

What is the relationship between coaching interventions and team effectiveness?

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Abstract

This article concerns research undertaken with a cross-functional team preparing the market launch of a new product in Germany. The research aim was to find out whether there is a relationship between team and one-to-one coaching interventions and team effectiveness. Collaborative Action Research was chosen as a methodology to collect authentic, significant and trustworthy data from participants. Methods included semi-structured interviews, pre-test and post-test questionnaires, participant observation, individual and group feedback, and a researcher's diary. The aim of the study is to demonstrate the potential for tailored coaching interventions in relation to organisational outcomes.

Key Words: collaborative action research, team effectiveness, team coaching, team theory, communication.

Introduction

Team dynamics in organisations can play an important part in triggering both ineffective and destructive behaviour (Janis, 1972; Wegge, 2003). However, there are predominantly positive effects and outcomes that teamwork has for the individual, the team, and the organization with regard to improving effective performance (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Hackman, 1987; Clutterbuck, 2007). So the ultimate goal of team coaching is assisting a team to reach its maximum potential (Hackman & Wageman (2005).

The organisation that is the setting for this research has previously experienced several threatening situations and has learned to value preparation and well-planned strategies. The purpose of the action research study was to find out whether introducing a certain coaching model enhances a cross-functional team's effectiveness by addressing, identifying and solving its problem collaboratively. The family-owned international organisation involved in the study consists of 8000 employees worldwide with headquarters based in Germany. Due to the global economic crisis they experienced a loss of almost 35% in orders and -91,7 % net income for the financial year 2007/2008 creating serious consequences for the upcoming year. The main objective of the team was to establish an efficient and dynamic information exchange network that provides the participants with necessary, relevant and current information. One of the CEOs queried whether a high-performance team within their organisation would be able to bridge the gap between different departments and perform well or whether the notion of effective teams could be considered as "chasing ghosts". This concern informed the research question for this study: Can coaching interventions support team effectiveness?

Significant changes usually lead to an increase in anxiety, especially when the outcome of the project is uncertain (Edmondson, 2002). Due to the urgency of the current aggravated situation, and to minimise loss of customers concerning the new product launch, the success of the team required a well planned strategy and process to avoid inefficiency, time-wasting and costly pitfalls. The organisation's objective was to synergize the strengths of several departments in order to present a convincing product presentation. Combining theoretical and practical approaches might lead to an effective outcome (Graml, 2008).

Bryman (2001) considers action research as a suitable approach in which the researcher and co-researchers analyse and evaluate an existing problem and progress together towards an acceptable solution. The study might be informative for all participants insofar that it could trigger targeted actions which support creating the desired outcomes and enhance a “reciprocal learning relationship” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p.99).

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, a team is defined as a group of people that fulfils certain criteria such as size, complementary skills, sharing a common purpose, and performance goals. They must develop a common approach and hold themselves mutually accountable (Katzenbach & Smith 1993). Effectiveness represents the end result the team aims for; the positive influence the team has on its members or the improvement of the future performance by the team (Hackman, 1987). With regard to positive team results in this study, if the coaching interventions can serve as a framework for prospective teams within the organisation the Collaborative Action Research has been effective (Reason & Riley, 2008).

Literature

Little literature was found linking team coaching and team effectiveness, reflecting Clutterbuck's concern (2010) that evidence of leverage in team coaching is scarce. I also found no literature on combining team and individual coaching. However, there is an extensive literature on team effectiveness, which is discussed briefly below.

Team effectiveness

Teams are part of a complex system and therefore influenced by many environmental and external forces (Gladstein, 1984). Researchers have been fascinated by group phenomena for decades, especially the psychological aspects. For example, Milgram's experiment (1963) was meant to explain some of the group phenomena happening in World War II.

