

# A fleeting moment of 'noticing': the balance of presence in team coaching

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When coaching teams, how do we know when our presence is 'too much' or 'too little'? **Erik de Haan** proposes how to navigate dynamic instability in teams and maintain a delicate balance of full presence.

**T**eam coaching is a relatively new field. If we take the publication of Hackman and Wageman's 2005 article<sup>1</sup> as marking the launch of this profession, then team coaching is only just over a decade old. Most practitioners would argue that although the name 'team coaching' may be new, the contribution of team coaches is not; for example, Lawrence and Whyte trace a history in this field going back to Edgar Schein and his 'process consultation' in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

I believe it helps greatly to use the term 'team coaching', if only to indicate a contribution that is distinct from team chairing, facilitating, building or training. Team coaching provides a simple name for an important practice where we try to *nurture more or deeper reflection in a team*. In other words, I believe that the core of the team coach's role is simply to focus on making the team think better: on creating space and providing protection and inspiration for better reflection on team goals, decisions, ways of working, strategy, etc. Ultimately, shared reflection is key for developing a team that is both more effective and united.

It often feels to me that team coaching is an 'unstable equilibrium'. If not maintained carefully, team coaching can relax into either 'abstinence', where coaches remain too far outside of the team, or 'team leadership', where coaches are tempted to facilitate, cajole, chair, give feedback, or educate. Team coaching sits just in the middle of these and needs to be protected as an intermediate position (neither inside nor outside the team, or if you like, both inside and outside of the team), from moment to moment. The best team coaches try to make reflective, provocative contributions that are at the same time powerful and thought provoking,



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Only in this way are there clear parallels between team coaching and individual coaching, both being essentially *vehicles for development and containers for growth*, very much in line with the original meaning of the word coach: a horse-drawn carriage from the Hungarian village of Kocs (pronounced 'coach'). Coaches provide the means for a reflective journey through a safe, nurturing and thoughtful presence, but they do not take charge. →



### Why is team coaching important?

Helping the team to think better is no easy task, but some of the best research into teams (as cited below) shows that high-quality team reflection results in:

- Understanding and insight – both key motivators for positive change;
- The combining of more diverse opinions and views – leading to improved levels of performance;
- Contributions from team members at all levels – a kind of ‘upwards feedback’, which is known to improve leadership decisions.

A study with 100 work teams in China found that those teams that reflected on their tasks were more innovative,<sup>3</sup> while another study found that such reflection also resulted in improved performance.<sup>4</sup> Further research in 2015 with nearly 100 work teams from within the NHS found that reflection helped particularly with innovation under conditions of heavy workload and high psychological strain.<sup>5</sup>

In order to promote reflection, team coaches can help create new opportunities for the team to reflect on what is working well for them already, as well as where biases and obstacles to reflection may present themselves. Coaches should be good observers, relationally aware, containing and self-effacing – but at the same time, bold and challenging in offering new areas for reflection and hypotheses. This paradox of both sitting back with observation and leaning in with hypotheses creates the dynamic instability around presence that many coaches will recognise, and which is so much more pronounced when working with teams.

### Presence: the greatest challenge for team coaches

Essentially, as a team coach, you want to help the team – including each individual member of the team – to reflect more deeply, innovate, and become stronger at addressing and resolving issues. Team coaching differs from team building, facilitating or chairing in that, as a coach, you cannot just claim your presence and ‘lead’ the team. Indeed, presence with the team is delicate and tricky. You are aiming for ‘not too much’ but also for ‘not too little’, and you are working in a context where it is very hard to predict how all the people in the room are experiencing your presence from moment to moment. As you attempt to make an impact on reflection for the team, you also want to leave the team in charge so that as a team they themselves can attain higher levels of reflection and reflexivity.

Team coaching interventions involve the art of claiming *and* letting go of your presence with a live team. In team coaching, as in individual coaching, I experience every intervention as an experiment.

### Team coaching in action

A team is leading a large organisation through a number of challenges. These include the need to modernise their products, which in their case means a change to their leadership structure, in the sense that responsibilities will need to be handled much lower down in the organisational ‘hierarchy’. I offer a series of stand-alone reflective team coaching sessions and I am also invited to join their regular managerial team meetings. The case examples below demonstrate how as a team coach, we can be surprised by our own perceived presence within a team.

### Case example 1: Too much presence?

At the beginning of the board coaching session, I notice that one person is making notes on his laptop. I decide to make a gentle intervention around how taking away barriers might make us all more open and reflective, and I suggest an experiment: how might he turn up without the laptop? The impact is immediate and very strong. He looks furious and obviously feels ticked off. I sense other members of the team looking on with slight glee, and one or two nod as I am speaking. For a number of seconds, there is an awkward silence as he looks deeply into my eyes – then he says, ‘Fine, I accept the challenge’. Later, in the coffee break, he seeks me out, apologises and explains how note-taking on his laptop sometimes helps him to reflect better, but that he now realises it was not so appropriate for this session. The day passes otherwise without incident, and team members speak openly about their doubts and resistances, and their scepticism regarding plans for a new, more distributed, leadership. By the end of the day, people are thanking me and the team member for the decision to leave out laptops and for being so open and vulnerable. A very good day for the team, they all agree, but I am left with strong doubts, as I feel I intervened too brusquely. I suspect that from beneath the surface, I had emerged as a powerful informal leader for the day, one who had stifled rather than opened up genuine, deeper reflection.





