

Drama Techniques in Team Coaching

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Abstract

Team effectiveness and well-being can be negatively affected by unconscious behavioral patterns and dysfunctional group dynamics. Becoming consciously aware of such patterns and understanding their root cause is an important step toward rebuilding a healthy and well-functioning team. When such issues are addressed in a team coaching setting, drama techniques are a powerful tool to help teams understand and improve their functioning. Based on a multiple case study and from a psychodynamic perspective, this article gives an overview of current literature on this topic, formulates criteria found to be conducive to the effective use of such techniques, and describes team coaching qualities helpful in successfully applying these techniques and dealing with group dynamics.

Key words: Team coaching, drama techniques, group dynamics

Introduction

Statements such as *“There is so much tension around here”*; *“We just keep talking in circles”*; or *“I don’t feel safe to speak my mind”* can indicate that a team is stuck in dysfunctional group dynamics: behavioural and emotional patterns that are detrimental to team effectiveness, negatively affecting team performance, well-being or team learning. More often than not, such group dynamics can be clearly felt, but are not so easily put into words and even harder to change (Kets de Vries (2011)). From a psychodynamic perspective, which is elaborated upon in the literature section of this article, this unhelpful behaviour can be seen as the result of an (unconscious) collective defence mechanism: a coping strategy that has developed over time to avoid difficult emotions. For example, teams that delegate every decision back to their managers might be afraid to confront colleagues with differing opinions. Making cruel jokes can be a way to avoid facing feelings of being unappreciated or excluded. Teams that put all their efforts into minor details might be doing so to avoid having to acknowledge that they do not have the skills necessary for their real task. Such defensive patterns can become so ingrained in a team’s day to day functioning, that they lose sight of the underlying reasons for developing that behaviour in the first place.

In a team coaching setting, teams that are stuck in unwanted group dynamics can be helped to move forward by helping them understand what might be going on beneath the surface that’s keeping them in this unwanted situation, and turn their unconstructive group dynamic into more effective ways of operating and accomplishing the team’s work. To enhance this process, team coaches can use a wide array of interventions and techniques, including some borrowed from the world of theatre and film, such as role play, one-act plays or playback theatre, together called theatre or drama techniques. These techniques use physical representation and enactment of real or imaginary situations as an active, light-hearted and accessible way to let team members take a deeper look at what might be going on, and help them develop new, more constructive team behaviour. Drama techniques enhance the ability to take this

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deeper look by helping team members tap into their physical and emotional experiences as sources of information and knowledge, and allow them to look beyond a mere cognitive understanding of what might be going on. Here an analogy can be made with the use of drama techniques in the therapeutic setting (Blatner, 1996), where psychodrama (for individuals) and sociodrama (used to get a better insight into group processes), are used to help clients become physically and emotionally more aware of dynamics that thus far remained unknown or unarticulated, work through painful experiences and help them experiment with possible new behaviour to improve their quality of life.

As a team coach, the author has used drama techniques as part of her coaching repertoire. From the practitioner point of view these techniques indeed seem to help teams become more effective. But empirical research on the topic is as yet very limited, leaving team coaches (and teams seeking to be coached) with little evidence to guide them. This lack of scientific foundation led to the design of the current multiple case study. The aim is to develop a better and more substantiated insight into the topic. The article begins with an overview of relevant academic literature. It then describes the research method used and concludes with findings from the study. The results should help inform team coaches and teams considering starting a coaching programme, and will encourage them to compare findings from this research with their own experiences, in order to further develop knowledge of the field.

Literature

A literature search on the use drama techniques in team coaching as a method to work on dysfunctional group dynamics revealed no academic literature and so the search was extended to the following four separate aspects which are discussed below: the psychodynamic perspective, group dynamics, team coaching, and the use of drama techniques applied in contexts other than the theatre itself.

