

Academic Paper

Team leadership development through coaching: A case study of skippers in a round-the-world sailing race

Sue Fontannaz (Oxford Team Leadership Coaching, Oxford, UK)

Elaine Cox (Business School, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK)

Abstract

This paper explores the use of coaching in supporting leadership development in a challenging team context. A case study methodology was used to uncover perspectives on the different coaching interventions incorporated in an 11-month round the world sailing race. The coaching was found to be supportive of contextually embedded team leadership development as skippers transitioned into the team leadership role. The study extends prior research by exploring how team leadership development is supported over time through a dynamic coaching intervention.

Keywords

Coaching, leader development, team leadership development, relational leadership,

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Introduction

The recent shift towards a relational perspective of leadership and teams leads to the suggestion that leadership development requires a move away from focusing on individual leader development towards a more collective approach (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Grint (2005 p.39) even spoke of this shift as putting the *ship* back into *leadership*, suggesting it is “the crew of the metaphorical ‘ship’ not the literal ship’s ‘captain’ that has the requirements to construct and maintain an organization”. In other words, rather than leadership being restricted to a heroic leader, it is a collective and relational undertaking. Furthermore, Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm and McKee (2014) identified that leadership development approaches often pay inadequate attention to context and this inhibits their effectiveness. Leadership development therefore appears to require a more integrated and contextual approach as well as the recognition that it is a relational endeavour.

Relative to coaching, Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) have called for research that draws on a multiple stakeholder perspective with more emphasis on the process dynamics of coaching, rather

than just outcomes. They recognised that, similar to leadership, coaching is also not independent of its social context and research is needed to consider both the contextual factors and a temporal perspective of coaching. In the area of team coaching, Hawkins (2014) identified how the theory and practice of coaching teams have remained relatively unexplored in organisations. This gap is significant, since a 2016 International Coach Federation (ICF) survey indicated that although over half of professional coaches work with team leaders, there is no clarity on how to coach leaders who are embedded in teams. There is also little research focused on the role of coaching in supporting leaders transitioning from technical specialist to team leader: individuals are often chosen for leadership positions “because they are in some way technically gifted” (McLaughlin & Cox, 2016, p. 10) with little attention given to the development of skills required to lead the team.

The purpose of this article is to examine how team leadership can be supported through coaching in a real-world context. The paper addresses calls from both organisational (Jones, Woods & Guillaume, 2016) and sports coaching scholars (Cotterill & Fransen, 2016) for more research to understand the process of how coaching works, by offering a case study of coaching for technical experts (skippers) as they transition into team leadership roles in a challenging context. It also emphasises the relational context of the team leadership role.

A case study methodology was used to research an 11-month round the world sailing race. This provided the opportunity to study the dynamics of both the coaching and the resultant team leadership development. This choice of methodology also addressed the call from Tannenbaum, Beard, McNall and Salas (2010, p. 20) for more case study research of team leader development “in the wild”. Kellerman (2012), too, stressed the importance of exploring leadership embedded in context. This instrumental case therefore affords a microcosm of team leadership development embedded in a socially dynamic context and includes a qualitative and temporal perspective to contribute to understanding the complexity of developing team leaders.

The article begins with an overview of relevant literature before explaining the case study method and presenting information about the case study and findings.

Literature

The review of literature is in two parts: the first reviews relevant research on team leadership development and the second is an examination of team coaching literature.

Team leadership development

Since 2000, there has been a consistent move away from individualism in *leader* development towards a more relational approach to *leadership* development. Crevani et al. (2010) and others have explained how the leadership field has traditionally been leader-centered and focused on individual leaders, their traits, abilities and actions (Wood, 2005). However, *leadership development* is becoming recognised more as a continuous process which is closely linked to the work context and involves what Day and Dragoni (2015, p. 134) have defined as “expanding the capacity of individuals to be effective in leadership roles and processes”.

