

INSIGHT:
Team coaching, not team building



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Team building has been a lucrative product for training companies since the late 1980's. Product managers know that as a product moves through its lifecycle maximising profit depends on adjusting the marketing mix, so does that mean that 'team coaching', a term that is in increasing use, is merely team building in new clothes?

This article considers team coaching through its use by a team responsible for high cost engineering and plant investment decisions..

Heavy industries like oil and gas, or nuclear, depend on the quality of their long term investment decisions, decisions that over a lifespan will encounter controllable and uncontrollable challenges.

Those challenges can range from political or technological changes to the quality and speed of implementation of the decision.

On such high cost decisions unpredicted changes not only increase costs but also schedule, delaying return on investment.

The example through which we contrast team coaching with team building is with a senior Research and Development (R&D) team tasked with the greatest challenge they had ever faced.

The goal they were given by the Executive was to reduce the time and cost of heavy plant investment decisions: the strategy was to be through merging and engaging the organisation's engineering community in order to develop a different mindset and approach to project planning and implementation.

Team building or team coaching?

At the commencement of large and challenging projects many teams use team building to establish clarity and strength by bolstering team fundamentals, such as good communication and positive team climate.

Team building has been generally associated with multi day programmes that use activities, either indoors or outdoors, to generate a shared experience and build trust and openness.

The process enables a team to develop how they relate to and function with each other.

Such programmes can be powerful in opening new perspectives and understandings between team members that can then transfer to the workplace in the form of strengthened collective identity and clearer communication.

They generally focus on behaviour. Behaviour is what we see and experience, it is salient, and team building events by their nature push people's comfort zones and can result in behaviour and interactions becoming the dominate topic and subsequent focus of the event.

This is undeniably useful, but is it also an opportunity lost?

Team coaching shares properties with team building. For example relationships are just as important, but they are one ingredient in the mix rather than the mix itself. Some other differences are:

- **Time.** Team building is typically a one-off, multi-day event, say at project launch, which requires considerable investment. Team coaching has reduced investment but clearer payback as it can be short in time scale, often one day, and conducted on an on-going basis.
- **Style.** Team building is often based on reviewable activities, team coaching is based on key areas of focus and the pertinent questions arising from them.
- **Focus.** Perhaps the key area. As highlighted above team building is drawn to developing the quality of relationships within the team, but Michael West's (2012) extensive research into teams demonstrates that successful teams monitor two key areas, social effectiveness and also task, because they are both recognised as integral to success.

Research by West (2012), Hawkin (2011) and Manktelow (2009) demonstrates that effective teams are reflexive.

Reflexivity is the on-going belief and practice that nothing remains static and that anticipation and adaption are vital in achieving the primary goal task achievement.

Reflexivity is the willingness to scan, test, review and adapt in order to attain the primary deliverable.

The team's challenge

The goal our R&D team in question was given was to reduce the time and cost of heavy plant investment decisions.

Culturally decision-making had been driven by a predominantly engineering mindset, a mindset with good intentions but which in practice over-specified requirements to reassure differing engineering stakeholders of robustness under extreme conditions.

In complex systems communication flows elongate, decisions became protracted, technology changes, elements needed re-specifying, costs increase, return on investment is delayed and the cycle begins again.

In practical terms, their task was to work as a leadership team to integrate Research and Development with Engineering so that technical and scientific knowledge and the methodology they used could be used to produce faster but still robust specification decisions.

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Team coaching - where to focus?

Hawkins (2011) believes leadership teams must pay attention to, and maintain, an on-going dialogue about four broad areas in order to be effective.

Internal to the team: within the team's control

TASK-RELATED

- Their purpose
- Their objectives
- Their plan
- Their processes: decision-making, communication etc.

External to the team: outside the team's control

TASK-RELATED

- The project commissioners
- The commissioners' brief
- The focus/purpose of the commission
- Contracting the commission
 - goals, timescales
 - resources, budget
 - boundaries i.e. decision making rules, authority, responsibility, support etc.