The psychodynamic perspective

The psychodynamic perspective is rooted in the psychoanalytic thinking as formulated by Freud, one of his key notions being that we are only partially as rational as we like to think. A big part of our behaviour and reactions to what is happening around us is unconsciously being ruled by our personal history and earlier experiences, which are projected onto and played out in current situations (Freud, 1922). Painful or anxiety provoking experiences can cause us to develop coping strategies to deal with the difficult emotions these experiences evoke. Though helpful at first, over time such strategies can turn into a defence mechanism: an 'automatic' response to situations we consciously or unconsciously (and correctly or incorrectly) perceive as threatening. Such defence mechanisms can override our capability to consciously choose the most appropriate or helpful reaction to situations we encounter (Freud, 1922; Kets de Vries, 2011). Initially described for individuals, this dynamic has been identified for groups and for organizations as well (Smith & Berg, 1987; Stein, 1996; Marshak, 2006; Kets de Vries, 2011; Long, 2013). When we catch ourselves, be it individually or in a group, displaying the same old unwanted behaviour time and time again and we somehow do not manage to turn it around, the chances are that below the surface of what we can clearly observe and articulate, some unconscious processes are at play that are more influential than our conscious thoughts and good intentions (Stern, 2004). This dynamic can exist *within* ourselves as individuals or groups (our own unconscious anxieties and fears influencing our conscious actions), or can, through processes of projection and transference, exist *between* individuals and groups. In the latter case, feelings and defensive patterns that are (unconsciously) present within clients, teams or organizations, can be manifested in and felt by other individuals or groups, such as other team members, therapists, consultants or coaches (Hirschorn, 1988; Kets de Vries, 2011).

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In cases of persistent unhelpful patterns, change might be found in uncovering the underlying unconscious dynamics and defence mechanisms, working through the anxieties involved and developing alternative, more helpful behaviour (Amado & Ambrose, 2001; Kets de Vries, 2011). An important step in this process is getting access to and articulating what Bollas termed *the unthought known*: the things we know deep down, but have not been able to put into words yet (Bollas, 1989). Going through this change requires a holding space: an environment safe enough to learn, experience and express sometimes difficult emotions, and develop new, more helpful behavior. To provide this environment, therapists and coaches should be able to build a safe relationship with clients, teams or organizations, and should be able to contain both the client's and their own anxiety at times when tension or emotions run high (Hirschorn, 1988; Amado & Ambrose, 2001; Kets de Vries, 2011). Another ability essential for therapists and those working with psychodynamic concepts in an organizational setting, is the ability to simultaneously observe what goes on with the client or the team and within themselves as therapists or coaches. Making such inner feelings explicit and enquire if these are manifestations of dynamics within the individual or groups worked with which have been transferred onto the therapist or coach, can help clients become more consciously aware of what is going on within themselves and make sense of their inner processes (Hirschorn, 1988; Amado & Ambrose, 2001).

Group dynamics

Academic literature on group dynamics covers both conscious and directly observable factors, such as style of communication and handling of conflicts, and more covert or unconscious aspects of group life. They are seen as existing at the same time and mutually influencing one another (Lewin, 1947; Bion, 1961; Gillette & McCollom, 1990).

Concentrating on the psychodynamic literature on this topic (e.g. Bion, 1961; Menzies Lyth, 1990), a common notion is that when groups have developed defensive mechanisms, even though these patterns might be consciously chosen and helpful at first, over time these may become so ingrained in the team's day to day practice that the group loses sight of the initial reason for developing those patterns, and they turn into an 'automatic' mechanism that become part of the group's unconscious behavioural repertoire. Sometimes keeping these mechanisms in place in order to ward off the underlying anxieties unconsciously becomes a goal more important than the goal the team was formed for in the first place, thus deflecting the team from its real task. In such cases, the defensive mechanism has become dysfunctional and has to be changes for the team to become effective again (Bion, 1961; Menzies Lyth, 1990; Kets de Vries, 2011).

Where in individuals, the development of defence mechanisms finds its source in the individual's personal life, in groups, the root cause of collective defence mechanisms can be found at several, coexisting levels: in anxieties within or between individuals, within the group as a whole or between the group and its environment, and may be related to several issues like the paradoxes inherent to group life (such as independence versus interdependence) (Smith & Berg, 1987), unarticulated different paradigms and value systems in a group (Marshak, 2006) or contextual factors like a complex context, emotionally demanding tasks or conflicts with other teams (Jaques, 1974; Menzies Lyth, 1990).

Team coaching

In the current academic literature on team coaching, the term is used to indicate two broad areas (Thornton, 2010):

- Teams as a vehicle for individual development, where the group functions as a social learning environment by mirroring and giving feedback on individual issues. (Kets de Vries, 2011; Ward, Van de Loo, & Ten Have, 2014).

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- Teams-as-a-whole as the object of coaching, primarily aimed at increasing performance, learning capability and dynamics of the group as a whole, with possible benefits in terms of learning and increased performance and well-being for individual team members (Hackman & Wageman, 2005; Liu, 2009; Clutterbuck, 2007; Thornton, 2010; Haug, 2011).

The research conducted for this article is aimed at the second form of coaching: the coaching of intact teams in order to improve performance and learning of the groups-as-a-whole, narrowing it down further by focusing on situations where the coaching role is taken by an external team coach.

