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Academic Paper

What Do Team Coaches Experience at the End of a Client Relationship?

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Abstract

All coaching and business relationships have an ending. Here we explore the reflections of experienced team coaches at this key stage of the client relationship. This is where coaches consider the choices they have made, how they responded to the client, their relationship to the wider organisation and the other key stakeholders. By seeking to explore how seasoned coaches interpret their experiences, we gain a window into how they have developed a mastery of their craft. Using an IPA methodology, this study contributes to evidence-based research in the discipline, practice, and purpose of systemic team coaching.

Keywords

systemic team coaching, endings, relationship,

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Introduction

This study commenced with the following questions: What really matters at the end of a team coaching relationship? What should we be paying attention to, to facilitate learning for team coaches, their clients, and organisational sponsors? How can coaches put 'last things first to end well'? (Cox, 2010). By exploring team coaches' interpretations of relationship endings in practice, we can build our knowledge through lived experience (Merriman & Bierema, 2013) and explore how these seasoned practitioners have developed their craft. This study contributes to both evidence-based practice (Grant, 2016) and academic research.

By gaining insight through lived experience, we can move our attention beyond definitions, coaching outcomes, and effectiveness to focus on the coaches' purpose and 'what they are trying to achieve in their work' (Bachkirova, 2020a, p. 9). Also, by suspending the constraints of proving their worth, credibility or impact, we create space for coaches to consider how they use their situated cognition (Larkin, Eatough & Osborn 2011), learn to develop their practice, and to build reflexivity and construct meaning in context (Freeman, 2020). Research that puts the voice of the practitioners at its centre and explores their 'professional-self in action' (Bachkirova, 2020a) is limited within the team coaching domain. However, the drive for research that evidences

quantifiable outcomes and assumes that 'what is measurable is effective' (Jones, Napiersky, & Lyubovnikova, 2019) predisposes the purpose of team coaching and the importance of the coaches themselves, leading to an overly positivist perspective (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015). Indeed, coaching is essentially a phenomenological process (Rajasinghe, 2019; Bachkirova, Rose, & Noon, 2020b) and is at the 'intersection of experience and meaning-making' (Freeman, 2020, p.1). Additionally, whilst there is a drive to focus on the effectiveness of team coaching (Peters & Carr, 2019; Murphy & Sayer, 2019), the stated end goal of coaching is typically to foster client self-efficacy and independence (Cox, 2010; Hastings & Pennington, 2019) which suggests that it is the team which has ownership of the outcomes. Adult learning is a process that is self-directed, and the team decides what, when and how they respond using their own discretion. It is essentially an andragogical approach (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson 2015).

A coaches' practice may draw from different philosophies and disciplines and is correlated to their values and the purpose of their work (Saunders et al., 2015). Therefore, they may be coaching for skills, performance, or development, for example in O'Connor & Cavanagh (2016). Similarly, studies and literature reviews by Peters and Carr (2013, 2019) and Jones, Napiersky and Lyubovnikova (2019) highlight the range of coaching practice, including external coaches, internal coaches, leaders as coaches and peer coaches – all working in different contexts, with different skills sets. Iordanou, Hawley and Iordanou (2018) note that internal coaches have 'prior knowledge', and this brings unique ethical issues to the boundaries of their client relationships. Therefore, coaches have diverse relationships with the teams they coach in terms of power, distance, and influence (Louis & Dichon, 2018). In conclusion, when taking these variables into account, the synthesis of what team coaches do 'compares apples with pears' (Fillery-Travis & Cox, 2018). For clarity and homogeneity this research has concentrated on the particular discipline of systemic team coaching and included external coaches with relevant training, who work in organisational settings, and have a commercial relationship with their client, allowing consistent themes and patterns of experience to emerge through intimate engagement with the research subject (Bachkirova et al., 2020b).

A team coach is at times a trainer, facilitator, consultant, and coach (Hartog, 2019). As a result, it is a multi-disciplinary practice and draws on a variety of interventions from 'informative' to 'supportive' (Heron, 2001). Consequently, team coaching as a paradigm remains challenging to define purely within the boundaries of the dyadic helping professions from which it is clearly distinctive (Jones et al., 2019). This raises a question around the additional theoretical development that is needed for a team coach to develop their craft. Therefore, this study draws upon research in the fields of organisational development and consulting, as well as business management (Grant, 2016). For clarity, these simplified definitions apply:

A team is:

> *A small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable (Katzenback & Smith, 2005, p.45).*

The system referenced is situated within the organisation and business context:

> *A system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organised in a way that achieves something […] a system must consist of three kinds of things: elements, interconnections and a function or purpose (Meadows, 2011, p.11).*

Systemic Team Coaching is defined as:

> *A process by which the team coach works with a whole team, both when they are together and when they are apart, to help them both improve their collective performance and how they work*

> *together, and how they develop their collective leadership to more effectively engage with all their key stakeholder groups to jointly transform the wider business (Hawkins, 2019, p.39).*

The coaching field:

> *The "life space" (Lewin,1951) of the individual, group, or organisation; that is, the psychological environment as it exists for individuals, groups, and organisations. (Stevenson, 2018, p.171).*

This paper includes a literature review tracking the evolution of systemic team coaching as a discipline, relevant social science, and business management research. The methodology provides an overview of the design process, sampling, and data collection also a diagrammatic overview of the core elements of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings give a voice to the coaches themselves. The analysis and discussion are divided into three core themes: The Team Coach in the Field; The Team Coach as Guide; The Team Coach Withdrawal. The conclusion explores the implications for contracting, practice, coach development and reflexivity.