Internal to the team: within the team's control

BEHAVIOURAL/PROCESS-RELATED

- Their internal dynamics
- Their ability to co-create conditions for performance
- Their culture
- Their interpersonal and team dynamics
- Their codes of conduct, group process

External to the team: within/outside the team's control

BEHAVIOURAL/PROCESS-RELATED

Relationship with other stakeholders their project may impact upon:

- Other functions, departments
- Other regions
- Other managers, above, to the side, below
- Customers
- Systems owners

As covered earlier team building events are often drawn to the bottom left box, which can be useful and cathartic but may not explicitly address the other areas. Hawkin's (2011) experience, like West's (2011), is that effective teams continually maintain ongoing monitoring, dialogue and action in relation to every box to ensure they are focusing efforts on what is required, and what and who is needed to bring the goal to fruition.

Effective teams are reflexive teams.

The 'how'

Team Coaching's approach is to view the situation systemically. The team cannot be separated from the surrounding system and team coaching aims to help the team generate insight into who, where and how the surrounding system needs to be influenced, and adapting themselves accordingly to ensure task delivery.

A simple framework for systemically generating insight can be:

Purpose and Focus

- The measure of success. Effective teams understand the need to maintain focus on task achievement

Team Leadership

- In order to maintain momentum what style of leadership does the team need and how should that be dispersed throughout the team

Process and Interaction

- In order to be effective (rather than efficient) how does the team coordinate effort

Team Influence

- In order to be successful who and what does the team needs to influence in the external environment

People

- The team's social dimension, robust social health, enables effective support and resilience

In terms of reflexivity, both task and social, the delivery team scored highly because team coaching (as apposed to team building) was considered integral to their formula for success, and at the start of a new challenge it was natural to turn to team coaching.

By doing so the team collectively identified and understood a number of issues that affected task delivery. An example of some of the issues were:

- The overall goal of reducing the time and cost of heavy plant investment decisions made sense as the need to do so was apparent to all team members. However the strategy and expected timescale was unclear (Purpose and Focus).

A key action agreed upon was the use of a two fold strategy:

- **One:** ensure that an on-going relationship and dialogue was developed with the Executive in order to test and retest their understanding as the initiative progressed (Purpose and Focus/Team Leadership/ Team Influence/Process and Interaction)
- **Two:** adopt a generative, rather than imposed, strategy for merging with and developing the Engineering functions. Doing so would take time but in the longer term would engage people (Purpose and Focus/Team Leadership/Team Influence/Process and Interaction)

- The challenge was unlike anything the organisation had ever undertaken before and represented new ground for an established culture. That uncertainty would in all probability manifest as resistance (Purpose and Focus)
 - Agreed upon was that the change was more profound than developing new skills and resistance was natural, however the team held lower resource power and needed to remain resilient over the long term by using its expert power to best effect (Team Influence/Purpose and Focus).
- The scope of the challenge meant the team would often need to work independently (Team leadership/Process and interaction)
 - Agreed upon was that each team member's resilience was crucial. From past challenges the team acknowledged that high social health of the team had been a vital component in maintaining resilience, and agreement was reached that on-going team coaching and on-going informal 'health' checks would be vital in maintaining not only social health but, critically, task effectiveness (People/Team influence/ Purpose and focus/Process and interaction).
- A key concern related to identity. The delivery team was small and had a lesser profile in the organisation. Because of the need to work independently and influence as wide as possible the team was concerned their identity could easily be subsumed into the Engineering function and their capacity to influence collectively lost (team influence/purpose and focus).
 - Agreed was the importance of maintaining visible support by on-going communication from the Executive in order to reinforce their legitimate as well as expert power. Also agreed was need to ensure their own communications were coordinated and consistent with the core message of the time (Team influence/people/ team leadership/process and interaction).

As they embarked on a challenge that would take time and much energy the team thought they were well prepared in terms of the collective commitment to the challenge and their commitment to ensuring they were creating the conditions to enable one another's success.

Summary

Team building and team coaching may share similar properties but team coaching endeavours to build a comprehensive appreciation of the system a team must work within, and the actions a team needs to take, both within itself and with the outside world, to ensure task success.

References:

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Manktelow, J. Brodebek, F (2009). *Team tools*. Mindtools.com



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