the rationale behind further research on team coaching was the pressing need to better understand a practice that is becoming more prevalent in the business world, a pragmatic framework of knowledge acquisition was used, due to its effectiveness in deciding what steps to take when attempting to better understand real world phenomena (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Furthermore, it was hoped that this approach would allow the research to best represent the experiences of external team coaches delivering team coaching (Creswell, 2003).

In keeping with a pragmatic view of philosophical dualisms, the study utilised a qualitative descriptive method, using semi-structured interviews and Thematic Analysis. The primary rationale behind choosing Thematic Analysis was to have the theoretical freedom to allow for an accurate and rich account of data. Taking this approach allowed the experiences of the coaches to determine the data, without limitations or constrictions, maximising the value of their experiences and reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was of paramount importance in order for the findings to be as generalisable as possible, in terms of guidelines for use in a wider context (Babbie, 1990).

Participants

Participants were all English-speaking coaches, with a minimum of five years of experience as an external coach and between four and 35 years of experience, specifically coaching teams. Coaches were based in UK, USA and Australia.

Figure 1: Experience and location of participants

Participant	Location	Years coaching	Years coaching teams
1	US	35	35
2	UK	8	8
3	UK	16	6
4	US	5	4 (facilitating teams for 20 years)
5	UK	12	4
6	Australia	11	11

Participants were sourced through a combination of referrals and by directly contacting team coaches via email and LinkedIn. An initial shortlist of participants was created and invited to complete a short Survey Monkey survey to confirm location, experience and availability for interview. In keeping with Braun and Clarke's (2013) suggestion of a sample of six to 10 participants for a small Thematic Analysis project, and with the intention of keeping the sample size to a manageable level to allow for a thorough and in-depth analysis of the data in the time available, the sample was reduced to six for the purposes of the study. The final six were chosen to ensure both maximum years of experience and wide geographical representation, i.e. the most experienced coaches across three countries were selected.

Procedure

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. These were between 49 and 63 minutes in length and utilised open-ended questions to explore the following key areas of enquiry:

1. Coach's background, training and journey in coaching.
2. Methods, tools and theories they use when coaching teams.
3. Any fundamental differences between their approaches to team coaching and individual coaching.
4. Logistics and contracting related to their team coaching practice.

Due to the wide geographical distribution of participants, all interviews were conducted by Skype and audio recorded using Callnote. Participants were asked to agree to a specific time and date, to allow for a private and quiet location, such as a private office, in order to prevent any distractions or interruptions.

Data analysis

Thematic Analysis was chosen to allow coding and analyses to be driven by the experiences of the participants. Themes were identified through an inductive analysis of the data (Frith & Gleeson, 2004), meaning coding and analysis was data-driven and no attempt was made to fit the data to a pre-existing coding frame or researcher's analytic preconceptions. Through this method, the study identified, described and interpreted themes at a semantic level initially (Braun & Clarke, 2006), before analysing them for their significance, meanings and implications (Patton, 1990). In line with the pragmatic approach of the study, it was not deemed necessary to go beyond this, to a latent level, as the purpose of the study was to identify common themes for the purpose of informing coaching practice and future research, not to explore the underlying meaning.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method was utilised as it provided a guideline that lent itself to good Thematic Analysis, particularly as it allowed for a recursive rather than linear approach, as well as aligning with the chosen inductive method of analysing and coding the data.

Initially, all interview data was sent for transcription by a third party. As Thematic Analysis didn't require a specific system such as Jefferson or, indeed, as detailed a transcription as methods such as Conversational or Discourse Analysis, a full verbatim transcription of all verbal utterances was requested. In lieu of the familiarisation provided by transcribing the data (Riessman, 1993), all transcripts were checked twice against the original audio files for accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Notes made by the researcher during and after each interview, as well as during checking against the audio files, were added to the right column of the transcripts. Initial coding was then determined, identifying the interesting semantic content with the use of coloured highlighters. As the study was data-driven, this stage was approached with no specific questions to code around, instead the themes were determined by the data. Codes were then compiled in a separate Word document, before being analysed and grouped into categories which were reviewed and compared back to the original transcripts. During this process, an original 142 codes and 14 categories were adapted, and themes and sub-themes developed, by determining which codes made the most analytical sense to most concisely and accurately represent the data (Charmaz, 2006). Ultimately, data was organised in to three themes and ten sub-themes based on the prevalence across the six interviews. By considering the broad essence of these themes and sub-themes, all similarities and overlaps were considered, allowing them to be consolidated into the two themes, each with three sub-themes, that were deemed to most accurately represent the data. Finally, themes and sub-themes were named in a way that both described their essence and addressed the study's overarching research aim.