In their theory of team coaching Hackman and Wageman define team coaching as “A *direct interaction with a team intended to help members make coordinated and task-appropriate use of their collective resources in accomplishing the team’s work*” (Hackman & Wageman, 2005, p. 269). Here, a clear position is chosen that team coaching is a supportive, not primarily directive activity, aimed at helping teams help themselves and making use of already present team resource in order to achieve sustainable change. This is underwritten and elaborated upon by Clutterbuck, defining team coaching as a learning intervention designed to increase the effectiveness of a team by using coaching principles like assisted reflection, analysis and motivation to change (Clutterbuck, 2007).

An interesting debate is to be seen about the topics team coaching should be focussing on. Views range from team coaching being most effective when focussing on the functions and goal of a team, with little value found in addressing interpersonal dynamics (Hackman & Wageman, 2005), through views where a made-to-measure combination of focus on interpersonal dynamics and functions and goals is seen as most helpful, (Clutterbuck, 2007; Liu, 2009) to views where addressing unhelpful interpersonal or intragroup dynamics are regarded as (the) key to effective team coaching (Thornton, 2010). Those working from the assumption that interpersonal and group processes should be at least part of the topics addressed during team coaching, describe a coaching process consisting of different stages of becoming aware and understanding what might be going on, dismantling old patterns, developing new, more helpful ways of functioning, and integrating these into everyday practice (Clutterbuck, 2007; Thornton, 2010).

In order to enable this learning and change, team coaches need knowledge about both organizational and group dynamic factors, have a wide repertoire of responses to help uncover and deal with these dynamics, and have the personal and interpersonal skills to build a holding space for safe and playful learning and experimenting (Amado & Ambrose, 2001; Clutterbuck, 2007; Thornton, 2010; Kets de Vries, 2011).

Drama techniques

Team coaching is not the only setting in which drama techniques are being applied. In the therapeutic setting, the use of these techniques is a tried and tested way of helping clients get a deeper insight into their unconscious processes and helping them develop new and more effective behaviour. When working with individuals, psychodrama is the term used to indicate this, whereas the use of drama techniques in a group setting, for example in family therapy is labelled sociodrama (Blatner, 1996; Moreno, 1953). Social change is another area into which drama techniques have found their way. Starting with Boal’s ideas about the *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 1979), a wide range of theatre techniques has been developed, described and applied to help less privileged societal groups become aware of their position and stimulate their emancipation.

In organisational life, too, drama techniques are becoming a familiar tool to improve collaboration and enhance cultural change: role play is a common technique to train skills, playback theatre – in which professional actors mirror behaviour they observed in an organisation – is used to ‘kick off’

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organisational change programmes (Mangham en Overington, 1983; Meisiek, 2004; Schreyögg, 2001). The literature on drama techniques in a team coaching context however is very limited, mainly focussing on the way individual techniques should be carried out, with little to no explicit connection to their effect on team development or group dynamics (Mulder & Budde, 2006; Oostra & Devilee, 2012). Directions are given though about the process that drama techniques should be embedded in, which starts with a warming up stage to get participants in a sufficiently playful and active mood, followed by the enactment and application of the technique, and finally a debriefing about participants' experiences (Blatner, 1996; Mulder and Budde, 2006; Oostra and Devilee, 2012).

In all three stages, the effectiveness of drama techniques is ascribed to their playfulness, physicality and creativity (Moreno, 1953; Boal, 1979; Blatner, 1996). According to Winnicott (1971), working with drama techniques can bring about a certain joyfulness and fun, a feeling of playing and cheerful pretending, similar to the way children learn to deal with the world through their play; playing as a safe and light-hearted method to help individuals and groups take a deeper look at anxiety provoking situations without becoming overwhelmed by the emotions connected to these (Moreno, 1953). Physicality refers to the fact that in drama techniques, the body is the instrument being worked with. Becoming physically aware of what is going on during the enactment of a situation, also gives access to underlying emotional feelings, much more so than by only talking or thinking about it (Moreno, 1953; Blatner, 1996). And when developing new, more constructive team behaviour, drama techniques can help teams step outside their habitual routines and roles, and try something completely new and different. This taps into the group's creativity and gives them the opportunity to develop new behaviour and use latent but so far unused talents (Boal, 1979; Blatner, 1996).