Effective teamwork

Research reflects the fact that effective teamwork has to be seriously considered as an answer to achieving fast and effective results. Gladstein (1984) for example, in co-operation with 100 sales teams, examined the impact of a group effectiveness model that concentrated on group process, group structure, and group effectiveness. Hackman, (1987) stressed the benefit of effective teams contributing to their organizations and Guzzo and Dickson (1996) examined in their study three crucial aspects related to team effectiveness: group composition, cohesiveness, and motivation. Campion and Medsker (1993) related job design, interdependence, composition, context, and process to pre-determined effectiveness criteria in their study, while Edmondson (2002) highlighted that in order to obtain desirable outcomes psychological safety was of essence. More recently, Hackmann and Wageman (2005) looked specifically at three aspects of team interactions that they identified as contributing to teamwork effectiveness: joint effort towards the task, deployed suitability of strategies teams used in relation to the task and the expertise of team members. Co-operation as opposed to competition is a requirement for successful teamwork according to Scholl (2005) and Pearsall and Ellis (2006) recommended that organizations pay heed to team design and understand the workflow within a team network and therefore, select corresponding staff on board.

Team cohesion

Intensive team cohesion can open the door to groupthink (Lord, 1997). However, Jordan *et al.* (2002) defined social cohesion as the dynamics that made members stay in a group. Their findings indicated that social cohesion had pivotal impact on team effectiveness. Bradley (2003), investigating conflicting study outcomes which referred to the greater impact of task interventions versus interpersonal interventions concluded that team members could endure poor relationships for a short while, but in order to accomplish lasting and outstanding results, fostering collaboration was vital. Tse

and Dasborough (2008) in their study of interpersonal relationships between team members stated that people were more willing to share and centralize information, to come up with ideas and provide necessary feedback within a cohesive team.

Groupthink

Janis (1972) focusing on groupthink lists eight symptoms that characterize and help to identify the social phenomena at an early stage: invulnerability, rationale, morality, stereotypes, pressure, self-censorship, unanimity and lastly, mindguards. Champion and Medsker (1993) agree with Janis, but draw on several models and reviews that demonstrate that teams have great potential and are capable of achieving desired results. Hilsenbeck (2006) emphasizes the fact that distorted perceptions by team members will almost inevitably lead to poor decisions. He urges coaches and practitioners to make room for discussions, setting up subgroups, determining a person functioning as devil's advocate. Chapman (2006) recommends the social phenomena can be counteracted by raising awareness of self-management, an improved evaluation process and a sophisticated methodical approach.

Team coaching

With regard to team coaching, Hackman (1987) stressed a framework that includes appropriate group task assignment; competence and authority of the team; the perception by the team itself and outsiders as an acknowledged team; a team-supporting organizational environment, and coaching that concentrates on prominent changes in task performance processes. Whitmore (1992) recommends that team coaching follow the same guidelines as coaching individuals, so that the objective should be to accentuate not only mutual team awareness, but also to heighten individual's perception. However, Groß (2003) explicitly stated that the mission of team coaching should not be to change individuals, but rather focus on improving concerted action by the team. In addition, Clutterbuck's (2007) prime concern is to enable the team to be autonomous and work independently. Clutterbuck (2010) was distinctly aware of proponents against team coaching, arguing that individual coaching is of little impact if the environment people operate in is not examined as well as part of the change.

This review highlights only a limited range of team coaching literature. The research itself addresses some of the gaps in knowledge about the chosen team coaching model.

Methodology

This research is underpinned by an interpretive stance and this ontological view acknowledges that the world is complex; people's interpretation of reality is subjective and unique. From an epistemological point of view, knowledge is influenced by personal beliefs and values; theories are guidelines and do not claim to be the only acceptable truth and are influenced by the social environment a team lives in.

The Grounds for Collaborative Action Research

Collaborative Action Research contributes to creating knowledge and understanding, as well as supporting change (Chiu, 2006). It is based on internal conviction, personal understanding and acceptance, and representative experience that accentuates positive outcomes owned by the participants (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In addition, it bridges the gap between the participants experience, achieved outcomes, and their conceptualizing of the process. The committed alliance between researcher and participants ensures the mutual reflective and critical analysis of findings that Collaborative Action Research claims to be based on (Burgess, 2006). The outsider in collaboration with insiders approach seemed to fit best to ensure personal commitment by all participants (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Participants and Conduct of the setting

The participants were all members of the cross-functional team, which consisted of five people, all male: one middle-aged executive, one development project manager, one sales project

manager, and one technical customer consultant aged between 28 and 45 years. We used an allocated meeting room for all our team meetings. The one-to-one coaching took place in adjacent, smaller rooms. The research was conducted at the organisation's headquarters comprising a workforce of approximately 2000 multinational employees. The organisation operates in a market that is dominated by state-of-the-art technology. The project started officially in January 2010 and ended six months later. A total of 20 weekly meetings of varying attendance by four to five participants took place.

