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Team Coaching: The Living Systems Approach

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"I love to hear a choir. I love the humanity ... to see the faces of real people devoting themselves to a piece of music. I like the teamwork. It makes me feel optimistic about the human race when I see them cooperating like that."

--- Sir Paul McCartney

Teams or groups emerge all the time. Their members may work in close proximity, meet on an occasional basis or comprise virtual teams. You may have observed or worked in teams which have had varying degrees of functionality and success. I believe that an organization's single greatest point of leverage is its ability to transform what amount to aggregations of human capital into purposeful, collaborative and accountable teams. These renewed teams are stimulating working environments that can elicit continuing contributions from all of their members.

Modern coaching practice has developed the ability to influence people's lives, enabling them to learn, grow and contribute to cultural change and sustainable results in the teams and organizations in which they work. *The Living Systems Approach to team coaching is the catalyst for the transformation of the individual and the organization.*



LIVING SYSTEMS

Teams are dynamic, rather than static; as with your body or any other life form in the universe, each team creates itself on an ongoing basis. Teams have the potential to learn and to evolve, and to adapt to their context or environment as if they had a 'social identity'. These are the characteristics of a *Living System*.

Given their mandate and the context, each team is unique. To move forward, team members need to look within themselves in order to enhance their personal capacities. In the Living Systems Approach to team coaching, coaches support the members in achieving these new levels of awareness, and in creating their own self-reflective and self-regulated learning environment. This environment allows team members to continually deepen their learning and forward their actions toward the outcomes they desire as a group.

A FRESH ASPECT OF TEAM

As a group of individuals meld into a team, its members experience a perceptible mental shift ...

"Team: an attitude held by collaborative high performers who have a common purpose and a mandate to fulfill.

This definition also puts few limits on who can be considered as a team under the Living Systems Approach: for example, seasoned C-suite executives, nonprofit leaders joining forces for the first time or project teams.

Coaching supports team members to reflect on how they are showing up collectively and how they are supporting each other.

The support is offered not by telling or advising, but by increasing team members' self-awareness and the degree of connection they have to the group. The experienced coach provides the appropriate mix of activities in the moment, in order to advance the team's learning.

*Emerging from this initial focus are the foundations for high performance capacity, personal growth, and innovative approaches to resolving performance and business issues.” **

The Living Systems Approach focuses on fundamental cultural issues for the team and its members. Besides developing the team’s capability to better deal with today’s major business issues, the aim is to develop the kind of robust human infrastructure which will serve the organization for the future as well. The key results are that the team can think more effectively as a unit, and that its members develop a way to achieve alignment on defining and then acting on what matters to them.

BENEFITS

The main benefits of the Living Systems Approach are:

1. It produces sustainable results.
2. Team members learn to use their strengths and gifts productively, in service of the team.
3. The cultural changes developed within the team—including greater awareness, a shared sense of purpose, a learning mindset, expanded levels of trust and greater commitment to action—remain in place afterward.
4. It develops enhanced performance and learning for both the team and its members, and provides a model for the entire organization of the impact of strengthened team-ness.
5. Team members experience greater personal fulfillment.

PROCESS

This section outlines the course of a typical Living Systems team coaching engagement.

1. The team leader discusses the team’s mandate and the context with the coach. The leader also clarifies which decisions the team will and will not be able to make during coaching.
2. The team leader and coach design the nature of the partnership: usually a series of team coaching sessions over time, with individual coaching as appropriate. The team leader is generally an equal partner with the rest of the team during the sessions, and the team’s diversity is regarded as a strength.
3. Major building blocks in the sessions are openness, trust and establishing relationships between all members and with the coach.
4. The team agrees on outcomes and its agenda.
5. In her role as partner in the team’s journey, the coach provides tools, structures and questions to reinforce continual learning for the members and the team. She uses them as appropriate for the moment, rather than providing a predetermined formula for resolution.
6. The coach facilitates the growth of members’ awareness on all levels—self, others and the systems in which they work—using experiential and other techniques. The team coaching process occurs through conversation between members of the team and, when appropriate, the coach.
7. Team members learn to use their strengths and gifts productively in service of the team.
8. The team aligns on how they will move forward together.
9. They develop accountabilities for the next period of time.

The Living Systems Approach focuses on fundamental cultural issues for the team and its members.

**The quotation in this section is courtesy of Adria Trowhill, a Master Certified Coach and a pioneer in the Living Systems Approach. Adria has inspired much of the work in this article.*

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

ADVANTAGES

The Living Systems Approach is a different way to do team coaching. It works well because:

1. Recognizing that each team is unique, coaches approach every assignment in a creative way. The right path and the right answer for a group of people do not come out of a box.
2. The coach assumes that every team member is creative, resourceful and whole. They are empowered to work toward the outcomes which they choose together. The coach acts as a knowledgeable observer during this process; his role is to serve the team's needs.
3. It involves vigorous member engagement. While the coach provides process and tools as appropriate, the team is responsible for the content and for doing the work.
4. Surface issues aside, the method leads to deep conversations and dialogue about what really matters to move the team forward in learning and action.

CONCLUSION

The Living Systems Approach to team coaching emphasizes trust in the ability of team members to access the capacities that they need, individually and collectively, to move the team toward what it desires. Once the members become deeply aware of their collective strength and they coalesce into a collaborative team, they are likely to evolve further, both as individuals and together, to benefit the organization which they serve. ●

“Through techniques like dialogue and skilful discussion, teams transform their collective thinking, learning to mobilize their energies and actions to achieve common goals, and drawing forth an intelligence and ability greater than the sum of individual members' talent.”

--- Peter Senge