Summary and working propositions

Research into the use of drama techniques as a way to address group dynamics in team coaching appears to be missing in current academic literature. Suggestions for how drama techniques can be applied in such a situation, or what conditions and factors are relevant for their effective use were not found. Analysing findings from the literature on the separate aspects of this topic however shows some analogous concepts, which are used as working propositions for the multiple case study described below:

- Both conscious and unconscious group processes could influence team functioning. When teams want to turn around unhelpful group dynamics, team coaching can be a setting to learn how to do that and achieve the desired change. Both the psychodynamic and team coaching literature describe a change process of becoming aware and letting go of ineffective defence mechanisms, and developing better, more productive ways of thinking, acting and dealing with anxieties. Psychodynamic literature puts a stronger emphasis on working through unconscious underlying anxieties, whereas team coaching literature leans towards a stronger emphasis on integrating new behaviour in everyday practice.
- Desired change for teams with dysfunctional defence mechanisms can become sustainable when such change comes from within the team itself. Team coaches could therefore provide teams with an environment that enhances this learning process. Key factors include providing a holding environment, which feels safe enough for teams to learn and experiment, and helping teams use alternative approaches to see what might be going on below the surface, for example by making explicit what (projected) feelings are manifested within the team coach.
- Drama techniques can contribute to both factors: their playfulness helps to create an environment that is safe to learn and experiment and their physical nature helps bring into awareness feelings and emotions that are cognitively less accessible. They also stimulate creativity, which can be helpful when teams have to develop new behaviour. When applying such techniques, this could be embedded in a process of warming up, enactment and debrief.

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Methodology

The research design is based on the assumption that meanings attributed to phenomena are subjectively formed through interaction between individuals and that these meanings are varied, multiple and dynamic (Creswell, 2014). This social constructivist world view is reflected in the qualitative research design: a multiple case study aimed at understanding more about the use of drama techniques in team coaching through looking at the meanings attributed to it by team leaders, team members, and coaches who had been involved in such a process. The working propositions formulated based on the literature review were examined against participants' experiences and attributions, resulting in findings that can be seen as new, further developed working propositions. These hopefully inform team coaches and teams seeking coaching; inviting them at the same time to examine these working propositions and build upon them from their own experiences (Long, 2013; Creswell, 2014).

Research method

The research method chosen was a multiple case study (Yin, 2009; Creswell, 2014) relating to ten team coaching programmes in which drama techniques were used. All cases took place within Northern European organisations, mainly in healthcare and non-profit organisations. Team size varied from five to eighteen members, programmes had a time span ranging from a single half day meeting to five full day meetings over a period of nine months. Of these cases, four were considered to be successful (the definition of successful being: perceived as helpful in enhancing team effectiveness by team members and team leader). Two cases were unsuccessful, the four remaining cases were partly successful (some parts helpful, other parts not, or helpful according to some people involved, but unhelpful according to others). Case selection was based on the following criteria:

- The coaching programme addressed intact work teams (teams working together in an organisational context);
- Drama techniques were part of the programme;
- Both conscious and unconscious processes were addressed;
- The total amount of cases included both successful and unsuccessful or only partially successful cases.

Data gathering

Data were collected from formal and informal programme documentation, including initial programme designs and contracts, programme descriptions, reports from meetings, interviews, feedback and evaluation forms and coaches' notes. In addition to this, a total of eighteen people were interviewed, including nine team members, six team leaders (of which one was involved in two cases) and four team coaches (of which one involved in two cases, another one in four). Interviews were semi-structured and addressed the interviewees' perceptions of impact and effect of steps, interventions and overall programme, both for themselves individually and for the team as a whole. Triangulation took place by combining different data sources (documentation and interviews) and by incorporating at least three perspectives on each case (one or more team members, team leader, one or more team coaches).

Data analysis

Analysis of data was conducted in three stages: firstly an analysis per case, including a time series analysis (Yin, 2003) looking at the chronological order of the different steps in the coaching programme and connecting these steps to the techniques used, reactions from team members and team as a whole, team coach behaviour, and interviewee reflections on the effects of steps and techniques.

The second stage of analysis consisted of a cross case synthesis, comparing and analysing all cases to see what analogies could be distinguished in the findings from the singular case analyses. These

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included shared characteristics of team behaviour and emotions in the course of the coaching programmes, shared characteristics in the drama techniques used, and roles and skills seen as important for team coaches. Next the perceived successfulness of the techniques and programmes as a whole was analysed in relation to the patterns found. In the final stage of analysis, findings from the first two stages were compared to the propositions from the literature review.

Findings

One of the propositions emerging from the literature was that coaching dealing with dysfunctional group dynamics (combining psychodynamics with team coaching) could be most effective when it includes steps of becoming aware and letting go of ineffective defence mechanisms and of developing better, more productive ways of thinking, acting and dealing with anxieties. Psychodynamic literature puts a relatively stronger emphasis on working through unconscious underlying anxieties, while team coaching literature leans more towards an emphasis on integrating new behaviour in everyday practice.