Data Collection and Analysis

Methods consisted of semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, Schostak, 2006), pre-test and post-test questionnaires (Van Dick and West, 2005), participant observation, individual and group feedback (Fengler, 1998), S.W.O.T-notes, critical incidents and written and verbal feedback and keeping a researcher's diary (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). In addition, to address researcher bias a summary of personal impressions concerning conclusions was designed and reflected back to the participants. An ongoing stream of emails was exchanged to accelerate agreement on various topics. Data analysis was guided by a systematic approach that highlighted themes and patterns, by creating visual images, triangulation and by organizing the data according to the emerged learning (Silverman, 2000).

Interim Evaluation of the Team Coaching Project was administered using Clutterbuck's evaluation questions (2007). The standards of evaluation were utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy. A formal evaluation worksheet developed by the University of Wisconsin (2006) was used to increase external validity.

Analysis of the questionnaire took place by comparing and contrasting core themes and patterns and reflecting them back to the participants for further comments or amendments. Note taking started with the first interview. Analysis of other material was made by looking for core categories by comparing contrasts and similarities, summarizing and reflecting back to the team. Zuber-Skerritt (1996) recommends keeping a journal to avoid misinterpreting data and being able to go back and reflect and understand. My interpretation developed through the process of discussing my reflections with the team and one-to-one, and by developing graphical representations of my findings. It sometimes felt like being a detective who is searching for the missing clue. In fact, there was one particular incident where being able to go back to my rich documentation enabled me to stop the team falling apart. I could identify and address an attendance problem of one team member in time that could have turned into an avalanche for the entire team if it had gone by unnoticed. Approximately 700 emails were exchanged between the participants and me over a time span of six months. The core themes were compared with findings from an ongoing literature review. Analysis was made by reflecting back summaries to further strengthen my interpretations. The cross-referencing of different beliefs, attitudes, viewing angles from several people upon the same subject reinforces the accuracy of the findings.

Regarding team and project structure, Maclean *et al.* (2007) recommend paying attention to a clear structure of collaboration, task assignment, and agenda significance which is sometimes more essential to effective outcomes than jointly creating innovative ideas. Rosinski (2003), too, identified as partners in the executive coaching process the coach, coachee or coaching team and the organization. Therefore, we had agreed that I would forward the applied theory models that I would be using to document the project's proceedings directly to the executive and exchange emails with the participants individually. We considered it as effective to document everything two-fold. The executive would set up a separate file where he could save all documents, measurements, links, e-mails that would be exchanged between the two of us. Furthermore, it would be supporting for the team to utilize the organisation's intranet to have mutual access to everything we did.

Intervention Framework

Kets de Vries (2008) recommends looking at organisational findings in their entire complexity. In February 2010, the executive and I met to discuss the needs of the organisation and the team: the accurate identification of the market niche, the initial product launch; the introductory product presentation to customers, and subsequent product marketing. With regard to the team's needs included handing over the baton (in relation to the development of a prototype and pilot production); well functioning collaboration (feasibility of technical details that needed to be passed on authentically and trustworthily to the customer) and interactive communication within the team.

Strategic consideration encompasses the overlapping cooperation of several functional areas which are of high importance and are crucial for successful implementation into the market. Whatever the manager-led team would create as a framework for the organisation's national and international teams, it would sooner or later play an important part in all other product launches and for international product roll-out. In an early interview with the executive I had inquired how autonomously the team could operate and whether decision power was within their range.

Team coaching was carried out by observing participants in meetings and at the in-house fair, sharing field notes, displaying graphics to reveal group processes and providing team theory and individual and group feedback via email. This was supported by one-to-one coaching undertaken with three of five team members. The coaching itself was underpinned by Zeus & Skiffington's coaching cycle (2002, p.78) and further invigorated by systematic questioning. Reflection on the sessions was achieved by using the Subjective-Objective-Analysis-Plan technique (S.O.A.P) for critical reflection (Dye, 2005) and feedback response.

