

Teaming: how teams learn and adapt to foster creativity and performance

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The question of how to bring people together quickly, to get the job done with the available resources, is at the forefront of most organisational leaders' minds. With the digital transformation informing and shaping how we do business, the traditional team structure is giving way to a more fluid team approach; one where being able to 'team' is a key competency for success and being part of a highly adaptable team is all about how to learn collectively.

Team coach-mentoring needs to develop to meet these challenges, to support teams to learn and innovate for success.

Coaching is always in service of change; change in individuals, in teams and in organisations (Newell and Williamson, 2016). As the certainty in which we work has reduced and the complexity and diversity of the problems we are faced with has increased, the need for teams to be able to catalyse new ways of thinking and learning has exploded.

In recent years the focus for teams in organisations has vacillated between:

- how to be more agile – do more with less, quicker;
- and how to bring innovation and creativity to problem solving.

The pressure to be able to adapt to changing requirements as the world has become more digital competes with the need to bring new innovative solutions to a global competitive landscape. This is the macro picture facing leaders but we, as coaches, are often asked to help with the symptoms these pressures bring to day-to-day working lives.

A constant request from our coaching clients is help them with how to:

- set goals and objectives when the environment to deliver them is uncertain;
- manage against these goals when many of the team members are working virtually;
- increase the confidence of managers to give effective feedback when measures are not clear;
- and increase collaboration in and across teams.



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As with all significant transformational change in the way we work, the practice of how we work lags behind the need to change. Knowing we need to change is not enough; knowing how and why is crucial. With the next change hitting before the current change has been realised, it is impossible to predict how much time a team might have to mobilise. Indeed, teams are expected not to need time to mobilise at all but to hit the ground running and adapt as they go.

It is no longer possible to sit back and assume that over time a team will form into an effective unit. Nor is it acceptable to

wring your hands and say it is impossible and hope it will all go away. Gone are the days of having a stable set of criteria, roles and deliverables for a team.

So, what can be done? How do we as coaches support leaders and their teams to face the future with courage, determination and hope?

Well, part of the answer at least, is that teams need to learn how to learn.

The motivational power of learning: getting better at doing something, learning how to master something you thought impossible or simply overcoming an obstacle that will help others is deeply satisfying. As coaches we are taught how to tap into this natural positive power in our one-to-one coaching. We now need to focus on how to enable teams to do the same.

Continuous, relentless learning through collaboration, analysis and reflection is the new must have competency for successful team members. The 'learning organisation' of the 1990s has now moved on to the 'learning team'. If we accept Mayo and Lank's definition of a learning organisation as that which "... harnesses the full brain power, knowledge and experience available to it, in order to evolve continually for the benefit of all its stakeholders." (Mayo and Lank, 1994)

What is a learning team?

Amy C. Edmondson, author of *Teaming*, describes it as the ability to work interdependently with others, to collaborate and reach across silos and boundaries in an environment that is uncertain and changing: "Teaming is team work on the fly".

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Coaching and mentoring is in a powerful position to support this growing need; to empower the team members to take charge of their own learning and that of the team collectively. For a long time learning in teams has been synonymous with away-days: team building activities that happen outside of the day-to-day operational challenges of a team. While these events are often a light-hearted relief from the pressures of everyday work and are good at building short-term rapport, team leaders and team members have consistently found it hard to transfer the learning back into the workplace.

Helping people to learn is a key objective of coaching and mentoring and this same priority must be adapted and blended to working with teams. For team coaching to build sustainable change in a team, the coach must pay attention to the learning as a process within the team's DNA, and as a collective shift in mindset to a state of continuous learning.

First though we must look at the current reality. In a lot of organisations, the 'old world' sits alongside the 'new digital world' but often does so in isolation. Look at technology companies who have set up new digital divisions targeted with capitalising on the latest innovations and advancements in technology but who, alongside this, have retained their existing structures to meet the requirements of their current service contracts and core customers. These subdivisions often act in complete isolation and can often be seen in competition with each other when bidding for new business. There is an unconscious mental model that the learning happens in the 'new' world and that the 'old' world simply needs to get on with doing more with less.