Findings from the multiple case study suggest that reactions and emotions of team members and topics of the steps in the coaching programmes follow a pattern that is comparable to the process described in the earlier propositions, including both the 'working through' of the psychodynamic perspective and the integration necessary for a team coaching approach. In addition some drama techniques seemed more effective at certain stages than others and this is also discussed, together with the effects of those techniques and the conditions and skills required to produce results.

The four distinct stages that teams appeared to go through during coaching are characterized by the particular topics addressed and types of team behaviour. These four are:

1. Awareness

In this stage teams became aware of their defensive patterns and the necessity to change. Group behaviour during this stage could be characterised initially as defensive (being late, trivialising), tense or giggly. When team members started enacting their patterns, the mood became loud and elated, until the tipping point, when team members became consciously aware of their actual dynamics. At that moment, silence occurred, which was interpreted by interviewees as withdrawing within themselves.

2. Letting go

Teams were confronted with the underlying cause of their patterns including the difficult emotions involved. In this second stage, group behaviour of the teams studied could be characterised as starting with denial or trivialisation of the patterns that had become visible, followed by sadness or anger directed at self, colleagues, leaders or coach. Having to face the emotions that all this time had been so expertly put away under their defensive patterns brought about a lot of confusion and anxiety. When adequately supported, interviewees indicated, teams felt able to work through these emotions and exchange and discuss them. The tipping point of this stage was marked by the fact that the teams started showing signs of curiosity about alternative ways to deal with their underlying emotions.

3. Creativity

Teams designed and planned new behaviour. A lot of energy, cheerfulness, loudness, physical activity where the types of behaviour typifying the teams at this stage.

4. Action

Teams practiced new behaviours and their new skills and integrated them into day to day practice.

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Team behaviour during this stage was predominantly action oriented, with intermittent periods of frustration when changes didn't come as easily or quickly as hoped for.

In successful cases, teams had gone through all four stages, sometimes temporarily regressing to an earlier stage. In cases that were unsuccessful or only partially successful, not all stages were worked through or the process had started with a wrong stage. For example, one team became aware of its patterns and necessity to change and faces the underlying emotions, but did not get around to designing and practicing new behaviours.

Timing of drama techniques

When looking at the type of drama techniques used at each of the four stages, findings suggest that in each stage drama techniques can be used to deepen and speed up the processes the team is going through. However, not all techniques appear equally effective in all stages. Findings during each stage are described below, using examples from the cases to illustrate what actually happened during the coaching programmes and how parties involved experienced this.

Awareness: Drama techniques producing a strong visual image were perceived as most effective in this stage. These included the musical chairs described in the next paragraph, *tableau vivant* or 'living picture' in which team members physically depict their team dynamic, making and watching video recordings of team functioning, and one-act plays in which teams perform a short scene about their day to day practice, as described in the description below of one of the cases:

The prospect of seeing their colleagues 'act' has put the team in a high-spirited, giggly mood. The scene starts. Two colleagues/actors are sitting at the back of the improvised stage, having a coffee, talking about their weekend. Team members number three and four are sitting centre stage behind a table, writing. Colleague number five marches onto stage and everyone gets it immediately: that's the aggressive client they talked about earlier. He walks alongside the table and in passing, slaps one of the team members on the head. Startled, he says: "Hey, you!" and looks at the colleague sitting next to him. "Oh, don't bother," he replies and continues writing. The coffee drinking colleagues have witnessed the whole scene but don't react and continue their conversation. At the beginning of the play, the spectator-colleagues were laughing and making jokes: "Yeah, exactly, take your time having coffee" and "You should exaggerate, not play it like it is!" The instant their colleague gets slapped, the atmosphere changes completely: the room becomes silent, some team members turn pale. At the end of the scene, the actors are rewarded with a lukewarm applause.

These visual drama techniques appeared to make teams face their group's dynamic in a very immediate and impactful way. An illustrative quote from one of the feedback forms handed in after the session described above appears to confirm this: "Only when I watched all this happening from a distance, I realised that this is exactly how we are! That's just horrible! We don't stand up for each other!" Very dynamic drama techniques, like active socio-drama and role play, were perceived as less effective, focussing too much on future possibilities, drawing away attention from what was happening in the present situation, or they evoked resistance because team members did not yet feel the necessity to develop new skills or behavioural patterns.