Edmondson (2002) emphasizes the fact that without creating a psychological safe area at work, smaller or larger teams will struggle with more or less the same issues: power, trust relationships and not risking failure. Taking into consideration the need for a safe psychological environment it was crucial to realize that anxiety levels may have been high and that encouraging open feedback is a vehicle to channel unexpressed emotions (Nowlan, 2008). People put a lot of effort into saving their own face because they want other people to believe that they are who they pretend to be due to a lack of trust (Herr and Anderson, 2005). Working with several team members in one-to-one coaching sessions contributed to the development of a trusting atmosphere where issues could be addressed that would have not been mentioned in the official team meetings.

The team design and team approach was influenced by knowing that I only had a few months to intervene. Knowing about the one hour regular meeting with the team, I was aware of the fact that it would be challenging to deliver effective team coaching interventions and therefore had decided to integrate one-to-one coaching as an accelerating factor. Focusing on indicators favouring team effectiveness, internal processes, such as a diminishing of personal anxieties and balancing personal needs with team and task requirements were linked to team effectiveness (Bushe and Coetzer, 2007). I utilized the Work-Life-Balance Wheel to address balancing personal needs and 'three wishes granted by a fairy' to find out more about their subconscious internal processes since a coach does not provide answers (Zeus and Skiffington 2002), but poses questions and triggers solutions which lie within a coachee and the team respectively.

Considering the integration of me as researcher and the social cohesion the executive had decided that it would be best if the team met first for a few meetings without me, agreed on their tasks, expected roles and outcomes and then asked me to join them. I had asked for a 15 minute interview with all five team members before my first official team participation to introduce my upcoming coaching interventions.

In relation to communication and emotions, interventions that supported the willingness to share information and fostered relationships would be vital. Team members would have to learn to listen attentively to each others needs. In the first few meetings my main task would be to simply sit there and observe and then decide on effective interventions. Also, a teams' readiness implies that interventions made in the beginning are for motivational aspects, in the middle for consultative and towards the end for educational aspects (Akande, 1992). This suggested utilizing a questionnaire and evaluation feedback before and after their first big milestone, the in-house fair.

Findings and discussion

An iterative cycle process (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988) was applied. First, a needs analysis was made (planning stage); followed by actions and measurements (acting stage); then the results (observing stage) were examined; and finally, sense was made of our discoveries (reflecting stage). The Collaborative Action Research methodology utilized to draw on synergies by the different participant's expertise served as platform for relevant findings and consisted of three phases: preparation, multiple action research cycles, and post-evaluation. A team coaching model (figure1 below) shows the beauty and strength of two combined established coaching approaches, team coaching and one-to-one coaching respectively, was administered to accelerate team task objectives. Relying on Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) iterative cycle process and Kolb's learning cycle (1984) it was challenging to distinguish the different stages the team and I, as researcher, went through. In fact, as the drawing of the cycles demonstrates it, there were rather multiple cycles within one cycle and linked with each other.

