# Two coaches operating as a 'learning pair'

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## Abstract

Whilst an established aid to personal development, coaching is still in its early stages of maturity. So too, outside of the field of education, is the concept of learning teams. This paper concerns coach development via two complementary coaches working as a learning team when conducting live coaching sessions. It proposes a way in which practitioners might enhance their continuous professional development - and therefore their service to their clients - by making an increasingly efficient and effective use of their everyday work. It is not concerned with team coaching, although many of the principles will be the same.

**Key words**
Coaching, learning-teams, action research.

## Introduction

This paper concerns coach development via a particular approach to live coaching. It is based upon the outcome of two coaches, one moderately experienced, the other a novice, working together for five years to develop themselves as a continuously learning team (in this case, a pair) to the ultimate benefit of their clients. Underpinning this approach was the working premise that learning teams are capable of solving problems that are beyond the capability of even their most talented members working alone (Michaelsen, Watson and Black, 1989).

The structure adopted was a triad, but not the usual one of three people working together in a training situation with one acting as coach, another as coachee, and the third as an observer providing feedback to the coach. Rather, it was two coaches, with different but complementary and appropriate skills (one with a business, leadership and growing psychological expertise, and the other with presentational and physiological expertise) working with one coachee.

Whilst each coaching session was a learning situation for the coachee, because it was their agenda that was the subject of the task, the true learning team, in the sense described below, comprised the two coaches. We noted, however, the point made by Kayes & Burnett (2006) that too much emphasis on team learning runs the risk of detracting from the effectiveness of the task. Three hundred and fifty hours of coaching with 28 separate coachees were involved. Furthermore, because we were recruitment and business consultants as well as coaches, during this period, as a team, we also conducted 436 hours of interviewing with 218 candidates, completed a substantial number of facilitation and consultancy assignments with company executive teams, and successfully undertook a two-year joint project as part of our Professional Doctorates. Indeed, our approach to everything we did in business was based upon the concept of the two of us being a 'learning team'.

In the terminology of our typical clients, we used the learning team format as a 'force-multiplier' to enhance our overall performance on their behalf, and our increasing understanding of human behaviour gained via the conduct and study of coaching to underpin all our other services.

**What is a learning team?**

In the manner we developed a learning team, it was not a pair of people who came together for a learning purpose, such as an action learning set. It was a permanent, intact work team that adopted behaviours that enhanced learning to the overall benefit of the team. However, the more we researched the terms 'team learning' and 'learning teams' the more we found in the literature the two terms being used interchangeably. So we asked ourselves, is there really a difference?

The concept of learning in teams was founded by Michaelson (n.d.). Much of his work has been within an educational sphere. However, Edmondson has taken the subject and examined it from a work-based perspective. Team learning has been described as: "An on-going process of reflection and action, characterized by asking questions, seeking feedback, experimenting, reflecting on results, and discussing errors or unexpected outcomes of action." (1999, p.353). It causes "a relatively permanent change in the team's collective level of knowledge and skill produced by the shared experience of the team members" (Ellis, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, Porter, & Moon (2003, p.822), occurring when "cognitions, emotions and behaviours are shared amongst individuals resulting in performance improvement for the team" (Kayes & Burnett, 2006, p.7). But are these writers talking about a learning team, or a group of people who come together with a common learning purpose, frequently described as team learning?

We suggest that at the heart of the difference between a learning team and team learning is whether or not the people involved are a genuine team, a term which is frequently misused. It is our experience that the adoption of the word 'team' for a group of people who work together is often wishful thinking. Indeed, we suggest it is a rare group of people that are prepared to make the necessary individual personal changes (in whatever respect) to achieve genuine team status. So, if the difference is whether or not a genuine team is involved, then first it would seem appropriate to define what a group and a team are.