Literature Review

The literature explored offers insight and clarity about the core elements of the research question, 'what do team coaches experience at the end of a client relationship?'. By exploring the origins and purpose of systemic team coaching it also offers a frame of reference for the interpretation of the research findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Systemic Team Coaching

Academic and peer reviewed research dedicated to the discipline of systemic team coaching is negligible. However, Hawkins (2014) acknowledges that over 70 practitioners and academics have contributed to its' development. The literature (Hawkins, 2011; 2014; 2019) has been continuously updated through 'professional wisdom' (Grant, 2016). To date, the literature has suggested that the purpose of team coaching is to improve team effectiveness or develop high performing teams (Peters & Carr, 2013; Hawkins 2011; 2019). However, in a recent blog, Hawkins (2020) asserts that this is now an outdated objective in a post COVID-19 world as this cultivates a positivist approach to team coaching that is overly mechanistic. Our focus should now be on value creation (Goedhart & Koller, 2020). Hawkins further asserts that team coaching should create interdependency through developing a team-of-teams culture (McCrystal, 2015), as opposed to driving internal competition amongst teams to achieve purely performance related goals. This is supported by Shuffler and Cronin (2019) who suggest that traditional static teams no longer exist and are an outdated paradigm. A post COVID-19 perspective shifts team coaching further towards the boundaries of organisation development and holism (Chidiac, 2018; Stephenson, 2018; Hawkins, 2020). Taking a socio-cultural perspective, Louis and Dichon's (2018) research supports Hawkins revised opinion, in that coaches should view themselves as 'active political agents' within the organisation. The empowering coach becomes an 'integrator' by working with (not against, or being used by) the system, a 'moderator' by enabling the client to make organisational change and/or a 'revealer' by surfacing hidden agendas and power dynamics to shift stakeholder relationships. Therefore, systemic team coaching invites the coach to work within the domain of power and space to build 'collaboration and co-adaptability' amongst multiple teams.

Team Coaching Process

The process of team coaching gives us insight into what coaches do in practice, Hauser (2014) and Maseko, Van Wyk and Odenhaal (2019) in their qualitative studies seek to synthesise both research and experience in a workplace setting. They explore what experienced team coaches (practice minimum 3-5 years) do through in-depth interviews and a thematic analysis. However,

whilst Maseko et al. (2019) focus on how to create the conditions for success at the implementation of team coaching, their paper goes on to capture seven themes and then extrapolate this to define 'critical success factors'. This attempt to create universal laws (Saunders et al., 2015) seems at odds with their constructivist, interpretivist positioning. Hauser's (2014) research illustrates how a coach's behaviour and motivation shifts throughout the team coaching life cycle from beginning to end. Hauser (2014) focuses on accredited external coaches through a robust criteria-based selection process. Influenced by Gestalt theory and the cycle of experience (Perls,1952), Hauser (2014, 2018) isolates a team coaches' role at the end of a client relationship, or at 'withdrawal'. Hauser labels a team coaches' role at the end of an assignment as an 'Assimilator' who:

> *Helps the team transition from active engagement to culmination and detachment from the coaching engagement. The assimilator witnesses the teams independent use of their acquired specialist expertise, acknowledges, and helps the team assimilate its increased capacity for team performance and effectiveness (Hauser, 2014, p.62).*

Both articles (Hauser, 2014; Maseko et al., 2019) offer insight into the 'how' of team coaching, (one contextual, one behavioural). This paper offers a deeper exploration of being an 'Assimilator'.

Team Coaching Relationship

The dynamics of the coach and client relationship is significantly different to dyadic coaching and it, 'is important to acknowledge the variation in features of developmental relationships' (de Hann & Gannon, 2017). The client relationship may include: 'sponsor, team, organisation, stakeholders and/or customers' with a possible added dimension of a co-coach (Hawkins, 2014). Wotruba's (2016) paper offers us further insight into the client relationship, acknowledging that the multi-relational context is complex and demands more of the coach to sustain relationships. The power dynamic in relationships becomes prominent in team coaching and organisational interventions where change is a desired outcome (Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2015; Louis & Diochon, 2018).

Dyadic coaching has a wealth of research on relationships including a meta-analysis by Graßmann, Schölmerich, and Schermuly (2019) and a systematic review by de Hann and Gannon (2017). They indicate that the relationship between the coach and client is the key element in positive coaching outcomes. Wotruba (2016) suggests this is true of team coaching engagements, where the relationship is simultaneously held with the team members and team as an entity and is sustained by trust. Given the complexity of the organisational environment and the demands on the team coach to sustain trust within multiple relationships (Wotruba, 2016), re-contracting is required throughout the relationship. This capability is also evident in the new EMCC Global (2020) framework. Maseko et al., (2019) also highlight the need to establish a clear coaching agreement at implementation and to develop ongoing strategies for monitoring progress. Cox (2010) also notes the importance of beginnings in coaching relationships as they are critical to 'ending well'.