In 2010, Crevani et al. argued that leadership should be redefined in terms of the processes and practices organised by people in interaction and that we should study that interaction rather than looking at what formal leaders do. This alternative perspective stressed the need for leadership to be viewed as a “widely dispersed activity which is not necessarily lodged in formally designated leaders” (Parry & Bryman, 2006, p. 455). Similarly, Van Dierendonck (2011) explained how leadership studies had shifted towards a greater emphasis on “shared, relational, and global perspectives where especially the interaction between leader and follower are key elements” (p. 1229). The move has been away from an individualistic, opportunistic and self-serving focus

towards “governance based on viewing individuals as pro-organizational, self-actualizing, and trustworthy” (p. 1229). Leadership has thus been redefined as a mutually influencing process (DeRue, 2011) and more recently as a “social and goal-orientated influence process, unfolding in a temporal and spatial milieu” (Fischer, Dietz & Antonakis, 2017, p. 1726).

According to Salas, Stagl and Burke (2004, p. 343), team leadership is acknowledged as distinct from organisational leadership and has emerged as a form of “social problem solving that promotes coordinated, adaptive team performance by facilitating goal definition and attainment”. This emphasis on the complex, interactional aspects of leadership has also been highlighted by Kartocho (2013) and Day and Dragoni (2015), who recognised that leadership should enable teams and organisations to “navigate the complexity of their internal and external environments” (p. 146). Cullen-Lester, Maupin and Carter (2017, p. 132) confirmed that such multilevel and relational perspectives are also expanding the focus of leadership development to include network-enhancing approaches that are likely to yield “more stable patterns of social networks (e.g., advice, friendship, trust, communication)”. Mindful of the patterns of social relationships within teams, leaders and followers are seen as playing important and interdependent roles in generating leadership opportunities, contributing to a system of coordination and harnessing the dynamic tensions of teams in order to forge a broader capacity for direction and commitment (Ancona, Backman & Isaacs, 2015). Within sport leadership too, there has been a significant shift away from a preoccupation with formally assigned leadership towards a greater emphasis on the collaborative and relational construction of team leadership (Ferkins, Skinner & Swanson, 2018).

Our study examined the coaching interactions that promote team leadership development. The case study design has also attempted to address the observation made by DeRue and Myers (2014, p. 848) that much research overlooks how the context “shapes the behaviours and practices that enable individuals and collectives to learn from experience”.

Coaching for team leadership development

Day, Zaccaro and Halpin (2004) recognised coaching as one of the effective developmental resources available in the work environment, suggesting it is through feedback and challenges from others, such as coaches, that leaders have access to their own knowledge and experience. Since that time, authors such as Hagen and Aguilar (2012) have suggested coaching as an essential activity of management and leadership with learning outcomes of team members expected to improve if a team leader has coaching skills. Ellinger, Beattie and Hamlin (2018) also argued that managers should adopt a team coaching approach and earlier, Hackman and Wageman (2005) developed a theory of team coaching focusing on the functions coaching serves for a team (motivational, consultative and educational) and suggested that team coaching is a distinctive and consequential aspect of team leadership.

Swart and Harcup (2013) identified three themes in the literature which describe how individual coaching is translated into collective learning: through enacting new behaviours, leading by example by enacting a coaching approach, and embedding collective learning.

This emphasis on context was also the focus of a qualitative study by Petriglieri, Wood and Petriglieri (2011). They suggested it is the social context that provokes and amplifies individual leaders’ experience, together with the existence of a holding environment, such as coaching, that enables learning. McLaughlin and Cox (2016) also supported this contextual perspective, suggesting that the coach ‘holds’ the right kind of environment for the leader.

In reviewing the literature on coaching, Theeboom, Beersma and VanVianen (2013) identified limitations in the research, including the lack of a temporal dimension to the studies. They called for the incorporation of perspectives from a range of disciplines to address the need for more theoretical development to support the field. Their study, however, was limited to assessing the

impact of individual-level benefits of coaching, without consideration for the 'spillover' effects that coaching has on other people in the team/organisation. O'Connor and Cavanagh (2013) did, however, report this potential in their quantitative study on the changes observed in relational networks of an organisation following a leadership coaching intervention. In their findings they confirm the influence of leadership coaching beyond the individual leader and suggest a more nuanced approach is necessary when designing interventions in complex adaptive systems.