Depending on context there are many definitions of a group. A well regarded academic definition is that *work* groups are intact social systems that perform one or more tasks within an organizational context (Hackman, 1990). However, one hardly talks about a team of shareholders for example, even if they take collective action for a specific purpose at an annual general meeting. As Clutterbuck states (2007, p.38) "A team brings something extra to the nature and quality of the interaction between members of the group." So what constitutes a team?

One commonly accepted description of a team is by Katzenbach (1990), a critic of the frequent confusion between teams and groups. He states 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.

And here lies the difference between team learning and a learning team. Based on our 40 years' experience of team building and leadership development we suggest that when most people use the term 'team' they are really referring to a group of people who either, work together under the name of a team - when they are not because they do not truly meet the criteria of Katzenbach's definition - or a group of people who come together for a learning purpose where the only collective task is the learning itself. A genuine learning team is a team "with a common purpose who take active responsibility for developing each other and themselves" (Clutterbuck, 2007, p.125).

Consequently, we suggest that a learning team employs team learning, but team learning does not necessarily imply a learning team. With that in mind, and accepting the fact that the terms 'learning team' and 'team learning' are frequently confused, what does the literature say?

**Literature Review**

The majority of literature on learning teams/team learning originates in America (e.g. Michaelsen & Black (1994) and Michaelsen, Black & Fink (1996), Johnson, Johnson & Smith (1991), Parmelee & Michaelsen (2010)), although it is spreading to the UK and Europe (e.g. Van den Bossche, Gijselaers, Segers & Kirschner (2006), Van Emmerick, Jawahar, Schreurs & de Cupyer (2011), Garavan & McCarthy (2008), and Borredon, Deffayet, Baker & Kolb (2011)). Additionally, Edmondson is widely quoted by a number of authors, and is accepted as conducting well-founded studies on the subject of team learning in a variety of authored and co-authored settings from health (2001, 2004, 2006) to business (1999, 2003, 2007). Thus she receives many critically acclaimed peer reviews and can be regarded as an excellent source of information.

Edmondson suggests that the best known early use of the term 'team learning' is found in Peter Senge's (1990) book, *The fifth discipline,* drawn primarily from the field of system dynamics which is an approach to understanding the behaviour of complex systems over time. Also often quoted are Argyris and Schon (1978) and their double-loop learning theory.

*Requirements*

According to Michaelsen the principles of learning teams (sic) are: (1) groups must be properly formed and managed; (2) students must be accountable for their individual and group work; (3) group assignments must promote both learning and team development; (4) students must have frequent and timely feedback. When these principles are in place groups evolve into cohesive learning teams. He advocates that learning teams should consist of five to seven people, whereas Fink (2004) states that co-operative learning recommends four or fewer people.

*The advantages of team-based learning*

The benefits of learning teams/team-based learning have been studied in a variety of fields including: education, e.g. Collier (1980), Gross Davis (1993), and Scott-Ladd & Chan (2008); medical learning, e.g. Hunt, Haidet, Coverdale & Richards, (2003), Thompson, Schneider, Haidet, Perowski & Richards, (2007), and Parmelee & Michaelsen (2010); marketing, e.g. Hernandez (2002), and Bicen & Laverie (2009.

Fink states the advantages of learning teams (sic) are that they: transform small groups into teams; transform technique into strategy; and transform the quality of student learning. They require: time to interact; intellectual resources; a challenging task to become a common goal; and frequent feedback. As a result, teams become capable of: inspiring a high level of individual effort; challenging each other but with give and take; communication without offence; and successfully accomplishing complex and challenging tasks.

*The disadvantages of team-based learning*

The pitfalls of team learning, according to Kayes, Kayes & Kolb (2005), are social loafing, group think, over-dependence on a dominant leader, over-commitment to goals, and diffusion of responsibility. Furthermore, different educational levels in a team could cause frustration between members at the rate of learning.

