

Understanding Team Development Practices

Adapted from the forthcoming book *Transforming Team Performance*

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After reading the results of the Finance division's portion of the company's annual employee survey, Renata – CFO of the organization and head of this division – knows she needs to call in an external professional to work with her Senior Leadership Team. For the second year in a row, the survey results show low employee engagement and morale. Ratings of the Senior Leadership Team are even lower than the prior year. While Renata knows that the team is struggling and needs help to transform its performance, she's not at all clear on what type of help they need. Should they engage in team building? Facilitation? Training? Or some other type of team-focused work? Without clarity on these options and what they can deliver, she's unsure whether real transformation is even possible.

Many clients I encounter who have challenges with their teams find themselves in a similar predicament. One of the first steps in most of my team engagements is highlighting the boundaries between various possible ways of working with teams. In particular, I often need to clarify the distinctions between team building, team facilitation, team consulting, team training, and team coaching. Each of these professional practices has value, and each is appropriate in certain circumstances. What's important is being clear at any given moment about

what it is that you're doing and what outcome you can reasonably expect to accomplish with that approach.

The outcome that Renata is looking for – transforming team performance – requires that the team does more than acquire useful tools, learn new ideas or skills, or achieve specific short-term results. True transformation means developing and maintaining fundamentally new patterns of behavior and ways of working that produce sustainable long-

term improvements in team cohesion, effectiveness, and performance – leading to specific, measurable results of clear value to the team and the organization.

I will argue that when transformation is the goal, an integrated approach to team development that incorporates team coaching offers unmatched potential to guide the team where

it needs to go. Team coaching is not sufficient on its own; in fact, I've never conducted an engagement where all I did was coach the team. However, as a core methodology – supported by other interventions that provide the basic tools, skills, and methods necessary for teamwork – it constitutes the “killer app”^{*} driving the team's success.

So what exactly is team coaching, and what sets it apart? My favorite definition was developed by a participant in a recent team coaching workshop: “Real work, real time, real results.” Here's what that means:

**Real work,
real time,
real results**

^{*} In a technological context, a “killer application” or “killer app” is a program that makes the technology in which it's embedded (such as a particular software platform or gaming system) much more valuable, to the point where it's a decisive factor in consumers' buying decisions. Likewise, I will argue that team coaching constitutes the core value of a transformative team engagement, and can be considered an indispensable component for any team seeking sustainable, long-term results.

- **Real work.** Team coaching takes place, for the most part, in the context of real meetings and work sessions, rather than in specially scheduled sessions focused on simulations, games, or exercises.
- **Real time.** The coach jumps in with live, real-time interventions. These interventions (called “moves,” as in chess moves) challenge the team and individual team members to notice how they’re operating right at that moment, as well as how these patterns of interaction are affecting their performance. In response, the team makes specific adjustments – again, in real time – to either build on their strengths or improve on areas of weakness.
- **Real results.** The adjustments the team makes are motivated by and directed toward achieving concrete results of importance to the team and the organization. Any process changes adopted by the team (e.g., decreasing interruptions, improving participatory decision making, or engaging in difficult conversations) are valued for their contribution to the team’s cohesiveness and effectiveness – and, ultimately, performance and results – rather than being pursued as ends in themselves.

A final defining feature of team coaching is the role of the coach, which is deliberately lower in profile than that of a consultant or facilitator. All meetings and work sessions in which team coaching occurs are fully owned by the team leader and members, not by the coach. The

coach acts as a guide, supporting the leader in leadership and the members in membership. When the team achieves transformation, it’s their victory, and they’re fully empowered to move forward on their own.

Other methodologies for working with teams share various features in common with team coaching. However, as I’ll describe, they all differ in at least one or two crucial ways. Keep in mind that throughout these descriptions, what I’m addressing is the “pure” form of each discipline. In practice, most team engagements include a blend of at least two different approaches. At the end of this article, I’ll describe how a combination of professional practices could be used to help Renata and her Senior Leadership Team.

TEAM FACILITATION. Let’s start by considering team facilitation. As the term suggests, facilitation helps to make a meeting or other team interaction run more smoothly. The facilitator is accountable for guiding the team through a specified method, process, or tool. This can make a big difference in a team’s ability to get work done, make decisions, resolve conflicts, or achieve other results that they’ve had difficulty attaining on their own. The team depends on the facilitator to take them through the necessary steps to achieve their intended outcomes.