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#### **Case example 2: Too little presence?**

I am attending another top team's meeting at the organisation's offices, which I observe from a slight distance. The team are preparing to make some important decisions, and guests from both inside and outside the organisation have been invited to join the meeting for particular agenda items. In the intervals between longer agenda items, I join the team throughout the meeting to comment on their seating, their turn taking, the repetitions on the one hand, and the suggestions that are being ignored on the other, as well as how I perceive the dynamics of their collaboration. They listen as always with heightened attention, as if they do not want to miss a word, then thank me and turn to each other to address the next agenda item. There is barely time for any processing as I am only observing the meeting. As I leave, I believe I raised a few important areas of conflict and ambivalence, but that nobody had responded to me. Now I have to sit on the feeling of having very limited presence with this same team, perhaps until the next team-coaching day in a month's time.

My presence as a team coach is a very tricky one for me, and one that leads to substantial doubts every time. Clients are often unaware of the amount of internal processing that goes on for the coach. Similarly, coaches may miss important information regarding how the team experience them from moment to moment. Often, you do not know if an intervention 'works' until well after you have tried it out...

Having given examples of how a coach might emerge from sessions feeling they have made an impact that is either 'excessive' or 'lacking', let me also give an example of where the amount of presence the coach is able to maintain might be 'just right' for the team. In this case, I believe the team can work with a large amount of new and relevant information, themes and observations that emerge during the session, without needing me to lean in too much as their team coach. →





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### Case example 3: The right amount of presence?

A senior team I am working with have recently been able to fill the vacancy of an important role. At the beginning of our team coaching session, we agree it would be helpful to make some introductions to acknowledge the changed composition of the team. I begin by asking everyone to name one 'value' that is important to them, a value that they bring with them from childhood, and then to name one 'moment' from their life that they believe has shaped them as a person. We hear moving accounts of determining influences and deep losses and how much each single team member has taken from their significant others and major life events. It is an open and intimate start to the day, with very careful listening. As their team coach, I hypothesise a few patterns emerging in the team: I notice and name some common values held by team members and some contributions that team members could make that sound beautifully complementary. The team are so focused on meeting each other in this new way that my hypotheses are welcomed but do not become overly dominant. We look at a recent 'case'; an important decision that has not yet been made, despite promises made to those directors in the organisation who had prepared the decision-making process. I merely reflect on the here and now of this meeting, and on the patterns that I see emerging. Again, I feel that my observations and hypotheses are welcomed, without becoming the centre of attention. We finish the session with a period of reflection, gauging

where people are now and with what feelings they are preparing to leave the meeting. There is a strong sense of togetherness, a new-found determination in terms of how their case for a decision might be resolved, and a much deeper understanding of others within the team. People stay behind, chatting with one another in the meeting room, which I believe is often a very good sign of a successful team day. I leave in a positive mood, realising that there had not been a moment in that meeting where I felt I took over the proceedings, nor was I struggling to be heard or understood.

In the case of larger and more pressurised teams, I find that the only way to keep this precious but intrinsically unstable equilibrium that sits in the middle between too much presence and near-abstinence, is to work with a team-coaching colleague with a similar background. One of us can then go slightly closer to the team and facilitate, while the other deliberately holds back and observes. We work together like the abdominal and dorsal muscles, keeping the 'spine' of our presence - our 'backbone and heart' of coaching - strong and yet flexible. The dynamic instability becomes more stable due to the presence of the second coach. During intervals and breaks, we can then share our observations, and the observing colleague can help the team coach 'in the lead' to see how he or she is being pulled in by the dynamics of the team. Only in this way can a team coach gently 'notice', while at the same time being exposed to the full force of the anxious, conflictual, splitting or otherwise pressurised dynamics.



#### Case example 4: Team coaches working in a pair

A large leadership team in a university needs to review and agree its new five-year strategy. During the day, they review personal commitments, strategic intent, formulation of a strategy, and decisions about the consequences for a revised leadership structure. They plan a very full day with an external team coach facilitating all processes.

Because of the size of the team, the coach has asked a psychoanalytically trained colleague to observe as she herself leads the day. If there are tensions within the team, the first coach can ask her colleague to feed back directly only to her in the breaks. However, here the situation is safe and contained enough for him to be able to comment to the team and team coach directly, at regular intervals:

- 'I am struck by the number of things you seem to avoid as a team of leaders. At home, you do your finances and nurture your relationships, yet here at work, you all seem to want to just do research and leave your managerial responsibilities to others.'
- 'I can see that my colleague, your team coach, has been given a true leadership role today. You gladly leave leadership to her and seem happy to follow. I wonder what will happen the moment your coach leaves you after today?'
- 'It seems your board secretary is leading all the subgroups he is in and those groups achieve more than other groups. Your secretariat appears more powerful and

better networked than all of you formal leaders together.'

- (At the end:) 'Now that you have a plan, you may expect resistance. And when resistance comes, my prediction is that the plan will crumble and quickly become forgotten. What realistic chance does this new strategy have here in this organisation?'

The observing team coach is able to be relatively outspoken, because the first team coach can take over and 'hold' the team after the second coach has spoken. One team coach can have a more observing, challenging presence, while the other has a more facilitating, helping presence. Together, they offer just the right amount of presence for new thinking to emerge for and from within the team and for the team itself to retain the responsibility to implement.<sup>6</sup>

#### Fleeting moments of noticing

I believe that as team coaches we should maintain a 'light touch', while at the same time keeping our boldness and courage in naming what we see. We should flirt with our hypotheses, but never marry them, certainly not when the whole team turns around and denies or berates us for making such a 'shocking' interpretation. Our contributions are best kept as *fleeting moments of noticing*, which will plant the seeds of some further future understanding that is as yet hidden from us – and quite possibly from the team as well. ■

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