

It All Begins with the Dancing!

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From the coach's perspective, team coaching begins with the 'dancing'—that capacity to be totally in the now, not knowing ahead of time what will be needed to support the team in moving to the next level, yet trusting the process enough to know that you and the team will succeed.

Teams hire a coach in hopes of improving operational efficiency and obtaining results. Generally there is no discussion of the maturational journey of the team members that will be needed to support these results, should they be achieved. However, in my experience, truly sustainable change does not occur without a collective *and* individual developmental process of self-discovery and learning. Sustainable team transformation requires growth in the form of an 'inside out' process that enables connection between current and future states, both externally *and* internally. When this internal process is ignored because of our outdated mental models and limiting beliefs, change efforts often fail to reach and sustain their full potential.

Parker Palmer, founder of the Center of Courage and Renewal (www.couragerenewal.org) tells us that leaders in our society tend to ignore what is going on inside themselves. They rise to power by operating very competently and effectively in the external world, sometimes at the cost of internal awareness. This happens for coaches, too. Under pressure to work with a team to produce results, we sometimes become hypnotized by the promise of the external and the tangible, disconnecting from the internal compass that brought us to coaching in the first place. When this happens we collude with the pre-existing paradigms we had hoped to leave behind.

19th Century Psychologist Alfred Adler suggested that work is primarily about the common good and meaning in life. How does the prevalent idea that work is instead mostly about productivity affect your team coaching? What impact does this productivity metaphor have on your thinking about raising a team's performance capacity? How does it impact your overall approach to coaching, particularly in the case of organizational teams?

Team coaching is an emergent process that lives in the realm of the unexpected. Formulaic approaches have limited value, partially due to a team's complex interpersonal dynamics and also because individuals need to enhance a variety of capacities in order to be able to create what they want. This adaptive process takes time.

A team is a 'Living System'—meaning that it is self-organizing, learns, evolves and adapts to a specific context. By respecting the team's unique characteristics and pace, a coach supports team members in creating their own self-reflective and self-regulated learning environment. Within this environment, team members can continually deepen their own learning and can forward their own actions. In other words, over time these teams become what Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline*, 1990) called 'Learning Organizations'. Learning organizations are capable of self-directed change.

In 1994, I found myself coaching a general management team for the first time. Ten highly independent company directors were suddenly required to team up to run the company. Knowing they needed help with the critical team issues of integration and collaboration, they hired me to be their coach.

At that time, I knew very little about being a coach but I did know a lot about organizational development, from a psychological as well as a structural perspective. Empowerment was the organizational 'buzz' word of the day. Yet command and control was the reality.

From the beginning I trusted my intuition. It was not easy--my inner critic had a lot to say! But I gave no promises on deliverables, explaining that it was not really possible to determine at the onset of a coaching process exactly what the outcome would be (and also that it really wasn't all up to me). I offered no tightly orchestrated agenda (although I prepared a general outline). I gave no rigid timelines to dictate how the process would be managed. I didn't tell them what to do. Instead, I asked lots of questions and organized them into conversations about specific topics. As I was coaching a Leadership Team, I called these conversations 'Leadership Dialogues', using them as the stimulus for deep thinking and learning.

When I started my own coach training in 1998, I learned that what I had intuited as a method closely aligned with the process of co-active coaching. I also learned much more which I then applied to the team coaching work I had initiated.

I discovered that the theories of team development that were prevalent at that time didn't appear to hold true for teams that were coached within this emergent paradigm. Their learning process appeared to be continuous, rather than in a series of discrete stages, and once started, it continued organically.

The premise that for a team to be effective, the individual must be subsumed by the collective--the notion that "there is no 'I' in 'team'"--also never rang true to me. In my experience, the individual 'I' enriches the experience of the collective. I was reminded of this recently when at the completion of a two day team coaching team experience, one physician wept with gratitude. His emotion provided a catalyst for the whole team to connect with a shared sense of isolation that had previously been repressed.

At the beginning of my own journey I found myself asking these kinds of questions: How do I coach team members to get off 'automatic pilot'--that insidious robotic trance that overtakes so many after a few years in the corporate world? What would enable them to begin thinking more critically and strategically? How can team members combine their strengths to achieve what they want?

Over time and with my own coach training and experience, my focus shifted to include: Who do I need to be as a coach to enable this team to deliver on their mandate and achieve the desired results? By then I had realized that as a coach, my presence had a profound and far reaching impact on the team's behavior and performance capacity. If I held open a huge and magnificent space for discovery and learning, who I was *being* could also support the team's movement forward. I also saw that desired outcomes did *naturally emerge* from the team's evolutionary process of self-discovery and learning. It was clearly evident to me that the International Coach Federation's philosophy for one-on-one coaching--that is, to follow the clients' lead and ask powerful questions so that clients find their own answers--worked beautifully when the client was a team.

Research has shown us that we have failed miserably as a society when it comes to developing collaborative, empowering and inspiring cultures within which people work. As team coaches, we need to step boldly forth--let go of our fear and old choreography and choose not to compromise, but instead, to firmly anchor team coaching within the coaching paradigm. It is time for team coaches to practice what we know in our hearts to be true--that team coaching is one important way of making the positive change we want to see in the world a reality. It all begins with the dancing!