Much of the work that I’ve seen described as team coaching is actually a form of facilitation. Like team coaching, facilitation focuses on real work, in real time, and leads to real-time adjustments in team members’ behaviors and ways of working. However, unlike a team coach, the facilitator takes up a leadership role,



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providing active direction and guidance. Team members may work together successfully within the structured approach the facilitator provides, but they don't always get practice creating and maintaining such approaches themselves. And they often have limited opportunity to fail – to get caught up in the habitual, unconstructive patterns of behavior and ways of working that get them into trouble when they're on their own. As a result, they miss out on a chance to confront those patterns and transform them to achieve sustainable, long-term change. Until they develop the skills to move forward on their own, they remain reliant upon external facilitation.

Facilitation can be very useful in achieving short-term results and modeling effective meeting management. Practitioners of team coaching should be skilled in this way of working, and should be prepared to shift into “facilitator mode” whenever the need arises. The key is to be clear about when and why this practice is appropriate, and to not expect transformative results from a facilitated process.

TEAM TRAINING. Another useful approach to working with teams is training. Team members learn and practice skills through demonstrations, exercises, and simulations. While they may bring in real work issues to practice with, the primary focus is on developing new skills, rather than achieving results. After they develop a skill in the training context, they then work to apply it in their real work conditions.

As with facilitation, training requires the practitioner

to take up a leadership role. The trainer acts as the expert – imparting knowledge to the participants, leading them through a learning curriculum, and giving constructive feedback on their performance.

I frequently incorporate training into team engagements, but only in small doses, and only when I need to introduce a specific tool for the team to focus on. In each training session, I present just one directly relevant tool that can be put into practice immediately. Often, teams find it surprisingly challenging to use even one new tool in an effective, consistent way. It takes follow-up team coaching to solidify the newly learned behaviors.

TEAM BUILDING. There are a variety of different approaches to “building” stronger, more cohesive teams. (In fact, team coaching can be considered one of these.) The type of team building I'm referring to here is focused on strengthening team spirit and cohesion and deepening personal connections and trust. The stereotypical scenario is a team going off-site to a workshop filled with exercises, simulations, and games that are indirectly related to actual work.

I hope it's obvious that such methods differ substantially from the team coaching focus on real work, in real time, for real results. This is not to say they're not useful. Often, team members enjoy these activities, feel a sense of team spirit, and leave with more positive attitudes toward each other. On its own, however, team building is often insufficient to generate significant, sustainable improvements in work performance. When



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TEAM DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

| | TEAM FACILITATION | TEAM TRAINING | TEAM BUILDING | TEAM CONSULTING | TEAM COACHING |
|--------------------------------|---|---|--|---|---|
| Approach | Active guidance and leadership of a specified method, process, or tool during a planned meeting or work session | Learning curriculum delivered through reading, teaching, and instructional exercises | Games, simulations, role-plays, and other structured group experiences delivered during special events | Assessment followed by recommendations and expert advisory support | Real-time interventions during regular team meetings and work sessions |
| What It Sounds Like | "The next step in this process is a brainstorm session. I will remind you of the guidelines and lead you through it." | "Now that you've learned about team-based decision making, split up into pairs and discuss how decisions are made in your teams." | "Everyone grab a blindfold, a piece of rope, and a rubber ball." | "You're missing some critical competencies on this team. I recommend you bring in at least one new member who can..." | "Over the past five minutes, what have you noticed about the team's approach to making this decision? What would you like to do differently going forward?" |
| Direct Outcomes | Achievement of a specific team goal or deliverable | Increased knowledge and understanding of a given subject area; acquisition of new skills | Greater team spirit, cohesion, personal trust, and respect | Expertise and roadmap of what needs to be accomplished to achieve a desired outcome | Immediate improvements in awareness, skills, and effectiveness |
| Team Performance Impact | Encouraged by the progress they've made, the team leader and/or members may adopt useful facilitator behaviors | Practiced skills may be transferred over into real work situations | Team spirit, trust, and cohesion may have a positive impact on member interactions | Recommendations that the team can commit to and implement may have positive effects on their work | Positive changes in individual and team performance can be observed and reinforced right away |

organizations devote considerable resources to this type of event, it's important for them to recognize that they're investing in interesting, engaging experiences that will require additional development work back in the office to ensure the learning is sustained.