Athanasopoulou and Dopson (2018) reviewed a number of studies and highlighted a neglect of the role of context in influencing coaching outcomes. So, although there is much commentary on the topic, research into the role of coaching in team leadership development is currently sparse. Also, whilst there is some research on leadership coaching that is relevant to organisational leaders, there seems to be little on how to coach team leaders who are embedded in the social dynamics of teams. Clutterbuck (2018) and Hawkins (2014) recognised the role of the team leader in team coaching even though there is little clarity on how coaches should engage with the team leader. However, Clutterbuck (2018) further noted that some observers contest the validity of team coaching as a genre, on the basis that it is no more than facilitation or team development, and that the essence of coaching is an individual process. This debate suggests to us that the focus should be on developing the team leader as coach.

Seemann, Štofková and Binasova (2019) view coaching both as a modern form of company management and as a development tool. The coaching manager can support employees to achieve goals and tasks and help them with problem solving either individually or through team performance and dynamics. In their case study, these authors used a range of coaching-related activities such as job shadowing, team coaching, individual coaching, and self-evaluation. Their findings suggested managers and team members benefited from the variety of opportunities to learn.

Like organisational coaching, sports coaching is also well established, although the role of coaching the athlete-leader is under-researched (Chelladurai, 2013). Most athlete leadership research to date has focused on leadership analysis before or after the game. However, Cotterill and Fransen (2016) suggested that more elaborate knowledge is required on how leaders impact their teammates during the game and across time. Barnson (2014) suggested that researchers should ask what tensions are embedded within the coaching approach and how these tensions are experienced and managed by coaches.

Researchers such as Day, Harrison and Halpin (2012) and Wolfe, Weick, Terborg, Poppo, Murrell, Dukerich, Crown Core, Dickson, and Simmons Jourdan (2005) view sport as a simplified microcosm of larger society. Day, Gordon and Fink (2012), for example, identified over 40 sports context studies that have been published in the organisation sciences from 1963 to 2011 and contended that since sports are defined by explicit and agreed-upon rules and have clearly defined boundaries where the action occurs, the context offers a type of controlled "living laboratory" in which to study individuals and groups.

In summary, team leader coaching is still emergent and whilst the literature acknowledges the impact of the context and social dynamics on team leadership, there appears to be little research that investigates coaching interventions with team leaders, and which acknowledges the specific tensions, challenges and opportunities of the team context.

Methodology

The aim of the research was to explore team leadership development through coaching. The research was designed from a social constructionist perspective to examine the perceptions and experiences of different stakeholders embedded within a socially dynamic team context. This

choice was based on arguments for a more socially situated and contextual approach to studying leadership development. For example, Ospina and Sorenson (2006, p. 193) argued for a more grounded constructionist approach to studying leadership, with the focus on the “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of leadership in context”, whilst Carroll and Jones (2017, p. 191) suggested a shift away from the “psychological, instrumental and quantitative orientation” of mainstream leadership studies towards a more experiential and relational approach. The social constructionist perspective allows the interpretation of the lived experience of team leadership development within an embedded context, where multiple conceptualisations of leadership exist.

With this contextual imperative in mind, an instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995) was chosen to enable rich data collection from a range of stakeholders to help understand the interplay between perceptions and the lived experience of team leadership. As described in more detail below, the case selected was an 11-month global sailing race, where 12 amateur teams were each led by a professional skipper on evenly matched boats.

Case study – the round the world coaching intervention

The Clipper (<https://www.clipperroundtheworld.com/about/>) Round the World race comprised eight different legs, with approximately 30 percent of the crew changing after each leg. The race skippers had professional sailing experience and their key challenge was to manage a dynamic, diverse crew of amateur sailors, who were paying customers of the race organiser. Approximately 40 percent of the original crews completed the race, with the balance of the crews changing as the race progressed. This contributed to the socially dynamic complexity of the team leadership challenge.

The coaching interventions were provided by the race organiser through an external coaching organisation comprising five coaches, each with many years of coaching experience. Each was accredited by the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM). The interventions included a combination of individual, group and team coaching sessions with the earlier sessions focusing on group coaching for the skippers, followed by individual coaching sessions. Team coaching was only added towards the later stages of the race. The structure of the coaching intervention and associated timeline are detailed in Table 1.