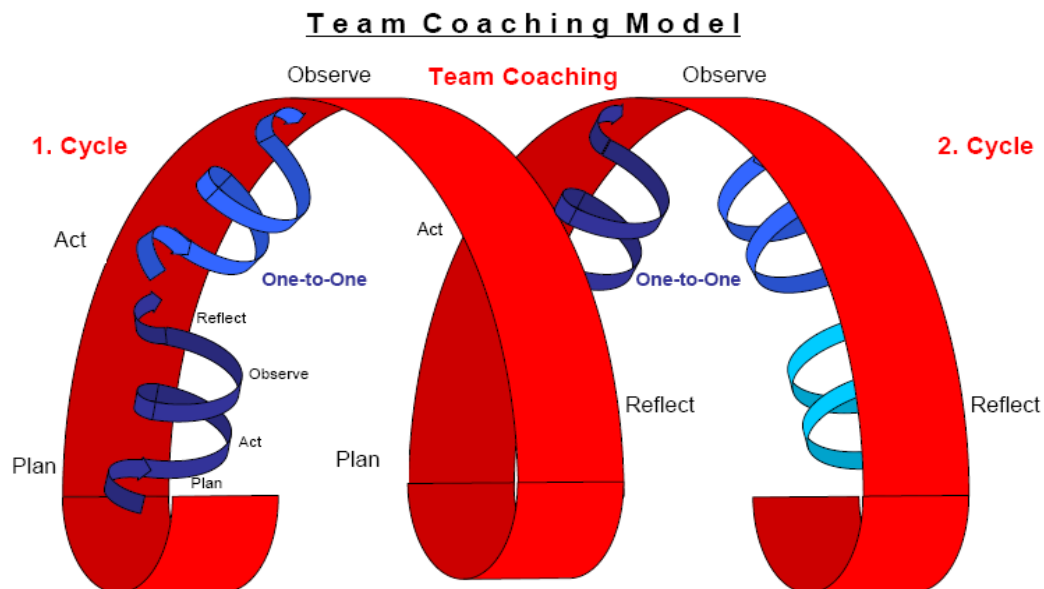


Figure 1 - Team Coaching Model

The team coaching model focused on two phases (figure 2 and 3 below): first, the team approach and then the one-to-one approach. The findings of the two phases strengthened the team and the individual team member alike. Their team and individual learning encouraged them to transfer the acquired knowledge into their own department. It seemed as if a 'domino-effect' or 'multiplication' had taken place.

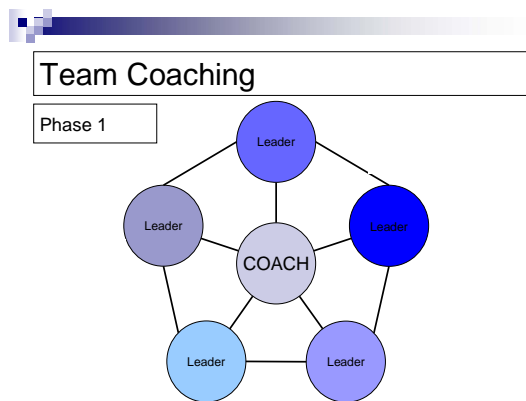


Figure 2 – Team Coaching Structure

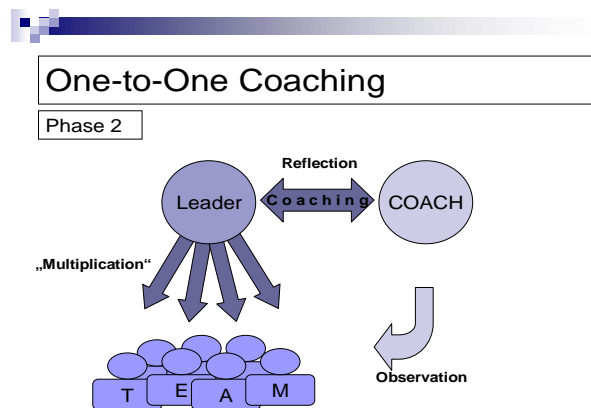


Figure 3 – One-to-One Coaching Structure

I realized that the people I had worked with did not know how coaching could enhance their performance. After observing the first three meetings I had to change course in order to be able to make any contributions to the team's effectiveness. At that point I realized that any assumptions and biased conclusions could only be solved by personal interaction with the team. I was given little time for team coaching, but as soon as the one-to-one coaching supported the different team members in achieving their personal and team objectives, coaching contributions were distinctly invited and welcomed. It had triggered excited and unexpected remarks by the participants who had experienced eureka-moments as they put it. They applied their acquired communication knowledge within the team and were pleased about the results. They received the desired information and support from their colleagues which had not seemed possible to them before. A positive team discussion environment seemed to have been achieved by the active contribution of the one-to-one participants. There seemed to be more respect and appreciation within the team. The development product manager commented: "There should be given more coaching time to make the team reflect on their teamwork. Coaching has proven to add value to our team effectiveness".