Letting go: For this stage, slow and physical drama techniques that emphasise becoming consciously aware of feelings that arise were felt to be most effective. An example of such a technique is a slower form of socio-drama which emphasises conscious perception of physical and emotional sensations, as described below:

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A team that is clinging too much to its leader stages its current situation. Chairs are pulled close together, people sitting on them with their backs facing the outside world, forming a closed circle. When asked about their emotions in this setting, a couple of team members mention feeling safe, secure, nice and warm. However, some of their colleagues, including the team leader, feel literally and emotionally suffocated, lacking room, overview and air. When the chairs are put further apart, some team members experience a lot more breathing space, but others start panicking slightly and try to push the team leader's chair back to a more close-by position. When invited to reflect on the nature and cause of their reaction, they realise that their panic stems from not knowing how to really help their clients, from feeling powerless, incapable and that they want their team leader to do the work for them.

Another technique that seemed helpful in this stage was (re)viewing video recordings made earlier, stopping them at the moments that most provoked anxiety and reflect on what team members felt then and there. Quick, energetic drama techniques were not felt to be effective in this stage. Becoming aware of deeper emotions required a slower pace than dynamic techniques offered.

Creativity: Drama techniques echoing the playful and energetic atmosphere of this stage were seen as most effective and were perceived as enhancing risk taking and team creativity. Dynamic socio-drama was one of such techniques used, so was self-directed theatre, in which team members play a short scene, reflecting their current and now unwanted behaviour. Other team members become the directors of this play, suggesting alternative ways to deal with the same situation. The actors follow these instructions, and during a debrief the whole team analyses what suggestions worked best. Dynamic sculpting was perceived as another useful technique in this stage. Here the team forms a series of living sculptures, in which they portray their current situation, the new desired one, and the steps necessary to get from one to the other.

Drama techniques with a slower, more reflective pace took away from the creative energy and were not considered effective during this stage: neither were training techniques, as they confronted team members too much with the things they had yet to develop. One team member confirmed this view, saying: *"I told you so. I am no good at this. It's no use trying something new"*.

Action: The teams' focus shifted in the action stage to the application of new behaviour in their day to day practice, and drama techniques that train team members in the skills necessary to make that change were found to be most effective. Such techniques include role play and clinics, where team members learn about the effect of their behaviour by literally experiencing it from their counterparts' points of view. Below is an example from one of the teams:

One team's result was hampered by the unclear and untimely information they received from a small group of its members, responsible for a first step in their production process. In a clinic, these 'sub-teams' changed places to experience what kind of information and behaviour would be most helpful when handing over work. In a role play following this clinic, team members trained the desired new behaviour.

Drama techniques that mainly focussed on reflection were felt to be less helpful at this stage: they tended to divert the attention back to internal dynamics and away from the desired behavioural changes.

In summary, Figure 1 shows how connections might be made between team coaching stage and the type of drama techniques used.