Michaelsen, Fink and Scott-Ladd & Chan all note the concern that some students might have to carry the less able ones because it is easier to hide in a team. They suggest that, to a degree, this can be

overcome in the classroom with good evaluation processes, and in business through feedback and analysis. From personal experience, to these we would add peer pressure, especially when, in a work situation, team members' remuneration is dependent on the performance of everyone. The reality is that in a high pressure situation team members will not tolerate someone who does not pull their weight.

Van den Bossche et al (2006) note that teams can interpret situations differently, leading to varying perspectives. The emotional rejection of differing views can interfere with productive team behaviour, which can only be beneficial if it leads to further investigation by the team. They also intimate that the number of team members can influence the outcome: the larger the group the more potential problems they could encounter. However, they recognised that teams bring together people with different experiences, values and knowledge, which will be more effective in problem solving than individuals working alone; but to do this adequately these perspectives must be integrated to develop a shared understanding.

*The business context*
Analysing the literature we found that the majority is based on student learning; however, Edmondson, Dillon & Roloff, (2007) contextualise it into the business arena. Their study observes that little of the literature has sought to solve specific practical problems (such as improving product development, enriching strategic decision making, or reducing medical errors) in which teams play a role. Although most of the research can be said to have *implications* for practice, managerial imperatives are rarely a driver of the questions and data selected in this work. Edmondson suggests relevance should be a crucial driver of future research.

Garavan & McCarthy (2008, p.452-3) note that much HR literature around collective learning has focused on individual-level learning and objectified learning:

The objectification of learning does not sufficiently capture the complexity of learning in organizations or its essentially emergent nature at the organization or collective level. It ignores the interplay of processes at an individual, team, or organizational level.

Argyris & Schon (1978) note that some companies do not know what individuals know. Popper & Lipschitz (1998) recognise that there is learning in organisations (LIO) and learning by organisations (LBO). Kasl, Marsick & Dechant, (1997) recognise that there are four learning modes: fragmented; pooled; synergistic; continuous. Yorks & Sauquet (2003) recognise that the relationships between these kinds of learning, the relative roles of Argyris & Schon's single-, double-, and triple-loop learning, and LIO and LBO, need more empirically explored research before further conclusions can be drawn.

Tucker, Nembhard & Edmondson (2007) found that *learn-what* (activities that identify current best practices) and *learn-how* (activities that operationalize practices in the work setting) were distinct team learning factors. Their research showed that learn-how was associated with the internally focused learning behaviour – because of the importance of attention to specific work processes and relationships in producing change. Hedberg's (1981) idea of unlearning is also critical for teams with old or preconceived ideas that can jeopardize new learning.

*Conclusion*
Reviewing the literature it became apparent that there is still considerable room for the study of learning teams, especially in business. Furthermore, it would seem that they have at least as many potential disadvantages as potential advantages. Nevertheless, we also concluded that the success of a learning team would most probably depend on purpose, membership and attitude.

Two further factors which aided our thinking were: the strong link between learning in teams, learning through coaching, and experiential learning; and the additional value that our coachees would gain if they were coached by two complementary coaches working together.

Regarding the first factor, as cited by Griffiths & Campbell (2009, p.16):

As learning is inherently viewed as a means by which coaching outcomes are achieved, coaching practice may be improved as coaches gain a deeper understanding of the learning theories underpinning coaching.

Team learning, whether in a coaching environment or not, when applied in business is founded on experiential learning, because participants are learning together within the experience and context of work. As Kolb states (1984, p.304), experiential learning offers:

the foundation for an approach to education and learning as a life-long process, and pictures the workplace as a learning environment that can enhance and supplement formal education and can foster personal development through meaningful work and career-development opportunities.

Borredon et al. (2011) recognise that deep learning comes not only from the integration of the four modes of the experiential learning cycle – experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting - but also from the double-loop process of Argyris, and from Kolb's conceptualisation mode that enables the learner to re-examine previous sense-making and make a profound shift in learning that goes beyond the light of new ideas.