Coaching and Business Relationship Ending

Team coaching is not alone in the lack of research into endings, de Haan and Gannon (2017, p.197) also highlight the lack of research attention to key stages of the coaching process in dyadic coaching, especially the end of a coach client relationship, where they 'experience relatively intense feelings'. Iordanou et al., (2018), also raise the consideration of ethics at the end of the dyadic coaching relationship and the importance of advance preparation for the termination of the work so that the coach can smoothly transition into a different role.

Research in business relationships offers some valuable insight, Halinen and Tähtinen (2002), Havila and Tähtinen (2012) and Bowden, Gabbott and Naumann (2015). Their research suggests that commercial relationships that are trusting, participative and co-creative tend to weather the ups and downs of variability in performance. When this is the case, the relationship has a low

propensity for disengagement, or to end early. However, if more transactional and utilitarian it will end at the first hurdle; research by Wortuba (2016) also supports this assertion. Therefore, the literature suggests that a team coach should pay close attention to factors that indicate a client has shared expectations, alignment of purpose, and a relational predisposition at the outset, to achieve the end in mind.

Methodology

The choice of IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) was informed by the nature of the research question, 'What do team coaches experience at the end of a client relationship?'. As Rajasingehe (2019) and Bachkirova et al., (2020b, p.75) assert, phenomenology is closely aligned to coaching as, 'coaches pay close attention to the subjective experiences of clients and the meaning they make'. IPA allowed a focus on 'what they think and what they feel' (Smith & Osborn, 2008) at a 'critical bridge' (de Haan & Gannon, 2017) in the team coaching relationship.

The research was conducted with external coaches who had undergone Systemic Team Coaching training and worked for client organisations in a commercial relationship. The coaches worked with leadership teams, 'where team coaches, leaders and organisations learn from each other' (Turner, 2019). Research participants were selected using a snowball methodology 'which amounts to referral by participants' (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2012; Bryman, 2016). The coaches had at least five years' experience and worked externally to organisations, this aligned with both Hauser's (2014) and Wotruba's (2016) studies. See Table 1.0 for details of the study participants.

Table 1.0: Study Participants

Coach Participant	Gender	Country	Practice
Fred	M	SA	Executive & STC, Faculty, MSc
Rebecca	F	UK	Consultant, Executive & STC, Faculty, supervisor, PhD
Anna	F	H	Previously a CEO, Executive & STC, MSc
Zoe	F	SA	Executive & STC, Faculty, MSc
Frank	M	US	Academic, Executive, STC, Faculty, MBA
Bill	M	UK	Previously a CEO, Executive & STC, Faculty, Supervisor, MA.

The semi-structured interview included questions relating to endings as raised by Thornton (2016; 2017):

> *For a team, it is important for them to notice what they are losing with your departure, and what they are gaining. What has your work meant for them? What have you represented (at a psychological level)? Have you become in some sense a part of the team, so that it is a loss to which they now need to adjust? What are your own feelings at the end of this assignment- what are you losing? (Thornton, 2016, p.251).*

The interviews were conducted one-to-one for up to 90 mins in total, using the British Psychological Society (BPS) internet mediated research (IMR) protocols and Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey and Lawless (2019) digital research methodology as a guidance. Interviews allowed for an in depth look at the phenomena, 'to give the participants space to think, speak and be heard' (Smith et al., 2012). The audio files were digitally recorded over the internet using Zoom (a video-conferencing tool) for the creation of transcripts. The analysis of the transcripts was a multi-layered, phased but organic process, see Table 2.0.

Table 2.0: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Process

'From the particular to the shared, from the descriptive to the interpretive' (Smith et al., 2012) Taking a constructivist epistemology, interpretivist ontology		
↑	**PHASE 3: INTERPRETATION OF THE PHENOMENON (Gestalt)**	• Capture the 'essence of the lived experience' in a few words • Summarise 'what' and 'how' the participants experienced the phenomenon in a Long Paragraph.
↑	**PHASE 2: THEMATIC & MACRO ANALYSIS (Patterns in Themes & Super-Ordinate Themes: All Data)**	• Mind Map of Participant Super-Ordinate Themes • Table of Themes/Meanings, Subordinate and Super-Ordinate • Themes for all participants • Review Recurrent Themes/Meanings • Identify Divergence, Convergence, Commonality, and Individuality of • Themes and Meaning.
↑	**PHASE 1: IDIOGRAHIC & MICRO ANALYSIS Singular Participant Data (Immersive & Inductive)**	• Semantic Transcript of Audio Interview Recording (adding non-verbal utterances e.g., laughter) • 3 x Review of Original Transcript (First & Second Order Analysis) • Descriptive Comments (descriptions, assumptions, sound bites, acronyms, idiosyncratic figures of speech, emotional responses – participant & researcher) • Exploratory Comments (similarities, differences, echoes, amplifications, contradictions) • Conceptual Coding (researcher pre-understandings, emerging understandings & biographical presence) • Deconstruction (isolation of extracts, reading backwards) • Free Association & Underlining • Capture Emergent Themes or Meaning Units • Invite Participant Review of Emergent Themes & Meanings • Creation of Super-Ordinate Themes (abstraction, subsumption, polarisation, contextualisation, numeration & function • Repeat the above for each participant (researcher awareness that fore-structures have changed from prior interpretations, practice 'fresh eyes').
FOUNDATION: Heideggerian Phenomenological Perspective: Hermeneutic Circle (Interpretive, Iterative & Interactive) 'Phenomenology is an encounter. A way of being, becoming, living and moving through the world' (Vagle, 2018, p. XII) • The part (a word, a single extract, the interview) • The whole (the sentence, the complete text, the study) • The meaning (the participant, the researcher, the study, and the broader context – societal, cultural, and theoretical) • The researcher makes sense of the participant, making sense of their experience; a double hermeneutic.		
RESEARCH QUESTION: WHAT DO TEAM COACHES EXPERIENCE AT THE END OF A CLIENT RELATIONSHIP?		