I had learned that the organisation itself did not practise reflection phases for their meetings or projects. They were well structured and experienced in organizing and conducting projects and had a variety of technological tools and software to support them throughout a project. However, the team stated that they would not have been as effective as they had been without the coaching support and the executive agreed by adding that they had received more than they had expected.

The executive feedback reads:

I have learned that a competent and aligned team which displays many of the ideal team characteristics is almost unbeatable. It justifies making decisions with regard to the achievement of objectives independent of steering committees. Certainly it does not absolve me from the obligation to inform superiors. Team coaching supported team communication and the development of decision-making basis. With regard to the prime product presentation, each team member has advanced and gained personal experience. For me personally, I am confident to pass on our insights to other teams.

The development project manager stated:

I have learned that it is extremely important, when several people with their respective competence come together in a discussion, to be aware of each other's area of competence. Due to the tailored (forced) methods of team collaboration by a coach, teamwork has been more effective. We have achieved 100% of our task objectives and have learned once more

how important goal definition is. I consider team coaching in combination with one-to-one coaching as ideal method to strengthen team effectiveness. I could very well imagine using coaching for other significant projects. Each employee reaches his breaking point in larger projects and coaching could support by balancing it.

The sales product manager commented:

I enjoyed the individual coaching approach. I have learned to appreciate effective information exchange, the different tasks and vantage points of my colleagues and gaining new insights into technical product details. We have all profited by collaborating with each other and staying in close contact. We have fully reached our objectives. Team coaching has encouraged staying focused on our team and task objectives. Summarizing issues by the coach were contributing to the team.

The marketing product manager wrote:

I have learned that objectives within a team do not always have to be similar. Communication within the team improved over time. It would have been good if coaching had been introduced properly at the beginning of the project.

I had applied triangulation to establish trustworthiness of the data, increase validity and to make sure that multifaceted resources served to reduce bias. A key learning for the project emerged since none of us had ever questioned the success of the project at the end of cycle one. It was measured by customer feedback, sales figures and the overall positive impact the laser machine had on the market. In fact, the team had successfully conducted benchmark project team collaboration and team coaching was considered by them as having been supportive of their case.

I was familiar with modifications at the end of an action research cycle (Zuber-Skerritt, 1996). Nonetheless, the striking necessity of doing a second needs analysis within the same project phase did not occur to anyone. It might have led to a new set of objectives for the different departments. The missing needs analysis for the entire team led to the misconception of what should be done next. Using reflective and comparative techniques allowed me to notice that the team was experiencing an interruption of their up to then well established team spirit. Drawing on my field notes and observation data in addition to researching motivation loss made me aware that the product marketing manager might have been lost as stakeholder in the project at that particular time. Findings from the varying resources were triangulated and served to find the explanation of what was going on for the team. After feeding back my findings, the team members became aware of the absence of mutually shared objectives that was necessary to keep everyone on board. The team's agenda adapted to the needs of the product marketing manager and experienced a refreshed team spirit afterwards and the inconsistent attendance of the product marketing manager came to a halt.

With hindsight, it became obvious that the organisation's internal approach does not practice observing, reflecting and evaluating as it does planning, acting, doing and checking. Whether conducting standardized needs analysis after each project phase solves any issues cannot be answered in this research study. Further research would be necessary to confirm this assumption.

The feedback and results imply that the research project gained from the twofold coaching interventions via team coaching and one-to-one coaching. Moreover, when the executive and I worked on creating the company's team model I realized only then what was seemingly obvious, but what I had totally missed. Each of the team members had unconsciously followed an individual objective from the very beginning, even though they consciously shared one mutual team objective.

The executive summarized at the end of our meetings what coaching did for them and can do for other teams:

With regard to interdisciplinarity: The forming and storming phases of a team can be accelerated by means of coaching and a qualitative better norming and performing level can be achieved.

In relation to competence: Within a team there are members with different experiences, competences and power issues. Group dynamics can be positively influenced through coaching interventions and task achievement achieved quicker.

Concerning progress within a project: coaching enables the uncovering of the reasons for a standstill. Team members tend to focus on their competence and are likely to overlook relevant issues. A coach can support the insiders by his outsider approach. In addition, through assertive coaching inquiries team collaboration is made possible and negative group thinking impeded. Coaching supported us by not only creating solutions to problems, but also by foresighted thinking about the next step in the process.