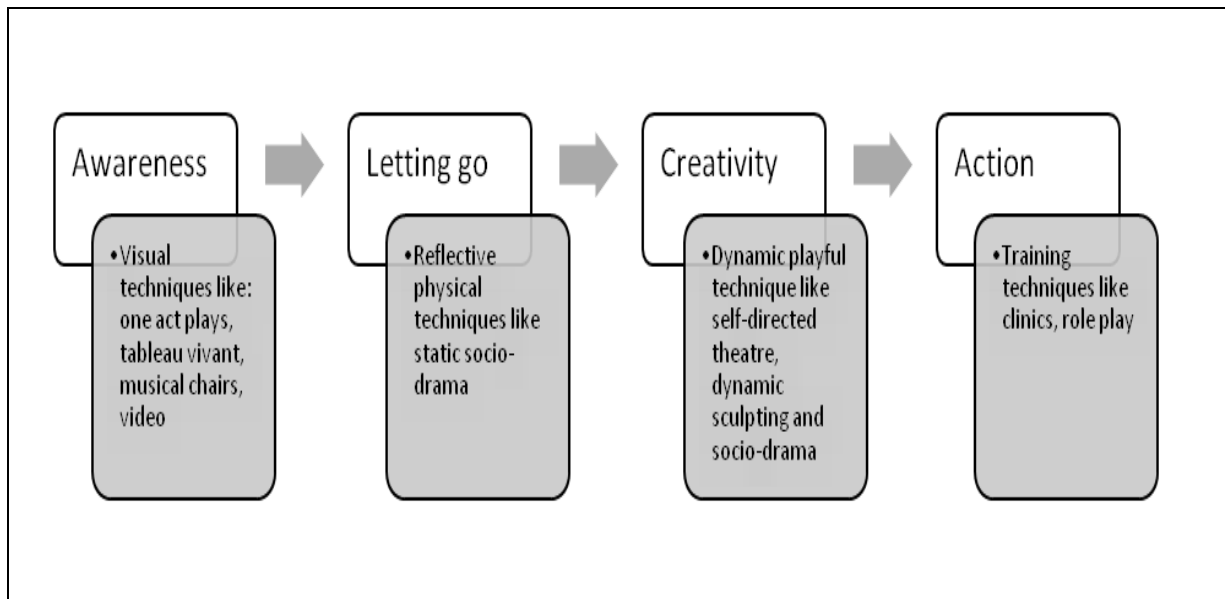


Figure 1: stages of coaching process and drama techniques found to be most helpful

Effects of drama techniques

Based on the literature a working proposition was formulated that drama techniques can contribute to team coaching because they are playful, physical and creative, adding to a safe learning environment, broadening the repertoire of bringing into awareness unconscious processes, and helping teams develop alternative behaviour. Results from the multiple case study are in line with this proposition but suggest some additional facets.

Team leaders and members indicated that the playfulness of the techniques made it safer and easier to look at their own behaviour. A quote from a team member illustrates this: *“It was a bit like playing a game. No real harm would be done if you got it wrong the first time around.”* Team coaches found these techniques helpful in creating a safe holding space, encouraging teams with cold feet to overcome their hesitation to discuss the more daunting issues between them and to experiment with new behaviour.

Drama techniques also put team members into (physical) motion, which was experienced as giving them an additional way to become more conscious of group dynamics. Team members in an acting role reported becoming very much aware of what physical and, connected to that, emotional feelings the enacted situations evoked, more so than they had achieved earlier through talking and thinking about these same situations. They described the impact as profound and immediate. For team members in a spectator role, watching their colleagues’ performance triggered a lot of recognition and a wide range of emotions. Taking the time to become consciously aware of these feelings, both within themselves and in the team as a whole and verbalising and sharing them gave a much deeper insight into what was going on below the surface. This elaborates upon the proposition in the sense that not only people personally and physically experiencing the drama techniques but also those watching the enactment, found drama techniques to be helpful. The following description highlights this:

Three members of a healthcare team, helping clients in making and selling art, are playing ‘musical chairs’. Each of them is sitting in a chair symbolising one of their three fields of activity: healthcare, art and commerce. They are discussing a real work-life example, each of them emphasising the values

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that are inherent to the field of activity they are representing. The team member representing art advocates the client's artistic freedom, while the commercial team member pushes on saleability. Their discussion becomes pretty heated, while the 'healthcare' team member just leans back and sits in silence. After five minutes, team members switch chairs, restart their discussion, and the same pattern emerges: an animated discussion between art and commerce, while healthcare holds its tongue and withdraws. During their debriefing, team members could link this directly to their day to day practice. Talking about their primary task, healthcare, was something they rather avoided, they now understood. They tended to lean back when the topic would arise. Reflecting on their behaviour and the underlying feelings driving this behaviour, they concluded that two sources of anxiety were at play: fear of confronting each other with opposing views and fear of falling short in their knowledge and skills. Talking about art and commerce helped them avoid the more profound but scarier discussions about the quality of healthcare. Or as one of the team members described it: "Art versus commerce is so much easier. It avoids arguments and they won't find out I'm really not that sure about what I am doing."

Team members and coaches indicated they felt drama techniques also enhanced creativity by helping teams to act and think more freely and inviting them to approach issues with much more imagination, using more of the known and unknown talents and knowledge present in their team.

But these playful and physical drama techniques did not have a positive effect in all teams: in teams perceived as displaying a lot of cynical behaviour, drama techniques were found to be counterproductive. Sketches and role playing became edgy and nonsensical, giving no room for reflection. One of the team members explained this with the following statement: "*Oh well, this is how we always react when things become too difficult, we just turn it into a joke.*" Teams with a strong rational inclination dismissed drama techniques as being too childish or vague as these comments attest: "*What do you take us for? A couple of toddlers?*" and "*Is there any proof this actually works?*"

Creating the right conditions: role and skills of the team coach

According to the coaching literature, team coaching should be approached as a process of learning and change, for which team coaches need create the right conditions (Clutterbuck, 2007). Key factors include providing a holding environment, which feels safe enough for teams to learn and experiment, and helping teams use alternative approaches to see what might be going on below the surface, for example by making explicit what projected feelings are manifested within the team coach.