Table 2.0 indicates the phases of the data analysis process. The individual participants interpretations of the phenomena were treated with utmost integrity by completing a first order analysis, including a textual and structural description of their lifeworld at the outset. This analysis was further developed in an 'interpretive, iterative, and interactive' (Alase, 2017) second-order review, facilitating an immersive experience to engage with the participant data and capture the overarching meanings, themes, and 'gestalt' (Smith et al., 2012). The idiographic analysis was conducted using a manual process to capture the participants descriptions and subsequent cumulative coding to identify the emerging themes and meaning units. The emergent themes were sent to each participant for comment, no additional material was volunteered. Finally, by integrative coding on Excel, the themes that described the 'essence' of the study were captured. Analysis was conducted by writing, mind-mapping and reflective voice notes to ensure a well-documented and transparent 'second order' interpretive process. Meaning making was conducted with 'empathy, questioning and understanding' (Smith et al., 2012). Applying what Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006) describe as, 'a phenomenological perspective' rather than a 'methodology'.

Findings

The interpretation of interview transcripts using the process described in Table 2.0 identified three overarching themes when considering, 'what do team coaches experience at the end of a client relationship?'. These themes related specifically to the nature of the coach, client relationship ending: (i) the coach relationship to the client system (ii) the coach relationship towards the team learning process and (iii) the coach relationship with the team and leader. All three dimensions of their experience had a significant influence on the ending process.

The thematic narrative is summarised in Table 3.0, including the overarching themes (super-ordinate theme), the key elements of those themes (sub-theme) and which participants contributed to each theme. The findings using the voice of the participants, and the subsequent exploratory discussion of these findings are presented in more detail below.

Table 3.0: Super-ordinate and Sub-Themes

Super-ordinate Theme	Sub-Theme	Participant Interview
1. The Team Coach in the Field – The Systemic Relationship	1.1 Purpose	Fred, Rebecca, Anna, Zoe, Frank, Bill
	1.2 Who is the Client?	**Organisation:** Rebecca, Anna, Bill, Zoe **Society:** Fred, Frank, Rebecca
	1.3 Navigating Systemic Forces & Cultural Dimensions	Fred, Rebecca, Anna, Zoe, Frank, Bill
	1.4 Power	Zoe, Fred, Anna, Frank
	1.5 Gender	Anna, Rebecca
2. The Team Coach as Guide: The Learning Relationship	2.1 Learning Process	Fred, Rebecca, Anna, Zoe, Frank, Bill
	2.2 Begin with the End in Mind	Rebecca, Anna, Frank
	2.3 Sign and Signals	Fred, Rebecca Anna, Zoe, Frank, Bill
3. The Team Coach Withdrawal: The Human Relationship	3.1 Paying Witness	Fred, Rebecca, Anna, Zoe, Frank, Bill
	3.2 Rite of Passage	Fred, Bill
	3.3 Ceremonies and Rituals	Anna, Zoe, Bill.

Team Coach in the Field: The Systemic Relationship

This theme considers the broader context in which the team coach is working, which is outside of the team composition and their internal dynamics. Taking a systemic perspective, it includes their external environment, the wider organisation, key stakeholders, and the political, economic, social, and technical context. The research found that the systemic forces at play in the coaching field were both structural and cultural (psychological) including power, politics, gender, motivation, purpose, resource constraints and market maturity.

The coaching field had a powerful influence on the coaches' experience, this combined with their purpose to engender systemic awareness informed when to end the relationship; for example, if they sensed that the client prioritised internal dynamics and team composition rather than cultural transformation and stakeholder value creation. For all, coaching systemically was more than a discipline, many used the word 'belief' or quasi-religious metaphors to describe their philosophical stance.

> *Bill: The scales fall from my eyes, YES!" .... "This was a wonderful road to Damascus moment…. that set me on a path.*

By working with leadership teams, the coach influenced the system, and in turn, facilitated 'relational bridges' that connected the team in a symbiotic relationship with their key stakeholders. This was essentially an organisational development approach. The coaches were motivated by the 'intellectual challenge'. There was a parallel between the nature of their approach to the work and the field in which they worked; both required a holistic or 'gestalt' perspective. They all sought out and thrived in 'complexity'. Their work was typically described as an organic, living, and elemental process.