TEAM CONSULTING. Similar to team building, the term consulting means different things to different people. Individuals who identify themselves as consultants may use any of the methodologies we've discussed so far, including team coaching. What's unique to consulting, as I'm defining it here, is that the practitioner gives expert interpretations and advice, and frequently completes specific pieces of work for the team. Consulting is directive, providing explicit guidance on what decisions a client should make or how they should resolve a particular problem (including recommendations of appropriate methods, tools, and best practices). Often this advice is based on formal and informal assessments of individual or group characteristics or behaviors.

Many transformative team engagements incorporate some consulting. Assessment tools can be invaluable in highlighting specific areas for improvement. And there are times when it's perfectly appropriate to simply suggest a solution or share best practices from our past experience. Again, we just need to be clear about the role we're in at any given time, and the value the client can expect to receive. While telling a team what to do may not build their capacity to solve their own problems, it can be extremely valuable in helping the team understand what they need to do and how they need to work in order to achieve what they want to achieve.

PROCESS CONSULTATION. One variant of consulting that bears a strong resemblance to team coaching is process consultation, which Edgar Schein defines as "a set of activities on the part of the consultant that help the client to perceive, understand, and act upon the process events that occur in the client's environment."¹ Schein takes care to distinguish process consultation from traditional "expert consultation." Like team coaching, process consultation is a collaborative practice designed to

empower clients to solve their own problems. The practitioner observes and gives feedback on how the group is working together, with the goal of improving effectiveness and efficiency.

Experienced process consultants may take more naturally to team coaching than individuals whose primary mode of working is facilitation or consulting based on expertise. In fact, team coaching can usefully be viewed as a variant of process consultation – one that engages at the level of the team, includes ongoing interactive feedback, and maintains a strong focus on results.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER. When planned and executed effectively, the professional practices of team facilitation, team training, team building, team consulting, and team coaching all complement and support each other. All five may be successfully incorporated into a single team engagement, or even a single team event. As practitioners we just need to be clear, with ourselves and with our clients, about what we're doing and why. The more practices we've mastered, the greater the variety of options we can offer.

Think back to Renata's Senior Leadership Team. Here's one possible structure for effectively integrating the five practices:

- **Team consulting:** A series of interviews with the team culminates in a report that highlights four main areas of concern: trust, decision making, mutual accountability, and meeting management. The practitioner works with the team to plan and design a series of three half-day and three full-day work sessions that will address these areas one by one. In each work session, she shares best practices and examples of how other teams have worked through similar issues.
- **Team training:** Each work session includes a mini-training on a tool or method related to the area of concern being addressed in that session.
- **Team facilitation:** For each tool or method that's taught, the practitioner facilitates a process in which the team applies what they've learned to real work issues.

- **Team coaching:** Following the training and facilitation, the practitioner observes the team in action doing real work while trying to use the new tool or method. Coaching interventions prompt the team to observe their own behavior and ways of working, assess their effectiveness, and make real-time changes to improve their performance and results. Repeated use of coaching interventions ensures these improvements will be sustained for the long term (this is the unique contribution of the killer app).
- **Team building:** At the end of each one of the three full days, the team has dinner together and engages in a fun social activity to help increase cohesion.

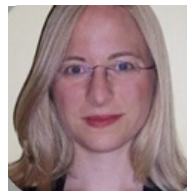
As Renata gains experience with each of these different practices, she'll be able to make more specific requests in the future – for instance, “We need to make sure this meeting is successful. Could you come and facilitate?” Or “The team is getting stuck on decision making. Could you provide training in consensus and then follow up with coaching?” This customized, “fit for purpose” approach will help ensure the team receives the types of support it needs to create sustainable improvements in its effectiveness and performance, and achieve results that are both real and impactful. ■



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“If you feel safe in the area you're working in, you're not working in the right area. Always go in a little further into the water than you feel capable of being in. Go a little bit out of your depth. And when you don't feel that your feet are quite touching the bottom, you're just about in the right place to do something exciting.”

– DAVID BOWIE