Results

There were three prominent themes, describing the philosophical rationale behind participants' approach to team coaching and the methods they used. Subsequently, there were three common purposes for which their methods were used.

Fig. 2 Summary of themes and sub-themes

Theme	Sub themes
Philosophical rationale for methods used	Pragmatic practice Eclectic artistry Systemic lens
Practical purpose for methods used	Creating the coaching space Catalysing team self-awareness and insight Building autonomy and accountability

Philosophical rationale for methods used

Pragmatic practice

All participants stressed that team coaching is a practical, pragmatic practice, dealing with complex, real-life situations. They were all, therefore, more focussed on an approach that allowed them to be adaptable to this complexity rather than be tied to a single methodology or theoretical framework. Participant 6 stated that “any models must support a fluid, pragmatic approach, not theoretical” and “For coaching to be most effective, you must include real-world issues”. Participant 4 suggested “There’s not a tight design to sessions, it’s really more emergent”, and Participant 1, on his practical use of tools “If… I got the opportunity to work with it and frame it in the right way….it can have a use”.

Eclectic artistry

This underpinning, pragmatic philosophy led to all participants reporting an eclectic, agnostic approach to theory when team coaching. Participant 4 indicated, “I’m……willing to…..bring together the mix of tools I think that will fit any…”, a view echoed by Participant 2 who suggested the most impactful team coaches are those who “have a very flexible approach” and “don’t stick rigorously to one particular methodology”.

Eclectic artistry precluded being bound by a fixed definition of team coaching for many of the participants, who indicated that they drew on elements of facilitation, as required, to suit the situation. Participant 4 summarised this as “I’m…swapping those hats on and off, you know, throughout”. Participant 2 went further, indicating “I probably wouldn’t draw a line at all” between team coaching and facilitation. In fact, all participants reported an element of teaching or education in their team coaching practice, Participant 3 indicated that “There’s a bit of….educational part for me, which I find quite useful”. Participant 1 described this dynamic a little differently, explaining his approach as consultant or coach; ”they may ask me a question and I say “Are you asking me as a consultant who has been through this or are you asking me as a coach?””

Systemic lens

Five of the six participants described an underlying, systemic or systems-based focus with team coaching. Participant 1 described:

> *coming out of Gestalt model, where we actually apply levels of systems, is what gives an advantage I think, because it’s a different set of eyes to understand what team dynamics are versus individual dynamics.*

Further, Participant 6 stressed the “relative complexity of team coaching” (versus 1:1) and stressed that “there may be systemic factors that must be addressed first if coaching is to be effective”. Participant 5 reinforced the need “to see the team as a system within itself, and…..as a system within other systems or the wider system it’s connected with”, adding that he aims to get a “sense of this whole thing…..how is it functioning, what are its characteristics……about the team, rather than the individuals in the team”. Participant 4 added:

> *you can’t coach….the team in isolation from the environment they’re in…if you’re doing effective team coaching, you’re helping a team not only get its internal act together, but they’re starting to impact their ecosystems, like…..a virtuous cycle….*

Participant 3 goes a step further, suggesting not only that coaching helps “the team see how it exists in a wider context, how it serves the purpose of the organisation….sometimes the stakeholders that it has”, but also stressing that, compared to 1:1 coaching, team coaching:

> *at the very, very core it's a fundamentally different thing…individual ideas, you don't want to be noticing that, you don't want to be paying attention to that…..the more you do get sucked in to individual ideas….the more I think then, as a team coach, all you are is part of the problem….and not part of the solution.*

Practical purpose for methods used

Participants reported use of a wide array of methods, tools and approaches when working with teams in the workplace. The methods were coded and arranged into three categories, or sub-themes, depending on their stated purpose.