> *Bill: I'm focusing on inside the skin, but then, that's permeable […] and so […] the team is sitting within a context and you know, is, connected to it.*

For some, this connectivity reached beyond the organisation to the macro environment, and on occasion, beyond for societal impact.

> *Frank: It crosses so many places; philosophically, economically, socially, technologically.*

They looked towards the long-term sustainability and progression of the organisation.

> *Zoe: It's the whole system that's really important. It is the future of this organisation.*

However, as the purpose of the coaching was to instigate change beyond the internal dynamics of the team, the coaches were intentionally positioning themselves amongst the systemic forces of organisational structure and culture, to create consciousness. All highlighted that systemic forces could not be distanced or ignored, there was a sense of their presence both within the coach and the coaching space.

> *Rebecca: I'm in the system and the system's in me, you can't separate those things.*

The systemic forces had a direct impact on the nature of the ending of the client relationship; be it at the instigation of the organisational sponsor, team leader or the coaches themselves. Consequently, those forces that impacted the team were experienced through the coaches' ability to sense and tune into their environment, ostensibly acting as an interpreter to the prevailing organisational climate. Facing into their newly acquired knowledge required courage from the coach, and in turn from the team.

> *Fred: We've exposed something within the organisation which the organisation wasn't ready to let go of, and we got a lot of resistance.*

The coaches had to make a choice as to whether they would continue with their work and engage with any resistance they evoked. If they decided to leave, there was due consideration about the nature of their departure. Coaches asked themselves, should they leave when the team thinks they have done enough, or when the coach perceives they can no longer add any value? What would be the knock-on effect to the organisation of their exit? Typically, these choices were made using their own judgement, in discussion with a co-coach or in supervision.

> *Rebecca: I think there's a difference between me and my co-coach and for me it's not about a happy ending, it's about value.*

The coaches often considered their own limitations, the realities of the organisation's culture and if it would support the coach's purpose, to create systemic awareness and change. They were comfortable to walk away, and this was not a purely commercial decision.

> *Zoe: What's needed is a complete restructuring of the organisation. And […] that's not what we do […] it was a big decision to make".*

Sometimes, a relationship failed to move beyond the transactional due to constrained resources, or a lack of commitment by the leader or team members. This may be down to the immaturity of the business environment, the cultural landscape, or the coach themselves. The coaches were finely attuned towards, and in relation with, the cultural and contextual setting. The coaches described their experiences using impactful words such as: 'bullying', 'corruption', 'disempowerment' and 'fragmentation'.

The coaches encountered ethical dilemmas, philosophical differences, and hard business realities. Their work asked them to be courageous, take personal risk and to work with internal discomfort or external opposition. When endings were instigated by the client, the coaches typically made sense of the decision by looking beyond the individual or team to the broader field of the organisation,

business, societal or national context. The coaches omitted to portion blame on individuals and retained a 'systemic perspective'.

A common thread in the coach data was that they entered the coaching field with a clear sense of self as team coach (Jacox, 2020) and with an intention to create 'systemic awareness' and 'change' or 'transformation' at a leadership team and therefore organisational level (Hawkins, 2019). The coaches were engaged with their 'professional selves' (Bachkirova, 2020a). However, the experience of the coaches in this study was that if their intention as a team coach was misaligned with the client, the team or organisation's leader; or undertaken without considering organisational readiness for example with respect to culture, resources, and structure then the coaching work was likely to be brought to an abrupt end. This study highlights the need for the coach to be explicit about their intention, purpose, and approach (Lawrence & Whyte, 2010) as systemic team coaching is significantly different to team performance coaching or inter-personal team building (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2016) and this may not always be fully understood by the commissioning client. To retain alignment with the client, contracting and re-contracting was an essential aspect of the process.

Even if the coach's purpose was aligned with the client, for the coach to create trust and a deeper connection with the team (Wotruba, 2016) they needed to continuously demonstrate the ability to interpret the field in which they were working and make meaning for their client. Here a 'hermeneutic circle' was created, (Heidegger, as cited in Smith et al., 2012, p.35) with the coach making sense of their experience in the coaching field, interpreting this experience to inform the team coaching process, and in turn the team making sense of the learning process to make changes in their system, which is the coaching field. Therefore, the coach needs to be practiced at a socio-cultural level, acting as an 'integrator' to instigate systemic change (Louis & Dichon, 2018; Schein & Schein, 2018).

The research offered three key insights into how a coach's relationship to the coaching field and systemic forces brings about an ending:

- a misalignment between the values, ethics and world view of the coach and client, whereby the coach declines the work post initial inquiry, or ends the relationship because of a perceived threat to their professional identity (Jacox, 2020)
- the coach and the teams' purpose are misaligned with the wider organisations culture and structure; therefore, the coach is unable to act as an 'integrator', possibly through the immaturity of their practice or because they become trapped within the role of 'isolator' or are 'limited' in their scope to add value or instigate change (Louis & Dichon, 2018)
- a significant structural change which interrupts the dynamics of the coaching field, such as a reorganisation, a rapidly changing business context or a reduction in available resources impact the organisation's readiness for change (Cheung-Judge & Holbeche, 2015).