Regarding the second factor, between us we combined not just different genders and generations, but also a combination that our clients found particularly useful: executive coaching, leadership and business management expertise backed by an appropriate professional Master's degree, and wellbeing and presentational skills based on extensive qualifications and experience as a massage therapist and classical singer.

We also noted that Kayes & Burnett (2006) advocate the developmental, but comprehensive normative model for team learning, which consists of five components: team-level inputs; team-level processes (shared beliefs and shared learning behaviours); team-level outputs; and knowledge requirements. We identified with this model most closely because we recognized the value to us of interdependence, we wanted to learn through experience, we shared similar or complementary values and behaviours, and we wished to develop individual and shared knowledge through critical reflection.

With all the above in mind, we decided to investigate the development of ourselves as a learning team when undertaking all aspects of our work, thereby incorporating live coaching sessions into our continuous professional development (CPD) and maximising our value to our clients. In doing so we added Professional Doctoral degrees to our qualifications, the research based project of which was conducted jointly and involved some of the coachees, candidates and clients underpinning this paper.

**Theoretical coaching perspectives**

Because coachees have a variety of needs and circumstances we were attracted to 'managed eclecticism' as outlined by Megginson & Clutterbuck (2009). They made the case for not remaining rigidly with one coaching perspective, but using many to meet a variety of needs. Later, however, we recognised the risk in this approach if taken too far – the potential for lack of depth - and the importance of using coaching approaches that did not conflict.

We believe in the value of a well-formulated philosophy that incorporates one, two or more theoretical perspectives that do not clash in terms of their main assumptions. Such a foundation could withstand a pull in a different direction from the inspiring variety of other well-supported perspectives on coaching. It would be able to support a 'managed eclecticism' in terms of tools, techniques and knowledge that the other approaches offer. (Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck 2010, p.420).

Consequently, we adopted an appropriate range of coaching perspectives that were sufficiently varied to accommodate the majority of needs and situations that our coachees were likely to encounter, but not to the point of overload or conflict. Our sympathetic but pragmatic and practical way of professional practice meant that we embraced a positive approach that enabled the identification and fulfilment of the coachee's agenda, looked for solutions, took account of the system within which the coachee worked, was highly relevant to the business point of view, but could also deal with inhibitions, perhaps from the past and, if the requirement was there, enable deep reflection on how an individual wished to live their life. These various approaches were either used individually, or in an appropriate combination as suitable to the need. For example, as Lee (2010) suggests, the psychodynamic approach is most useful when allied in an integrative way with approaches that emphasise strength and possibility, such as positive psychology and solution-focused coaching.

Finally, whilst recognising the value of being able to move up and down the directive scale, so providing expert advice as required, our style of coaching was firmly based on facilitating the thinking, exploration, empowerment and decision making of our clients, nearly always in a business context because that was where they felt most comfortable, even if we were dealing with a private or family matter - something that was sometimes necessary because, frequently, private and business lives affect each other. Remembering the potential dangers of eclecticism, we chose the following theoretical perspectives to concentrate on.

*Positive psychology*
Positive psychology (PP), based on the work of Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2002), is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups and institutions. As such it finds a natural home in coaching. The PP coach views the coachee as a whole and emphasises strengths, positive behaviours and purpose. This creates building blocks for the coachee to develop and improve performance (Kauffman & Scoular, 2004). PP is now being taken into the world of work through transformational leadership (Sivanathan, Arnold, Turner, & Barling, (2004), and positive organisational practice (Henry, 2004).

Recognising the attributes of PP, and the fact that by far the majority of our clients are successful business people, PP is at the heart of our approach to coaching because it relates most closely to the positive manner in which our clients undertake their lives. Successful business people are results and improvement orientated. Nevertheless, experience has taught us that because we are dealing with senior people, recognition of their status is important (Odendhal and Shaw, 2002). Additionally, questions calling for answers that put control, autonomy or rationality into doubt, if only implicitly, may be experienced as threatening (Schwalbe and Walkomir, 2002).