Team coaches interviewed confirmed these roles, elaborating on them by describing some of the challenges they had met during coaching and by identifying the skills they found necessary to meet those challenges. One of the challenges found was the 'contagiousness' of group dynamics: the risk of being pulled into the existing dynamic of the team coached (Cox & Patrick, 2012). At moments when tension and anxiety were high, team coaches felt that teams were making an implicit but strong demand on them to 'play along' in this dynamic, rather than looking at its nature and root. As one team coach described this: "*Before you know it, you unconsciously go along with the dynamic and become part of the whole system.*" Being able to consciously notice when and how they were being pulled into the team's dynamic, and not give in to that pull but make it explicit in order to help the team see what might be going on, was considered an important skill to help teams learn and change, contributing both to creating a safe environment and to helping the team look at their own dynamic.

Looking at defensive patterns and at the underlying difficult emotions brought about a lot of anxiety and discomfort in the cases studied. In those instances, coaches felt challenged to contain these anxieties within themselves and not walk away from them, for example by making a quick joke to

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reduce tension or falsely soothe the team by reassuring them that things were not so bad. They found that containing their own anxiety set an example for the team to do the same, thus creating a holding space.

Though the challenges and skills mentioned above were seen as relevant for most team coaching processes addressing group dynamics, working with drama techniques required coaches to have a wider repertoire of skills and coaching styles, and strongly appealed to their ability to consciously switch between those styles. As one of the interviewed coaches described:

One moment, you have to be playful and energetic to warm up a group, without getting carried away too much. The next moment, all your attention and energy is needed to maintain the tension and stay with the anxiety that arises in the group. You have to be calm, patient, and stay with what is happening right at that moment, even if the group would much rather avoid all the emotional hassle.

Limitations and further research

Findings from this multiple case study are important in that they show how the integration of psychodynamic and coaching approaches can be used in a team setting. Even so, the research underlying this article has its limitations. Firstly, the number of cases is small and restricted to mainly non-profit organizations in Northern Europe, which might make findings and conclusions less representative and applicable for different organizational or cultural settings. Further and broader research might be of use here. Secondly, the researcher was involved as a coach or consultant in the cases studied, increasing the risk of researcher's bias. This risk has been limited by including successful and unsuccessful cases and by using several types of data from different sources, including interviews from at least two other parties involved in each case.

In all team coaching programmes studied, drama techniques were used. No comparison was made with programmes that included only verbal or cognitive approaches or approaches from different art forms such as music or the visual arts. Further research is necessary to draw conclusions about the relative effectiveness of the use of these techniques.

Another topic not taken into account in this research is the relationship between the nature and cause of the unconstructive group dynamics and the type of drama technique best used to understand and change this dynamic.

Discussion

Taking into account the limitations described above, findings from this research suggest that drama techniques can be helpful in team coaching programmes addressing unconscious defensive patterns. Their playful, physical and creative characteristics can help teams become aware of these patterns, let go of them and develop new, more constructive behaviours. Three factors are perceived as contributing to their effective use:

1. Going through all four stages of the team coaching process (awareness, letting go, creativity and action);
2. An appropriate fit between type of drama technique and the stage the team is going through;
3. Team coaches' ability to create a holding space, which involves containing both their own and group anxieties, their ability to notice and explicate group dynamics that are manifested within them, and their ability to switch to the style most appropriate for the stage the team is going through (varying from dynamic warming up to maintaining tension and containing anxiety).

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Building on these findings team coaches can help substantiate their design choices and interventions in coaching programmes, both for themselves and in the conversations they have with their clients. They can be used as a source of information about the expected course of a programme and about the preconditions required to increase the chance of making team coaching using drama techniques successful. In case of a very cynical or rational team, or when there is not enough time to go through the whole process from awareness to action for example, it might be advisable to discuss alternative options to help the team.

Findings can also help team coaches in designing their team coaching programmes, using both the findings about the different stages and about the fit between stages and types of drama techniques. Findings about the wide ranging repertoire of styles and skills that are seen as helpful, can help coaches to get a better insight into which skills they might want to develop for themselves, or in which cases it can be advisable to work with two coaches simultaneously to bring sufficient diversity to the programme and to support each other in dealing what is going on both the conscious and unconscious level.

Teams considering coaching might use these findings to make informed choices about what preconditions to consider when embarking on team coaching, what type of programme and team coach to work with. Findings might also give a better idea of what going through such a process requires and entails. Finally, both team coaches and teams may use the findings from this research as working propositions to be examined against their own experiences, and as a starting point for developing further knowledge about team dynamics, team coaching and the use of drama techniques.

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