The Team Coach as Guide: The Learning Relationship

The team coach acted as a guide for the team throughout their learning relationship. The coaches experienced continuous uncertainty, and they embraced this and worked with it. The learning process for the team could be derailed at any time due to internal changes in the team, e.g., loss of the team leader, or changes in organisational priorities. They purposefully guided the client towards a systemic perspective and way of working, and this 'shift' or 'transformation' was their purpose. There was no sense of sole ownership of the learning process by the coach. By contracting and re-contracting, the coach and client developed a 'learning partnership' that deepened over time, usually several months. Throughout their work the coaches looked for signs and signals that new learning was embedded. The coach adjusted their approach as the client relationship evolved. For example, from the incisive and diagnostic approach of a 'surgeon', 'doctor' or 'auditor' to that of a 'guide' or 'navigator'. The coach approach shifted from 'depth', 'incision' and 'laser focus' to 'light

touch', 'leaving space' and 'nudging'. A coach may initially have been hired because of their expertise or status but they sought to move quickly from expert to partner. There was no sense that the coaches set the direction or the objectives, the destination was owned by the team.

> *Rebecca: Sometimes it's important to bring expertise, and sometimes it's important to challenge and say, 'What are we doing here?'*

The coaches differed in the amount of clarity that they needed to employ to signpost the end of the team coaching process. Contracting allowed them to begin with the end in mind. Rebecca, Anna, and Frank tended towards a more structured approach. Both Anna and Frank preferred to agree team goals and objectives upfront to engender a sense of achievement or effectiveness both for themselves and the team. Rebecca chose to set boundaries around timescales to plan for a scheduled ending.

> *Anna: At the beginning of the process, I tried to set up some measurable KPI's.*

Fred and Bill took a more organic and flexible approach, which led to a more emergent process. Fred sought 'playfulness' and 'experimentation'.

> *Fred: What it's going to evolve into I've got no idea, there's a bit more facilitation up front, after that it's just let's pitch up…and we work with what is.*

Bill and Zoe emphasized the dynamic nature of the work environment and the challenge this presented, a coach may encounter significant change which makes the initial contract irrelevant or could bring the work to an unexpected close.

> *Bill: Less [than] a third ever finished on plan within time. The bulk of them […] there has been restructuring of the organisation, […] change of the leader, two or three or four people in the team have changed.*

A unifying theme was what the coaches saw as their purpose; it was not purely to deliver objectives or outcomes, but more importantly it was to instil a different way of working, thinking and being; systemic awareness. There was no mention of a 'high performing team'. There was a common focus on the 'learning experience'. Sometimes, this caused a tension at the end of the relationship between the need for the coaches to validate their own capability and their desired outcome of autonomy for the team:

> *Frank: We're going to pick up the metrics from these retrospective interviews about what we're really measuring, and what's changed.*

They continuously sought evidence of a teams' development through experience and by observing how they worked together across the system, with their stakeholders and with each other. This was an iterative process:

> *Rebecca: I've equipped them with […] the eyes and ears to be able to review their own process to, to hold each other accountable.*

They also looked for signs of positive changes within the team's transitional work practices that would demonstrate the team were learning:

> *Bill: Whenever you see a new member join […] and the team is inducting them […], if you get to witness that, that's a very satisfying conclusion.*

To construct the most appropriate ending, the coaches shared how they needed to gradually step out of the coaching space; a sophisticated practice. The timing of a transition was unique to each

team and their context. Each assignment offered the coach a valuable new learning experience and deep professional satisfaction. It married their entire range of capabilities, as Zoe commented, "I love the energy of the new learning".

For the team coach their role as navigator could be categorised into three areas: (i) the ability to comprehend the complexities of the coaching field itself (ii) the practitioner tools and techniques required to work with the field and context, and in turn co-create a learning environment for the team and (iii) business acumen, to understand the broader implications of systemic change for the team, leader, and organisation. Beyond business fundamentals (Widdowson, Rochester, Barbour, and Hullinger, 2020), systemic team coaches working with executive leadership teams require astute commercial awareness and a knowledge of business terminology, governance, and the fiduciary responsibilities unique to these leaders. The coaches described the system influences at 'play' including internal and external stakeholders, the organisations' structure, and culture as well as the external business context; what James, Mavin and Corlett (2020) describe as having an 'ecosystem mode of awareness'. It was evident that the coaches' work required more than an understanding of individual psychology, dyadic coaching, and team dynamics (Hartog, 2019). Although the EMCC Global standards (2020) include multi-stakeholder contracting for coaching assignments, they may not put a strong enough emphasis on organisational culture and business or societal context for the purposes of systemic team coaching.

In terms of practice, Stevenson's (2018) integrated OD consulting model and Chidiac's (2018) Relational Organisational Gestalt approach captures many of the core concepts and capabilities described or experienced by the coaches, for example the interplay and relatedness of individual, self and other, team and organisation; when you work with one you work with all. And, integrating the practices of holism, Gestalt, systems thinking and field theory. The coaches 'dance' with the team and make sense of competing systemic priorities for the team (Margolis, 2019) and 'play' or 'experiment' amongst interrelated social systems (Cross, Ernst, & Pasmore, 2013). They interpret multiple data sources from 'artifacts, espoused beliefs and values and underlying basic assumptions' (Schein & Schein 2018, p.17-25). This requires a high level of intellectual acuity and, coincidently, all the participants had a higher degree qualification; although this was not a criterion for participation in this research, it was a criterion for Hauser's (2014). What was also evident was that the participants drew on their somatic and emotional intelligence, or 'whole intelligence' Parlett (2015) to interpret their clients 'life space' (Lewin, 1951).