Creating the coaching space

Methods used for this purpose centred around trust, openness and safety. Three of the coaches cited use of Lencioni's 5 Dysfunctions Model (Lencioni 2002), which positions absence of trust as the foundational dysfunction that side-tracks teams. Participant 3 challenged the notion that trust is vital "you've got models like Lencioni that state that trust is fundamental but I am not sure….I agree with that", rather, he positioned that "trust is…when you've got people working together, is about reliance on knowing where the other person's going to come from". This view partially aligns with the thoughts of Participant 4, who outlined four necessary conditions for trust:

> *they securely believe I hold them in positive regard and I'm motivated to act in their best interests……want to know I act in charity……..am I competent……and do I have the ability and power to do what I say I'm going to do.*

Regardless of their position on the importance of trust to an effective team, all participants agreed on the perception of a safe space being important, to spark conversation and have a productive team coaching session. Participant 3 described "opportunities to split them in to groups of three and create different conversations, and that can…..often build more trust, more safety amongst the team", Participant 4 suggests "the facilitation is more about providing structure so that we can create safety and get into some flow together, and then once we're in flow….the need for structure goes away", a position highlighted by Participant 1 "the greater the conflict, the more structure you have to apply to the situation". Participant 5 states, on being an effective team coach "an awful lot of it is about being able to hold a space of safety for people", before going on to describe the use of a constellation exercise early in the coaching engagement, so the team "can see and can feel their own system, and it settles them". Participant 2 indicated that this stage goes beyond safety, by "the coach being able to bring that openness and curiosity, trust and space between them, to have those sorts of conversations". His method to promote this is:

> *…the psycho-education bit. I think when people understand it's completely normal to feel that way about each other, and it's not them being vindictive, when they have that greater self-awareness, they tend to start to be more open.*

Catalysing team self-awareness and insight

Here, analysis clearly demonstrated the pragmatic, eclectic nature of team coaching, with a number of models and theories being drawn upon. All participants aligned in describing their methods as providing insight through data and assessment, educating and developing self-awareness, and challenging or pointing things out in the moment.

Participant 1 described using Wageman, Hackman and Lehman's (2005) Team Diagnostic Survey (TDS) "so I did the assessment on them using the Team Diagnostic process and….helped them break it down, about what was causing all of their problems". Similarly, Participant 2 described using a number of models, including the five dysfunctions of a team assessment as "as a conversation starter", Participant 6 used the same assessment, as well as TDS, clarifying that their use was “primarily as a discussion point, to create conversation” and Participant 5 described using “a Lencioni survey….to look at the five dysfunctions and see where they think they need to develop and what that would look like”. Participant 4 also uses TDS, but described himself as “sort of agnostic” in his use of instruments, stating “I think you can make them work and you can augment that with interview data, or other kinds of data, observational data even”, but also warns “without some diagnostic or assessment information like that, I think they don’t have a clear sense of where they’re standing and….where they’re going, or could be going, as a team”. While participant 3 agreed “there are tools around, you know, I’ve done different ones at different times”, he warns “that kind of feedback can….increase pathologisation in the team”.

While data and assessment tools were widely used by the participants, they formed just part of the methods used to catalyse insight and self-awareness. Participant 1 described his “intervention of the obvious”, which involves asking “this is what I’m seeing, is this normal?”. Participant 5 spoke about another constellation exercise, whereby the company name and vision were written on a piece of paper and placed on the floor and:

> *just ask them, invite them to find their place in relationship to that. The Chief Executive ran to the bit of paper and stamped himself on top of it…..and looked around to see his troops lined up behind him….They were all over the place and looking in all sorts of different directions, and you could see his face….*

Participant 2 describes psycho-education as being central to his approach:

> *when I share these concepts and maybe the odd cognitive bias….attribution error….these sorts of things……people often sit back and are, like, ah, now I understand why I find that person so frustrating, it’s not them, it’s just the way things are and, actually, if I learned to be a bit more tolerant of everyone we might work better together.*

Similarly, Participant 3 describes showing a team a video of the developing dialogue of a couple arguing:

> *Just to help them understand how, in their everyday engagement and dialogue, they are creating……meaning and understanding for each other, in a team……I will often talk about the fundamental attribution error, to encourage people.*

Building autonomy and accountability

Participant 6 suggested the “ultimate goal of team coaching is to become defunct”, with participant 4 going in to more detail, explaining:

> *early on, there’s a lot of orientation still towards you and the team leader, but as the process unfolds, it should be a transfer of power and authority, right? So it’s more distributed rather than localised in a formal or informal leader….if that transfer hasn’t happened….a fundamental shift hasn’t taken place and….once you’re gone, it’s going to fall apart….it hasn’t been internalised.*

Participant 5 explained that “I may be coaching the team, and coaching the leader of the team as well…..but without me becoming the leader of the thing”, he also described his dismay when a member of a team he once coached complimented him by saying they could no longer have certain conversations now he’s not there “Well, okay, actually, that’s not good”. Participant 2 describes autonomy more in the sense of the team holding themselves accountable “they might want to explore and to hold people to account for afterwards” and “they are more curious, and they are holding themselves and each other accountable”.

Participant 2 also explained autonomy in the form of the team coaching each other “But within those sessions it might well be that I have them peer coaching each other in smaller groups”, while participant 4 explained "I almost feel like the ideal scenario is where the team becomes self-coaching."

Discussion

This study set out to discover more about which existing theories are being used in practice, in order to provide more clarity and understanding of team coaching. The following section considers the core findings in relation to the literature reviewed, as well as a relevant study that has been published since data was collected, before reflecting on the significance and implications of the findings for academia and practice, limitations of the study and making recommendations for future research.

In reviewing which theories or tools are being used by team coaches in practice, it is important to highlight that participants stressed the need to take a theoretically and philosophically fluid and pragmatic approach, due to the relative complexity of coaching teams. As a result, coaches all reported an eclectic and agnostic approach, the key to which is being able to draw from and adapt a wide array of tools, theories and methods. Team coaches should be open to using whatever the emerging situation requires, in a real, live environment, rather than being tied to any one particular methodology. This finding lends weight to Thornton's (2016) suggestion that coaching teams requires a level of artistry when choosing an approach or tool, that relies on effective decision making in the moment, borne of extensive experience and finely-honed instincts. It also supports Hauser's (2014) shape-shifting framework, specifically that it is necessary for the team coach to adapt their approach and methodology in the moment. Furthermore, participant accounts were aligned with her suggestion that coaching work teams, versus coaching individuals, required a much broader base of skills, knowledge and experience. While a focus on emerging themes was described as the ideal, two participants reflected that it was reliant on a safe space being created. This supports Thornton's suggestion that more structure may be required if the team is less secure, a theme that was also reported by Lawrence and Whyte (2017), who found that coaches appear on a spectrum of planned to emerging.

Whilst participants stressed that a pragmatic and eclectic approach is key, they all described a consistent systemic focus, in line with the suggestions of Hawkins (2017) and Thornton (2016). This is a key reported differentiator between the methods used for team coaching and individual coaching and provides the lens which many of the coaches used when responding to emerging themes, supporting Thornton's view that understanding of a team's context is necessary to effectively coach them. This finding is consistent with conclusions made by Lawrence and Whyte (2017) in a sample of coaches from Australia and New Zealand, as well as Hauser (2014) in relation to external coaches in the US, who noted that a systemic lens is a key influencer on coaching behaviour and that the systemic context is part of what makes coaching a work team more complex than coaching individuals.

The themes of pragmatic purpose, eclectic artistry and systemic lens, suggest there should perhaps be no surprise that there was little evidence of the use of the individual coaching theories considered in the literature review. The exception to this was one participant who described utilising the GROW model (Whitmore, 2009), however, it was made clear that this was just as a high level process framework, as opposed to a structured coaching methodology. Participants all suggested that individual coaching models are, by design, not fit for purpose, as they don't account for the systemic context or complex nature of a team.