*Solution-focused coaching*
SFC sees people as their own best expert. Giving centre stage to the coachee's skills, strengths and knowledge, the coach stretches, clarifies, supports and empowers the coachee to design their own solution (O'Connell & Palmer, 2007). The emphasis is on the coachee defining the desired future state and then constructing their pathway in both thinking and action to achieve it (Cavanagh & Grant, 2010). For these reasons SFC sits very well with PP, and with the future focused, goal directed spirit of not just the mind-set of our typical clients, but also with the spirit of coaching itself.

Spending little time on the cause of the problem but looking for a solution, because often the more a coachee talks about a problem the more entrenched they become, the coach helps the coachee identify the simplest path to a solution, and then identify patterns of behaviour that support that solution. SFC focuses on how a coachee thinks about a problem rather than on the problem itself. We found this approach useful when the coachee had no issues, but quickly needed to build a way forward.

*Cognitive behavioural coaching*

CBC is an integrative approach combining aspects of cognitive, behavioural, imaginal and problem-solving techniques to help coachees overcome practical problems and deal with emotional, psychological and behavioural obstacles to performance, change and goal achievement. In doing so it enhances wellbeing and helps prevent stress (Palmer & Szymanska, 2007). A particularly pertinent situation for us was in presentation coaching where CBC can be used to counter the critical inner voice (Downey, 2003) which works against self-esteem, thereby turning negative thoughts into performance enhancing thoughts.

There are two basic premises of CBC: a coachee may have under-developed problem-solving skills, or may not be able to apply those they have when under pressure; and the way a person feels or behaves is largely determined by their beliefs and their appraisal of a situation. The coach helps the coachee improve their problem-solving skills, become aware of their thinking and how the consequent behaviour affects others, and develop plans for the future.

*NLP Coaching*

NLP is the study of how language affects how we think and, therefore, behave (O'Connor & Lages, 2007). Despite its cognitive behavioural roots (Beck, 1976) the originators, Bandler & Grinder, made no commitment to theory, but described it as a meta-discipline, the core activity of which is modelling, not coaching. The principal assumption underlying NLP is that there is a consistent ordering and structuring of our perceiving, thinking, feeling and behaviour, and that by modelling the process and patterns used by 'experts' these can be adopted resulting in consistent results.

The NLP coach assumes that the coachee's internal processes are psychologically channelled by the way in which they anticipate events and that this anticipation is a function of their perception of the world as influenced by their experience, beliefs, values, assumptions and sensory systems. Furthermore, that because each person's perceptions determine feelings and behaviour, unrealistic perceptions can restrict choice and result in problems. The aim of the coach is to help the coachee modify or replace these perceptions with more useful ones (Bandler & Grinder, 1975).

The goal of NLP coaching is to maximize a coachee's resourcefulness and increase choice. Fundamental to NLP is goal setting. Goals need to be stated in the positive, based upon sensory evidence, be measurable and owned, wanted by the coachee, and be something that accords with the beliefs and values of the coachee. The key to NLP coaching is to increase self-awareness to the extent that the coachee recognises that, whenever they do not know how to move forward, it is only because of the way they are interpreting the world (Grimley, 2007).

*Psychodynamic & Systems-Psychodynamic*

Psychodynamic coaching is based on a way of understanding how unconscious mental forces operating in and between individuals and groups effect their thinking and behaviour (Roberts & Brunning, 2007). The psychodynamic coach creates a space for the coachee to revisit difficult emotional territory in a safe environment in which thinking rather than reacting can take place so as to enhance awareness of self and circumstances, thereby opening up options which before were hidden.

We suggest that a sound understanding of the principles underpinning psychodynamic coaching is an important area of knowledge for any coach, whatever approach they adopt.

Systems-psychodynamic coaching is an extension of this approach which takes account of the effect on the individual and group of the system they operate within, and vice versa. We found this approach, usually integrated with appropriate others, useful in leadership coaching, when the coachee has to think about themselves, their team, and their company, systematically in the round.