Limitations

According to Kock *et al.* (1995), drawing on several studies about action research's weaknesses identifies the following issues:

Interference with the object of research, contingency of the results, lengthy time required, low control of the environment, personal over involvement and unplanned and informal structure (1995, pp.8-9).

This study would have gained by the organisation's acceptance of coaching as a team-supporting tool. The participants would have been familiar with coaching outcomes, processes and coaching tools. Furthermore, additional team coaching time would have given more room for interventions, thereby facilitating the observation and reflection phases that the organisation does not practice as much. This study was time-bound and would benefit by looking longitudinally at knowledge transferability by the team members as a "multiplication factor" within their organisation.

Another limitation was that as researcher I could not draw on prior research of my applied team coaching approach. This study cannot answer how much of our success can be contributed to the fact that I combined two established coaching approaches and how much was due to having worked before with the executive and our established and dependable working relationship. Undeniably coaching was adding value, but I would prefer now to work with a control group in order to make a stronger case for return of investment, which is necessary to make coaching for organisations more attractive.

Conclusion

Team dynamics can lead to ineffective and destructive behaviour and be responsible for suboptimal circumstances as we have observed in this study. A main finding was that the 'hidden agenda' of pursuing different individual objectives within the overall team objectives, would have gone unnoticed without being addressed individually by a coach. The coaching interventions seemed to mitigate the diminishing team participation and avoided likely negative consequences in this particular instance. Furthermore, it revealed the necessity of implementing a second needs analysis before entering into the second cycle due to changed, but unvoiced expectations. Therefore, this study concludes that the coaching interventions have played a vital part in accelerating positive team results.

A second finding was that the literature review underpinned my tacit knowledge in acting appropriately to changing circumstances. Similarly, it has accentuated the necessity of being able to draw on theories and experience by other well-established coaches and researchers. The purpose and strength of the methodology was to create research quality as well as internal and external validity. In addition, the iterative cycles have made an overt and reflective learning process possible. For the participants, the one-to-one coaching has been a dynamic, flexible and powerful intervention to support the team's effectiveness.

Another key learning was to look at the achievement of objectives from the different stakeholders' perspectives. For the team it was 100% of task achievement and being able to present a perfect product presentation. For the executive the wins were even higher. Indeed, he could present a team model that can be used for national and international roll-out and, at the time of writing this article, this has been successfully implemented. Human Resources (HR) and Organisational Development (OD) departments can draw on documented project processes and outcomes and have experienced team members they can draw on for guiding prospective teams. From the organisation's stakeholder perspective this cross-functional team has demonstrated that teamwork is not just chasing ghosts, but adding value.

Different teams have worked together at different times in the investigated organisation, but there has never been a cross-functional team preparing a product launch before and with an executive's objective of creating a team model that other teams can follow. The special contribution to the German coaching arena lies in the fact that a large corporation employing 8000 staff worldwide has been willing to benefit from coaching support. It has considered the research outcomes as profitable, suitable for integration and has transferred it to their Austrian subsidiary as a first step. Coaching as a developmental tool has now been recognized as part of the project's success and the research study and outcome has been introduced to OD, HR, and the head of the development department, to the top management and to one of the business owners. At the point of writing, a meeting with the newly appointed Human Resource Manager has been set up to clarify how the findings can be implemented to support the entire leadership development process.

This study has profited by drawing on prior group dynamic research, team coaching and one-to-one coaching, in the chosen methodology and research design. Needless to say that it has been a pilot project and that the team coaching model needs therefore further research into its reliability and validity. The findings indicate the wider implications for future team coaching approaches since not one similar coaching model has emerged so far as the exhaustive literature review indicates. Action Research, closely supported by multifaceted approaches as described, should encourage conducting relevant empirical studies about team coaching aligned with one-to-one coaching. Future research could investigate the new team coaching model to look for relevance beyond the outcomes of this research. Verifying data and creating new insights would contribute to the new approach that has already been introduced to other leading major companies within Germany.

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