In line with the pragmatic focus reported by participants, analyses of the theories and tools used led to themes related to their practical purpose; creating the coaching space, catalysing team self-awareness and insight and building autonomy and accountability. It is worth noting that there was no indication from the participants that these were stages that team coaching progressed through over time, rather that theories or tools were used with the purpose of developing one of these areas, as and when required, thus providing no clear support for Hackman and Wageman's (2005) developmental focus. Moreover, participants reported a focus on the interpersonal relationships, relational dynamics and systemic context of the team, rather than an explicit focus on task performance, therefore supporting the views of Clutterbuck (2007), Thornton (2016) and Hawkins (2017). In fact, some coaches indicated that they would consider a focus on task performance or skills, more as training or facilitation, whereas coaching is more inherently related to the interpersonal and relational.

In creating the coaching space, some participants reported taking more of a facilitator role, suggesting that the pragmatic approach can also mean breaking away from a strict coaching paradigm, thus providing some evidence of Reich et al's (2009) facilitator role. There is also significant alignment between creating the coaching space methods and Hauser's (2014) 'advisor' stage of team coaching, particularly with regards to the need for structure in order for the team to settle. The findings did not fully align, however, as participants did not report being highly directive, instead accounts suggested a range of methods, some more directive, some less so. Nor did they necessarily suggest low dialogue, in fact some accounts suggested a high level of dialogue, or 'download', towards the coach or leader, which needed to be redirected in order for coaching to be effective. The results also provide support for Carr and Peters' (2013) indication that full participation is key throughout much of the coaching process. Furthermore, in order for the coaching space to be productive, participants suggested that team members had to feel safe, or at least be willing to be vulnerable, lending support to their suggestion that safety is central to the team coaching process.

All participants described using a number of methods to catalyse team self-awareness and insight, including challenging dynamics or behaviours in the moment or providing psycho-education. This contributes to the emerging educational theme in team coaching literature, included to a greater or lesser degree in the theories of Hackman and Wageman (2005), Clutterbuck (2007), Reich et al (2009), Hauser (2014) Hawkins (2017), and Lawrence and Whyte (2017). Five of the six participants in this study specifically reported using education to provide insight and catalyse change in relational dynamics or systemic awareness. The other element of this theme, reported by participants, was the use of team assessment or diagnostic tools. The two most common tools used were the Team Diagnostic Survey (TDS) (Wageman et al, 2005), and Lencioni's 5 Dysfunctions Model (Lencioni, 2002). The use of psychometrics provides further support for Carr and Peters' (2013) model, however, while their model suggests this is the first of six steps, the results of this study remain in line with pragmatic practice and suggest that these tools could be used at any point during the team coaching process, as necessary.

Participants described an ultimate focus on using methods that lead to building autonomy and accountability. This stage is marked by a reducing reliance on the coach, instead encouraging peer-coaching and self-coaching, providing support for Hauser's (2014) assimilator stage and the related, low directive, coach behaviours. Alignment between this theme and other theories is less explicit, some participants reported using methods to maintain momentum and motivation, supporting Hackman and Wageman's (2005) motivational function, some reported an ever reducing reliance on the team coach and any further engagements being driven by the coachees, supporting Reich et al's (2009) mentor role.

Implications for academia

An issue that has plagued team coaching is the lack of evidence-based literature and the subsequent difficulty in building validity (Clutterbuck, 2018) by clearly defining team coaching and how to differentiate it from other team interventions (Lawrence & Whyte, 2017). The findings of this study support Lawrence and Whyte's conclusion that team coaching distinguishes itself from team building through a focus on a performance outcome (Clutterbuck, 2008) and from team training, due to a systemic focus. Pragmatic practice and eclectic artistry sub-themes in this study provide clear support for Clutterbuck's suggestion that team coaching is different from team facilitation due to being less structured. Furthermore, the catalysing team self-awareness and insight sub-theme supports his suggestion that team coaching differs in its educational component. This sub-theme, along with building autonomy and accountability, lend weight to Hawkins' (2017) perspective, that team coaching enables teams to recognise and modify its own process, versus facilitation, which focuses on task. It is encouraging to find support for so many elements of the key previous theories, and in doing so, hopefully contributing to further validity of team coaching and distinction from other team interventions.