The coaching programme began with an immersive ‘learning group coaching’ programme held four months prior to the race start and 24 hours after skippers had been selected for the race. A group trip to the Brecon Beacons National Park, Wales, was organised by the external coaching organisation and comprised four and a half days of group coaching. The coaching objectives included: equipping the skippers with additional competence and confidence to lead themselves and others consistently, to build and lead their teams effectively, and to manage leadership communications more appropriately. The key themes coached throughout the programme included developing self-awareness, effective leadership communication and adaptive leadership styles, coaching skills and building high-performance teams. The external coaching team drew on their experience of coaching the skippers and crew in the previous race, which aligned to the ‘world class basics’ of coaching, communication, leadership and teamwork (Anderson, 2011). Coaching was defined by the external coaching team as a non-directive, development technique based mainly on the use of one-to-one discussions to enhance an individual’s skills, knowledge or work performance. The coaching targeted high performance and improvement and usually focused on specific short-term skills and goals.

Table 1: Structure of the coaching interventions

Timeline	Coaching mode	Participants	Purpose
March (prior to race start)	Learning group coaching (4½ days)	12 race skippers, race and deputy race director and 4 external coaches	To encourage a coaching style of team leadership and develop race expectations
July	½ day of learning group coaching	2 skippers and race director	Resolve issues of team dynamics
August	Crew coaching workshop (1 day)	150 crew members (Round the World and 'Leggers')	Develop understanding of a coaching culture
September (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)	Individual Skype coaching sessions	Some skippers (not all completed)	Supporting the skippers in leading their teams
October (Cape Town, South Africa)	Face-to-face coaching with 2-3 skippers in learning group coaching sessions	11 of the 12 skippers and 3-6 crew members from different teams	Supporting skippers in leading their teams and the crew in managing team dynamics
November (Albany, Australia)	Skype coaching sessions	11 skippers and 6 crew members across 3 teams	As above
February (DeNang, Vietnam)	Skype coaching sessions	11 skippers and some crew members	As above
April (Seattle, USA)	Face-to-face individual coaching sessions and team coaching	Skippers and crew members. Some team coaching at the request of crews	Supporting the teams in managing team dynamics and improving performance
June (New York, USA)	Face-to-face individual coaching sessions and team coaching	Skippers and crew members. Some team coaching at the request of crews	Supporting the teams in managing team dynamics and improving performance
Ongoing during the race	Internal skipper debriefs with race and deputy race director, which some skippers considered as internal coaching	Skippers	Supporting the skippers in dealing with the challenges of leading their teams

The learning group coaching was followed up with half-day, one-to-one skipper coaching sessions before the race start. The coaching organisation also held an introductory, one-day crew coaching workshop attended by 150 crew members in order to develop a common language around a coaching culture.

Individual Skype coaching sessions were attempted after the completion of the first leg of the race in September, but there were unexpected issues, which undermined the coaching engagement. The skippers and crews were dealing with the aftermath of a fatality that had occurred during the race and counselling was offered by the race organiser. Technical issues with Skype were also experienced. Some sessions were held with skippers, but the coaching was abandoned as a result of these challenges and unexpected issues.

Face-to-face coaching sessions were held in Cape Town (October) with 11 of the 12 skippers. The sessions were limited to one hour, learning group coaching sessions, with three to four skippers in each session. Crew coaching was also conducted in three sessions with six to eight crew members per session.

Skype coaching was then conducted with 11 skippers and six crew members (evenly spread across three of the teams) in various locations between November and February and face-to-face coaching was conducted in Seattle in April. Some team coaching was also conducted in Seattle and New York. The crews were dealing with a second fatality and were recovering from challenging racing conditions, which had resulted in significant damage to some of the boats. This coaching session was followed by face-to-face coaching in New York prior to the final ocean crossing of the race. The coaching programme was distinctive for the length of time between the different coaching sessions and the variety of modes used by the coaching organisation. The external coaching process was independent from the skipper debriefs that were conducted by the race organisation.

