

A Recipe for Transformation Within Team Coaching

Over the last 35 years coaching and consulting, I've coached individuals, built teams, and designed and delivered hundreds of workshops. My primary focus has been on working with leaders as both a coach and an organization development consultant. My work as a coach of team will be the focus of this article.

To begin, I want to admit to having been a workshop junkie over the years. I've loved participating in personal growth workshops and even more, creating and leading them. I love the insights that come from participants as well as being an agent of people's transformation. Over time, however, I've grown to recognize the limitations of workshops. Often it is hard to sustain the learning without sufficient support and sometimes the learning fades rather than strengthen.

In contrast to my past devotion to training, I now believe that in the realm of leadership, training rarely works very well as a standalone approach to leadership development. The concept of training is based on the assumption that there is a body of knowledge that needs to be imparted to a person in order for them to become a better leader. But leadership at its best is not taught. It is discovered. Great leadership cannot be learned by following five easy steps or adopting three simple processes. Instead it is earned through an on-going examination of oneself, and by fully embodying one's authentic ability to inspire others. To achieve this aim, I have developed a process for group or team coaching I refer to as "cohort coaching".

In cohort coaching, I work with a group of people or a team, and in this process, I both teach and coach. In addition, participants also coach each other. I often meet with the team once a month for about 5 hours, during which time participants are introduced to a universal set of principles of high-performance leadership which they learn to embody (using their unique expression) over time.

These Principles include:

- Being guided by an inner compass
- Looking at the organization as a system
- Gaining alignment with teams, strategically and tactically
- Developing trust
- Synergy and collaboration
- Leadership as an expression of integrity
- Courage and risk-taking

The group meets either face to face or on Zoom conference. Sessions revolve primarily around "cases" or situations that participants bring to the meeting, enabling everyone to explore ways of strengthening their leadership effectiveness in "real-time" situations. Common themes are explored, and powerful principles of leadership are offered. Through deep exploration, inquiry, and dialogue, insights for leading naturally unfold. Together, we create a confidential, emotionally safe environment within which to develop participants' leadership capability. In addition

to the monthly meetings, I meet with individual participants at least once a month between sessions to deepen their experience and amplify their own individual lessons and discoveries.

This combination of a learning environment, participants coaching each other, and my coaching them as individuals between sessions, has a number of advantages over one on one coaching. The biggest advantage is that I get to see the people I coach in a real setting of sorts. I see how they interact and how they coach others. Since coaching is a crucial part of being a good leader, by seeing them in action, I learn a whole lot about their paradigms for leader, which I can then incorporate into my 1:1 work with each individual. As coaches, we often rely on a clients' self-reporting which is naturally filled with biases and blindspots. By seeing them in action, I get a better sense of who they are and how they operate.

Another advantage of this form of group coaching is that it usually goes on for at least a year, sometimes much longer. As a result, clients are steeped in the learning process. It keeps it front and center for them. In contrast to workshops which tend to be congested and short, cohort coaching moves slower and takes longer – which is ideal for learning that endures.

When I do team coaching (coaching with an intact team as opposed to a collection of individuals), I teach principles of effective teamwork and then help the team integrate these principles real time. In these leadership teams, the leaders get better both as leaders and as teammates. They also learn how to develop the culture of their organization together.

During these monthly sessions, people bringing specific challenges they're facing at work and they get coaching from others in the group (not advice but true coaching). The experience of coaching one another becomes a laboratory of sorts, where I am often calling "time-out" and inviting us to look at the dynamics of what is going on here and now in the cohort coaching session. I might say something like, "I notice Sally tightening up in response to what you just said, Jake. Did you notice it?" Or, "I'm wondering about the dynamic I just saw unfold. What I saw was...." We then explore any of a number of things: What happened, how did it happen, what could have been done differently, etc.

Over the years, as I've continued to develop my own recipe for cohort coaching, I've grown to love the process and more importantly, the outcome. I believe that participants end up with substantial "ahas", as well as the ability to couple these insights with concerted experimentation and action. Over time, the process becomes a powerful cauldron for learning.

One of the greatest aspects of the process is participants becoming accountable to each other. In coaching individuals, they're only accountable to themselves, and to a lesser extent, to me. The tensile strength of their agreements with themselves to do X, Y, or Z is therefore not nearly as strong as when they make an agreement to do something in front of the cohort. The mutual expectations and reinforcement accelerate the process mightily.

I continue to do one on one coaching, and will happily take on more clients, but I prefer cohort coaching in many cases because I get to provide one on one and work with the group at the same time. The combination requires more of me, but it also allows me to have an even greater impact. And of course, that is the ultimate aim.