Implications for practice

Consistency in the research findings is an important step for external team coaching practice, as it gives us a platform from which to drive awareness and to legitimise practice. The more that external team coaches can point to consistent models and approaches during contracting, the more clarity can be created at that stage, especially as the emerging approach is one of an eclectic, agnostic and fluid nature therefore not easy to explain to a potential client and prone to misunderstanding without supporting research.

Limitations of the study

Findings were based on the self-reported data of a small sample of six coaches. While this certainly allows for limited generalisability of findings, by using Thematic Analysis to allow the experiences of the coaches to determine the data, without limitations or constrictions, the aim was for the findings to be as generalisable as possible in terms of guidelines for use in a wider context (Babbie, 1990). Support for elements of existing research is encouraging in terms of the generalisability of the broader body of team coaching scholarship.

It is acknowledged that researcher bias (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013) may have been a factor. If repeating similar research, triangulation (Patton, 1999) would be utilised in both the data collection and data analysis stage, in order to mitigate the risk of bias.

As highlighted in previous, similar studies, there is a notable concern about social desirability impacting the trustworthiness of the results, in that participants may have been motivated to provide inaccurate responses intended to make them look good in the eyes of the researcher (Bryman, 2008) or to align with their perception of the research hypothesis.

Suggestions for future research

The results of this study show some alignment with previous research, and future research would be well placed to build on that. There has perhaps been a lack of common direction in scholarship until very recently, and we would be well placed to build on the common, overlapping themes emerging from the growing body of research. Further Thematic Analysis, with a larger sample size, as well as a bigger research team to allow for triangulation of data collection and analyses, would allow us to consolidate consistent findings which would be more generalisable. This would, in turn, lend itself to a quantitative, or mixed methods, study to identify to what extent team coaches are practicing the discovered methods globally.

Once a more global and generalisable understanding of team coaching methods has been established, there is ample opportunity to measure its efficacy, something that is currently lacking in the literature. Part of the pragmatic approach that team coaches reported taking involved a firm focus on improved team performance, also a component of Clutterbuck's (2018) definition of team coaching. Whilst not explored in this study, it is reasonable to assume that these goals, or purposes, may be consistent across teams, given the many common goals and problems that organisations face. While the issue of measuring the effectiveness of 1:1 coaching has been plagued by not always having clear outcomes for coaching (Feldman & Lankau, 2005), and outcomes being incongruent with the type of coaching provided (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Ely, Nelson, Boyce & Zaccaro, 2008; De Meuse, Dai & Lee, 2009), it seems that, in team coaching, we may have a clear outcome and, potentially, a common, fluid and pragmatic coaching methodology to adapt to whatever that is. We are, therefore, in a fantastic position to be able to measure the effectiveness of team coaching by establishing outcome measures pre and post coaching.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that external team coaches apply a pragmatic practice, eclectic artistry and a systemic lens to their methodology when coaching teams in a work domain. Methods are deployed for three main purposes: creating the coaching space, catalysing team self-awareness and insight and building autonomy and accountability. Methods are used in a fluid manner and can be used across each purpose depending on the emergent situation.

The alignment of the results of this study with elements of much of the previous research signals further progress for the field of team coaching. The potential for clarity and validation of team coaching is another step closer. Implications of this for both academia and practice are positive as we get closer to being able to clearly differentiate from other team interventions, providing a solid platform for further research and a clearer understanding for both team coaches and organisations.

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About the authors

Ross Hastings: through Coaching Psychology and Positive Psychology, Ross strives to explore what leads people and groups to perform optimally. This quest has spanned three continents, working in business, sport and education. He is a Research Supervisor at University of East London and Co-Founding Director of NeLo, a consultancy in Australia.