We emphasize two points. One, it is most important to recognise that coaching is not therapy, so the coach should not attempt to surface deep unconscious material, or directly interpret it. Two, from our experience, because coachees, in business at least, wish to appear positive and capable leaders, we recommend psychodynamic coaching be used in a fashion that does not appear psychoanalytical, but practical and business-like.

**Methodology**

We recognised that we needed to understand our own paradigm and epistemological perspective before we could construct the most appropriate methodology. After careful consideration, and taking account of the work of such authors as Gummerson (2000) and Jarvis, Holford, & Griffin (1998), we decided our paradigm embraced elements of constructivism, critical theory and participatory. Nevertheless, we also recognised that our typical clients, often located in the engineering-based sectors of the economy, might well come from a different paradigm (possibly positivism because of its more technical ethos) and so we had to be able to look at issues from their perspective in order to understand them better. Our epistemological perspective could be said to have been constructivist.

We then considered a number of methodological options: action research; case study; phenomenology; grounded theory; soft systems; and experiment. With our overall aim in mind, to learn and develop from our experience, thereby maximising our ability to assist our clients, we chose action research because researchers "take action… to try to understand how they might improve what they are doing... and aim to change themselves by questioning what they are doing, evaluating it rigorously" (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 2003, p.14) and because it helps to improve professional functioning and efficiency (Cohen & Manion, 1994). We noted Kayes, Kayes & Kolb's (2005, p.349) point that effective learning teams "do not cycle through the learning process once, but complete the loop of learning several times."

However, we also appreciated potential limitations. For example, some writers (e.g. Burns, 2000) have argued that action research lacks rigour. Isaac & Michael (1981) believe this is because its internal and external validity is weak, its objective situational, and its sample restricted and unrepresented, implying that although findings are useful practically they do not contribute to the general body of knowledge.

Additionally, because action research is interpretive, and our sources were subjective, we recognised our results would not be grounded in scientific fact and experiment, but based on assumptions deriving from personal experience. We also recognised the danger of over-involvement by the researcher, leading to personal bias and subjectivity (Winter, 1982).

This is not to say our results were wrong, but they were based on opinion rather than something more empirical. However, as stated by Kolb (1984, p.21) when describing Lewin's model:

Immediate personal experience is the focal point for learning, giving life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete, publicly shared reference point for testing the implication and validity of ideas created during the learning process.

Having considered the pros and cons of the methodologies above, we decided action research was best suited to ourselves, our clients, and our developmental aim.

### Data collection

We sourced two themes of data: internal and external. Internal data comprised, first, observations of each other and the coachee to gauge verbal response and body language during each session. Second, after each session we discussed between ourselves how we had achieved results, what could have been done better, what we felt worked well, and how we interacted together.  This enabled not only an assessment of how we were developing as a coaching team, but also the engagement in more critical dialogue. Thirdly, each practitioner kept a journal to reflect more deeply upon their work. Kolb (1984) recognised that reflection on action is a useful tool to analyse how we grow as practitioners, as too did Gibbs (1988) in his circular model of reflection, asking the practitioner not only to describe the experience, but how they were feeling during it.

External data comprised discussions with the coachees after every session on the conduct and outcome of the coaching: what worked well and what could have been improved, how each practitioner worked and how they worked together. The salient points of each session were recorded so they could be analysed afterwards. Additionally, we discussed each overall assignment with the client company. Finally, literature on learning and coaching was continually reviewed.

### Analysis

Analysis of data was via a triangulated approach, so as to ensure all voices were heard and data was weighted equally. Research relied on: the interpretation and understanding of our work rather than on numerical material; it was more about meaning than measurement; it was subjective over objective; and exploring rather than testing. The data analysis could be described as observer impression: open (identifying the dominant messages and subject matter within the text) as opposed to prescriptive (where the context is a closely-defined set of communication parameters) as outlined in McKeone (1995).