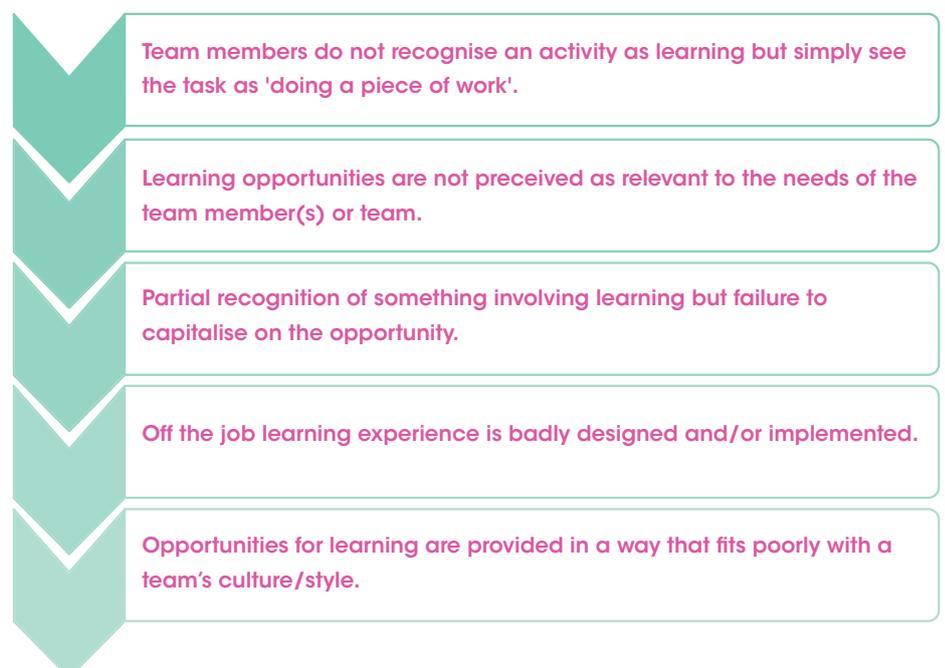
Another example is where shared service centres have been established. In this scenario the learning is limited to how to deliver the most effective service to

the defined key performance indicators (KPIs) to drive efficiencies. This learning is very rarely shared back to the customer facing teams who, in turn, are unlikely to include the shared service centre team in designing the customer solution.

In both these examples the teams themselves are constantly changing. Fast moving work demands fast moving agile workforces. Teams can be disbanded overnight and team members moved into new roles with little or no notice. The speed with which these changes have occurred has left many teams struggling to understand how to adapt. Not considering the team as a unit that must apply all learning is just one of the ways in which teams are failing to add value for the themselves and the organisation.

There are a number of ways in which learning is impeded both at the individual and collective team level. The figure below looks at the five-point scale of learning inefficiencies as a continuum from perception to implementation (Parsloe and Leedham, 2016).

Perception



Implementation

As a coach-mentor working with a team it is important to understand at what point the individual team members are in this continuum as well as the collective consciousness of the team. A good place to start is with raising the awareness of the team to the importance of teaming and link this to group learning for the team's success.

Team Learning

Raise awareness

Awareness is gained by focusing attention and critical analysis. As a coach-mentor we are well placed to ask the obvious questions and challenge the team to look at the situation from an alternative angle to improve insight and clarity.

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- Are they aware that learning is part of the role they need to perform to be successful – where are they on the five-point learning scale?
- What questions are the team not asking?
- How/does the team learn from its success and mistakes?

The aim here is to gain understanding and acceptance to the significance of shared learning in being able to adapt quickly and effectively.

Accepting responsibility

Once the team are aware of the need to embrace learning as part of the way they work, all team members need to be able to accept that they must individually and collectively take responsibility for that learning. As mentioned earlier this knowledge is not enough on its own to impact the change in behaviour across the whole team. Each team member must be able to see:

- What purpose the learning will serve – how the team goal(s) are impacted?
- How they are involved in the planning and evaluation of their and the rest of team's learning?

Here the goal is for each team member to accept their responsibility for the learning across the team. A couple of questions to ask yourself as the coach-mentor are:

- How does this team embraces learning to advance their thinking?
- At what stage on the five-point scale will they likely struggle the most?

Moving to action

At this point it is important to work on the change quickly, for the team to implement new ideas and learn experientially, building into their working practices ways in which to critically apply their learning for themselves and those teams that they are interdependent with. It is here that the coach-mentor can help maintain the focus of the team to the learning as a process, what changes need to be made and what has been successfully embedded into the new way of working.

Reflection

Reflection is an area of coaching that is most often squeezed and crushed out of a team's day-to-day work. By helping a team build in structured reflection a coach-mentor can equip a team with the resources to build sustainable change and working best practice. As the learning for the team will be dynamic, iterative and fluid, reflection needs to include questions such as:

- What am I learning about myself?
- What am I learning about my team?
- What am I learning about the teams we depend upon?
- What am I learning about how we learn?

For many years team coach-mentors have talked about building self-sustaining teams but for countless teams this has been hard to sustain once the coach has left. Frequently teams wait for the 'perfect state' before they embark on the changes, concerned more change will destabilise the existing equilibrium. Enabling a team to 'learn how to learn' and supporting them to build this into their ways of working moves a team forward, instilling the confidence and agility to change seamlessly to the drivers around them.

Using coaching tools such as triple loop learning, understanding the Why, How, What and Outcomes, coaches can create a shift in the context or point of view of team members and ultimately the team themselves. Unlocking the power of learning to motivate and energise the team, freeing them up to think creatively, is one of the greatest rewards for a team coach-mentor.

References

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