The mutability of the coaching context requires the coach to have the ability to move the client relationship beyond the transactional and utilitarian to a co-creative learning partnership towards its end (Halinen & Tähtinen, 2002; Havila & Tähtinen, 2012; Bowden et al., 2015). If the relationship fails to progress beyond the functional then it will be vulnerable and have a 'limited tolerance for failure' (Bowden et al., 2015). The research supports the conclusions of Maseko et al., (2019), that at pre-implementation there is a need to align core activities and expectations of outcomes, ensure that key enablers are in place and that constraints such as the necessary resources are addressed to ensure a good ending (Cox, 2010). Therefore, to co-create a generative learning process coaches would benefit from undertaking some initial inquiry as part of contracting, or 'pre-relationship' stage (Cox, 2010). This inquiry enables the coach to contract for a learning process that is congruent to their clients' culture (Hawkins, 2019) and the exploration of its' 'social, power, uncertainty and ambiguity, goal, and time orientations' (Hofstede, 2017). Attention to business culture may assist the coach when considering how to approach contracting to avoid early 'disengagement' (Bowden et al., 2015). The coaches described that their role was to gradually shift the team along the prescriptive-catalytic gradient (Heron, 2001), so that the team becomes self-directing by the end. This perspective was supported by Hauser's (2014) shapeshifting model, which highlights how the behaviours of the coach change as they move through the learning process from 'advisor' to 'assimilator'. The findings emphasised that 'embodied learning' for both the coach and the client, is best described as 'holistic, synthesised, acting, feeling, thinking and being-in-the world' Stolz (2014, p. 474). This type of embodied change is challenging to measure at the end, especially if the teams' composition is different.

The Team Coach Withdrawal: The Human Relationship

Reflecting on the coach's experiences of working at a human level offered them positive affirmation, this was not only in terms of their capabilities, but at a deeply personal level to all bar one participant, who retained a more intellectual and rationalist view. Bringing the coaches into contact with these emotions allowed them to pay witness to what they themselves contributed and their distinctiveness. The coaches experienced, 'delight, freedom, gratitude, pride, regret, loss, separation and wistfulness'.

Participants described the ending of the relationship between the team coach and the team as a withdrawal rather than a hard stop. Their experience was that they were moving from walking alongside as a guide, to taking a watching brief as a custodian and finally choosing to step aside and walk away. However, what was consistently core to this theme was the essence of the human connection. The relationship was at the heart of their work.

> *Zoe: I think that there is often a very strong bond that has formed between the coaches and the team" … I'll often feel the pain [of the separation].*

Notably, the end of the coaching work was not necessarily the end of the relationship. But the nature of the connection changed between the coach and client and the coaches felt that this warranted attention in its own right. This was a particularly emotive part of the research for the coaches, some described the interview process as 'therapeutic'. So, although the work with a team may end, often the relationship with the team leader, the sponsor, or the wider organisation was sustained through work with other teams or dyadic coaching. Sometimes, there was a gradual transition whereby the coach and team leader had a check-in every few months. Both Fred and Anna intentionally retained a relationship with the team leader, this was both a commercial and relational decision.

> *Fred: Does it ever end, or does it just morph, it morphs into […] a different kind of relationship.*

They concurred that the relationship with the team as an entity always came to an end. A team's transition to independence was frequently described as a rite of passage.

> *Fred: The 18-year-old can now go out into the world as an adult and do their own thing, and you have to take on a different role of observer.*

Their reflections indicated the value in paying witness to what they and the client had lost and gained at the end of a team coaching relationship. Requiring the coaches to mirror their own practice:

> *Bill: Get them to stop, in a sense, and say, so to almost force them to stop and reflect on, on what has been useful and effective.*

The coaches used a variety of emotions to describe what they themselves felt at the end of a systemic team coaching relationship. However, they often 'struggled' to articulate what the client team was losing by their exit at the end. There were several prolonged silences and requests to repeat the question, evidencing that this was not something they had considered before or found difficult to respond to. However, the coaches did show humility; they believed that their role was to 'empower' the team towards their desired future:

> *Zoe: So what are they gaining…autonomy. Independence.*

The reflective process heightened their awareness of their professional presence and what they had given of themselves and their influence on the relationship, their coaching identity. The

coaches acknowledged that at the end the clients lost the external perspective of the coach, along with their ability to hold the team as an entity and to fast-track their learning:

> *Bill: That independent voice that is not caught up, or is less caught up, in the system… My facilitation skills that […] help them move through […] a difficult exchange faster and more effectively.*

Most found the endings affirmative in the development of their professional self:

> *Frank: I think it elevates my game.*
>
> *Bill: A greater confirmation of who I am as a team coach.*
>
> *Rebecca: A sense of joy actually, […] there's been something achieved that there is a recognition of a change and a shift.*

The practice of recognising and responding to the change in the relationship with the team members was particularly important to the coaches and required proactive management of the transition to the end. This was a figurative juncture in the relationship for all the coaches and was central to the ending process.