### Ethics

All coachees were treated in accordance with the EMCC and CIPD codes of conduct, with particular emphasis on the ethical and confidential use of data.

## Findings

### Coachee perspective

As examples, the following are three varied, but typical, coachee comments.  One coachee found having a male and female on the team helpful: "it helped me to think about my wife's perspective as well as bringing balance to the testosterone, male-driving business perspective." He also recognised that [his] learning in the session could be taken home to help with the 'domestic team', and was, therefore, not just relevant to work.

Because of his family circumstances he said in his first session "sometimes you just want someone to tell you what to do".  The subject of coach as expert advice-giver is controversial.  On the one hand, coaches such as Whitmore (2002) emphasize a non-directional approach; others, such as

Goldsmith (2000) take a more directional stance and emphasize robust feedback and advice giving. We suggest the issue is not which of these approaches is right or wrong, but which helps the coachee reach their goals, and is the most appropriate at any specific time within a coaching session.

Blended with a great deal of experienced-based understanding of his situation, we were able to help this coachee think through his domestic problem as if it was a business one, which was more comfortable territory for him. An action plan was devised, tested and followed up at subsequent sessions. It proved to be successful, both domestically, and in relieving a stressor that was impacting on his work. Here was an example of how business and private lives can interact and, when they do, why they need to be dealt with together.

Another coachee was looking for a comprehensive review of his life and his future, and he recognised that what we could offer as a team (career coach, wellbeing coach, presentation skills coach, and executive coach) would have been difficult to find in one person; therefore our complementary team approach to his needs suited him well. He also saw how we benefited from using reflection, and took advantage of this himself.

A third coachee, who had not experienced coaching before, was not sure what to expect, but commenced a series of sessions with an open mind. By the end he had a tangible plan to go forward. In his feedback he stated:

*It is good having two people working with you, it's less intense than having one. The combination is powerful. I think, having a male and a female, and of differing ages, is good too because you'll never alienate anyone that way will you? You grow accustomed culturally to different people having different perspectives, and I think that works very well as well. The interaction was very good. There are certain exercises that one of you would do better than the other, and you intuitively seem to sense which one will work best.*

### Client perspective

As recruiter-coaches, once we have placed the candidate into a job we then coach them as part of their induction package. With an estimated 70% of executives unhappy with how they have been inducted, using a coach or mentor to allow new executives to 'hit the ground running' can be highly advantageous (Braid, 2008).

This combined recruitment and post-placement coaching service also demonstrates our long-term commitment to the client, and enables us to continue to learn about our client's business. Coaches who have recruited the coachee not only understand the client's business environment, aims and culture better than a coach going in cold, they are also able to establish trust more quickly because of their earlier role as recruiters. Additionally, as one client said: "If the client's perfect candidate could not be found, the recruiter-coach was well positioned to coach someone and address any gaps to satisfy the company aspirations and the individual's development".

### Practitioner perspective

We started this period with one moderately experienced coach, and one who had never coached before, but who knew her subject as a teacher. Both Michaelsen and Fink warn about the dangers of carrying another. In our case, to start with, one practitioner was not only having to lead the questioning, but also act as mentor to the other. However, as White (1998) states, team learning helps with the comprehension of complex tasks.

As the less experienced practitioner increased their involvement in coaching, and brought a blend of coaching and teaching to the role (especially in her specialist subject), the coachees advised us they gained a more comprehensive coaching experience, which was the object of the exercise.

Not surprisingly, having two coaches allowed the coachee to tap into both of our experiences, skills and knowledge. Furthermore, having a male and female combination, and of different generations, made it easier to ask delicate, albeit pertinent, questions. Two coaches also meant that one could take notes and make observations whilst the other engaged with the coachee, thereby enhancing the quality of post-session dialogue. These roles would swap several times during each session. Frequently, however, a three-way discussion would arise with all parties absorbed in the session, and ideas being sparked and considered in a very positive manner, but always focused on the needs of the coachee.

