

Coaching at Work

“pp18-19 – Opinion: Claiming and letting go”

All rights reserved. © This article appeared in *Coaching at Work*, Vol 14, Issue 1, 2019 and has been reproduced in full by kind permission of the publisher. Not to be distributed electronically or made available to public websites without permission from the publisher. For personal and internal organisational use only.

Coaching at Work is a bi-monthly magazine, which is available in printed or digital format. Subscription includes access to all articles published in the last five years; free registration on our global coach listing, worth £50; a monthly e-newsletter, and membership of the Coaching at Work global 42,000 plus Coaching at Work LinkedIn group. There are discounts on subscriptions available to members of the main professional bodies and some coach training providers.

For more information, go to www.coaching-at-work.com

To subscribe, call 01202 087621 or email:
cawsubs@selectps.com



Claiming and letting go

Presence is a tricky problem for team coaches, notes Erik de Haan. You want to help the team reflect, but you also want it to be in charge

Obviously, as a team coach you want to help a team to reflect more deeply, to innovate and become stronger at addressing and resolving issues.

Team coaching is different from team building or team facilitating or team chairing: in a coach role, 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 in a context where it is very hard to predict how your presence will be felt from moment to moment.

As you attempt to make an impact on the team's ability to reflect, you also want to leave the team in charge, to maintain the higher levels of reflection and reflexivity when you are no longer working with them.

HANG IN THERE

I find the risk of claiming and letting go of my presence with a live team really worth taking. In team coaching as in individual coaching, I experience every intervention as an experiment. My colleague, who is a keen paraglider, has a very good simile: presence as the ability to 'hang in there', to trust that you will be carried through even if you are only looking in from above, defying the laws of gravity.

As a team coach, you take a helicopter view while you are only held up by thin air. Like Icarus, you remain very much at risk of either falling flat on the ground with your observations, or being carried off well

away from the team, blown away by the current to a place where you cannot see the team very well at all.

Let me give an example concerning a top team with which I've recently completed a series of team coaching sessions, including observations of their regular half-day team meetings and stand-alone reflective 'team coaching' days. They have to lead a large organisation through many challenges, particularly in terms of the need to modernise their products, and therefore also 'modernise' their leadership in the sense that responsibilities will need to be taken much lower down in the organisation.

TWO EXAMPLES

Twice I was surprised about my own perceived presence retrospectively, first on a team coaching day and then at a managerial meeting.

● The team coaching day

At the beginning of this second team coaching day I noticed one person,

the number three in the team who sometimes plays out conflicts around the 'past' and the 'future' with the CEO, was making notes on his laptop.

I decided to make a gentle intervention around how taking away barriers might make us all more open and reflective, and I think I also suggested an experiment: how would it be without the laptop for a little while.

The impact was immediate and very strong. He obviously felt ticked off and looked furious. Others I thought were looking on with some slight glee, and one or two nodded ever so slightly as I had spoken. He looked me deeply in the eyes, there was an awkward silence – then, "fine", he said, "I accept the challenge."

Later in the coffee break, he sought me out, apologised and explained how his laptop sometimes helps him reflect more deeply, but that he realised it wasn't appropriate for this session.

The day was a very good one, and several internal doubts and





resistances, and a fair amount of scepticism, were expressed openly regarding the new, more distributed leadership plans. Come the afternoon, people were thanking the board member and me for the decision to omit laptops and for being so open and vulnerable.

A very good day for the team, they all agreed, but I went away with strong doubts and scruples – whether I had not intervened too brusquely, and whether under the surface I had not become a powerful informal leader for the day. This would explain everyone’s constructive stance but would possibly make them a lot less genuine or empowered.

● **The managerial meeting**

One other event was a team meeting in this client’s offices, which I only observed from a slight distance, as important decisions were taken, and guests from inside and outside the organisation joined for particular topics and slots.

In the intervals between agenda items, I joined the team members and asked permission to comment on their seating, their turn taking, the repetitions and the points that had been ignored, as well as how I perceived the dynamics of their collaboration.

They listened, as always, with heightened attention, as if they did not want to miss a word, then thanked me and turned to each other to address the next agenda item.

There was no time for processing, and as I went away I thought I had


raised a few important areas of conflict and ambivalence, and nobody had responded to me. Now I had to sit on the feeling of having very limited presence with this same team.

My presence as a team coach is a very tricky one for me, and one that requires much internal processing. Often, I do not know if it works until well after I tried it out.

Sometimes, for larger teams, or when there is a great deal of tension or a contentious decision to make, it helps to arrive together with a trusted colleague, to maintain that delicate balance of presence and observation, without becoming embroiled. The second team coach then feeds back to the first in breaks, about where the team coaching stance of the first may have lost some balance.

In my experience, the pair can then maintain a more observing, challenging presence, while also offering a facilitating, helping presence. Together they may offer just enough for new thinking to emerge from within the team and for the team itself to retain the responsibility to implement it.

I believe that as team coaches we should maintain a ‘light touch’ as well as great boldness and courage in naming what we see. In other words, we should flirt with our hypotheses but never marry them, certainly not when they lead to ripples in the team.

Our contributions are best kept as fleeting moments of noticing, planting the seeds of some future understanding that is, as yet, hidden from us – from all of us. 

I believe that as team coaches we should maintain a ‘light touch’ as well as great boldness and courage in naming what we see

● **Professor Erik de Haan** is director of the Ashridge Centre for Coaching @ Hult International Business School and programme leader of the Ashridge Team Coaching for Consultants open programme