> *Zoe: A little ritual […] just a simple way of […] changing the relationship. Our voice goes with you, now make it your collective voice*
>
> *Anna: I always do some ceremony […] because I was in Africa a lot of time and I implement the African tribe habits.*

A key role of the coach was to have the awareness to know when to move aside and allow the team to move into the final stage of the learning process:

- the coach requires an ability to shapeshift (Hauser, 2014) through the learning process to bring it to a successful conclusion; this adaptability is multi-faceted, it includes aligning the learning process with the cultural context e.g., situated cognition, and coach orientation (Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Maseko et al., 2019)
- to sustain the learning relationship over time; a coach requires a deep awareness of their own preferences, working styles and blind spots, because sustaining the learning partnership may at times require pragmatism (Jacox, 2020)
- the coach draws upon their repertoire of sense making and reflexivity about the adult learning process to guide the team and themselves towards the intentional conclusion of the coaching assignment, client self-efficacy (Merriam & Bierema, 2013; Knowles et al., 2015; Iordanou et al., 2018).

The findings of Bowden et al., (2015) suggested that the signature of a co-creative business relationship is ‘connectedness, empathy and caring’ and de Haan and Gannon, (2017, p. 197) describe the dyadic coaching relationship as that of ‘genuine interest, mutual attentiveness and positivity’. The current academic literature regarding team coaching often omits to discuss the nature of the human connection between the coach and the client, Wotruba (2016) and Thornton (2016, 2017) are notable exceptions. To date, team coaching research has lost touch with the relational aspect of its work, focusing on the efficacy and performance of individual teams, perhaps because of the necessity to prove its’ worth as an emerging discipline (Jones, et al., 2019; Peter’s & Carr, 2019). This research shows that when successful, at its heart the coach client affiliation is a long-term trusting relationship that co-creates ‘embodied learning’ (Stolz, 2014), ‘transformative change’ (Hawkins 2019, 2020), and perhaps even some ‘magic’ (Jacox, 2019). Therefore, systemic team coaching’s focus is less about performance or internal competition, and more about developing human connections for client teams to their wider system.

Conclusion

This study has 'shone a light' on the practice of systemic team coaches at a significant juncture, at the intersection between learning, outcomes, and the ending of their relationship with the team. The research question has resulted in revealing the intentions of the systemic team coaches, the skills and capabilities involved to bring the work to a successful conclusion (on their terms) and how the experience of ending informs their identity and future practice.

Theoretical Foundations for Development

There is a congruence between organisational development (OD) and systemic team coaching, particularly when working with executive leadership teams. When aligned, both have a mutual interest in working towards cultural change, transformation, and value creation. Therefore, systemic team coaches require knowledge of OD practices, and to demonstrate a sophisticated multi-disciplinary approach beyond dyadic coaching and team building. Also, the business savvy and intellectual acuity to appreciate the complexity of their clients political, economic, social, and technological context. Finally, the embodied awareness to interpret the cultural and psychological life space of the team to successfully navigate the systemic forces.

Contracting and Practice

The role of the coach evolves throughout the learning process and therefore contracting remains a continuous cycle of engagement and adaptation, it is a fluid and temporal activity. The alignment of the direction of the team, organisation and coach is a key factor in sustaining the learning partnership to the end. Coach mastery is the ability to successfully navigate the tension between the triad of the learning process to create systemic awareness and change, the teams' purpose and the nature of the coaching field whilst sustaining the client relationship. All are subject to challenges: the learning process due to cultural dimensions of power, team purpose due to structural changes and shifting business priorities and the coaching field due to external influences, COVID-19 being an excellent example. It is an organic and capricious setting in which to work.

Reflexivity

The coach navigates the learning process with a predetermined intention to change the nature of their role and coaching relationship with the team. The figurative nature of the emotional relationship, which is in converse correlation to the coaching intervention, becomes closer over time. This human connection is at the heart of building and sustaining trust for learning to happen. There is an emotional cost for the coach as they bring the work to an end, but this is reconciled with a sense of achievement and satisfaction. If the work ends early the pay-off for the coach is anchored in their reflective learning experience. The nature of the ending informs the coach's sense of self and the perceived efficacy of their practice. Reflexivity on what really matters at the end of a team coaching relationship offers coaches an opportunity to deepen their self-knowledge and further reveal their coaching identity.

Limitations of the Paper and Future Research

This is an interpretive study, focused on depth not breadth, and has small representations of different cultures. Therefore, the research cannot offer a model or framework of practice or make assumptions about international differences. The research also omitted to consider the role that co-coaching plays in the team coaches' experience. The researcher is a systemic team coach and therefore the interpretation of coaches' experiences may have been influenced by prior knowledge.

Recommendations for Future Research

Possible qualitative research studies could include:

- a coach's experience of the co-coach relationship as they withdraw
- variations in endings in other international and cross-cultural settings
- a comparative study of endings in a virtual coaching setting
- the relationship of supervision to endings in service of coaches' purpose and identity.

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