Additionally, as we increased our knowledge of the many theoretical underpinnings to coaching, so we and our coachees were able to benefit from these, as opposed to remaining with one approach, such as NLP, or session structure, such as GROW. However, we were conscious to ensure that the approaches we adopted were employed and, if necessary combined, appropriately.

As Michaelsen, Watson and Black (1989) point out: if groups are properly formed, the members are willing to commit to a high level of effort in their learning, remain intact long enough to become cohesive teams, are repeatedly given challenging tasks with prompt and clear feedback, then 'students' learn the content and how to use it, they learn about themselves and how to interact with others on major tasks, and they learn how to keep on learning with significant depth. This combination enabled us to deal with the many external challenges that arose; in particular, the effects of the debilitating economic climate from 2008 onwards. As Senge quotes, "where teams are truly learning, not only are they producing extraordinary results, but individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise" (2006, p.09).

We found the following matters important to address. What we wished to achieve with our joint practice; what complementary expertise and knowledge we possessed so as to provide a more comprehensive or extended service to our clients, and how these could be combined to best effect; where the gaps were in our respective knowledge that the other practitioner could fill, and what additional CPD would be advantageous; the potential advantages and disadvantages of our different ages and genders; and how our respective values, behaviours and personalities might help or hinder communication, team learning and performance. We also agreed the ethical, confidentiality and professional standards we would apply.

We then considered our preparedness to be a genuine learning team. That meant: flexibility; open-mindedness; taking advice and constructive criticism; giving each other space to try (and fail); supporting each other and, when necessary, sacrificing to assist each other and, if there are differences in values and beliefs, respecting those reasons. As D'Andrea-O'Brien and Buono (1996, p.4) describe it:

> Team learning is the ability of members to share and build upon their individual knowledge so that their collective knowledge enables them continually to improve team performance as well as discover, develop and implement completely new ways of doing business.

Finally, that led to consideration of group think. We attempted to avoid this by, post each session, vigorously questioning what we had done. In particular, we played 'Devil's Advocate' with each other, sometimes asking uncomfortable questions to ensure we gave honest answers on our performance and opinions. This became deeper and more extensive as we developed as a team.

**Conclusion**

As an ongoing review, we considered how we matched Michaelsen's essential principles of learning teams: group formation and management; accountability for individual and group work; assignments that promote both learning and team development; frequent and timely feedback. Our conclusion was that we agreed with them and had met them. Furthermore, our experience bore out Fink's views regarding the advantages of learning teams. However, we could quite see the potential for the disadvantages as outlined by Kayes et al. (2005) and Van den Bossche et al. (2006).

Nevertheless, none of these potential drawbacks affected us once we had developed into a true team, despite the differences in experience. We suggest this was because the two members met the requirements of: flexibility; open-mindedness; receptivity; mutual support and respect. However, it must be stated we were a pair, not a team of 'five to seven' with the latter's potential for problems due to team size. Also, our respective skills and experiences were particularly complementary for the services we wished to provide.

So that brings us back to our contention that the success of a learning team most probably depends on purpose, membership and attitude; but we add this caveat - 'in a situation like ours'. Our team was bespoke to us and our type of clients, it may not translate, at least in toto, to other practitioners and their different situations.

That said, it was successful, as evidenced by the comments of our client companies and coachees, and our own personal achievements – for example, the successful completion of joint Professional Doctorates in Executive Coaching and Team Learning. Consequently, we suggest the concept of learning teams is well worth considering by fellow coaches, if only to help them think outside of their paradigms – something they encourage their coachees to do. Our proposal is one way in which practitioners might be able to enhance their professional development and, therefore, service to their clients, by making increasingly efficient and effective use of live coaching sessions.

Finally, for the future, it would be interesting to apply this approach to coaching business teams and compare the resulting professional development of the coaches with that of their counterparts coaching sports teams where often two coaches are involved. There may well be a valuable cross-over of experience.

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