Data collection and analysis

Different groups of stakeholders were invited for interviews in order to offer a multi-level perspective of the effect on team leadership development of the coaching intervention. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the lived experience of team leadership and coaching from a range of perspectives. Purposive samples of participants were drawn from each of the different stakeholder groups. These comprised four race directors and one manager (representing the race organisation (coded as DIRECTOR)); three coaches from the external coaching organisation (coded as COACH); 11 skippers (coded as SKIPPER) and 25 crew members. The crew sample included Round the World (RTW) crew members and some 'leggers' participating in one or more stages of the race (LEG). A prefix was added to the skippers and crew codes, to indicate whether they were in the higher performing four teams (HP), lower performing teams (LP) or whether there had been a change of skipper (CHANGE). Table 2 gives an overview of the participant groups.

Table 2: Overview of the participant groups

Raw organisation	Coaching organisation	Skippers (11)				Crew (26)			
		Pilot	Performance			Pilot	Performance		
4 directors	3		High	Low	Change		High	Low	Change
3 managers		2	4	4	1	2	15	6	3

Five pilot interviews were held with two race skippers and three crew members from the previous race. Interviews were then conducted with the race organisers and the coaching team. These were followed by semi-structured interviews held with crew members. The final interviews were conducted with the race skippers. All the interviews with the race directors, coaching team and the skippers were conducted face to face and recorded. The crew interviews included both face-to-face and Skype interviews. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and the transcriptions sent to the participants for verification.

Daily skipper blogs and additional documentary data, including a crew survey conducted by the race organisers (166 respondents), the coaching manual and race data, were also collected. Thus, the study blended ongoing real time data, in the form of the daily skipper blogs, with retrospective interviews from multiple stakeholders at different points in the race, to capture the progressive nature of team leadership development and contribute to the credibility of the findings.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to develop themes from each data set and NVivo software was used to manage the volume of data generated. Thematic network analysis diagrams (Attride-Stirling, 2001) were used to analyse the latent themes and compare and contrast the data from different teams. Each theme is illustrated with extracts from the interviews.

Findings

Three themes emerged from analysis of the data to illuminate team leadership development through coaching in this context. The first theme highlights the skippers' transitions to team leadership, where coaching is seen to address the gap between expectations and the race experience. The second theme emphasises the role of coaching in mediating skippers' expectations of team leadership and their actual experience. The third theme focuses on how coaching reinforced or continued team leader development. In this theme, two sub-themes are presented: i) the developmental challenge of facilitating the crew experience and ii) supporting the learning curve.

1. The role of coaching in the transition to team leadership

Skippers' transitions to team leadership were expected to be influenced by the initial coaching programme, which formed part of the race preparation in March. One director acknowledged how coaching can help build confidence by sharing prior experiences and scenarios:

I am not sure you can ever be totally ready to skipper a yacht in a Round the World race until you have actually done it, which is kind of backwards. [...] therefore, any way that we can build their confidence, with a bit more familiarity and advice [...] and sharing ideas – DIRECTOR3.

The skippers acknowledged that this initial coaching was valuable, enabling them to reflect on others race experiences. However, they recognised the transition to team leadership as a gap between expectations and experience. For example, one skipper commented on underestimating the challenge: "Even though I thought I knew how tough it was, and on the one hand expected it, I don't think I ever respected just how tough it really was" - CHANGESKIPPER1. Another skipper also highlighted the gap between expectations and experience: "I guess my expectations were a little bit off [...] I suppose I was a bit under prepared [...] for the team side of things" – LPSKIPPER2.

Whilst expressing confidence in the preparations, another skipper acknowledged the challenge of transitioning into the team leadership role and highlighted the expectation that development would occur naturally when faced with the unknown: "I felt prepared for it, I felt that I couldn't be more ready to take it on really, but I don't think anything can ever really prepare you for such a big challenge [...] you just hope that you can [...] that it will just come naturally when you are put in that environment" – HPSKIPPER1. Further, this skipper recognised that the preparation was valuable in influencing the race experience:

I knew exactly what to expect and for the most part, it was accurate and the preparation is absolutely key [...] it would have probably been a completely different experience if we had just been thrown into this group of people, without being briefed. – HPSKIPPER1.

This skipper recognised that the coaching was influential in supporting the transition to team leadership with the acknowledgement that the race experience would have been "completely different" without the opportunity of reflecting on the challenges associated with leading teams in such a challenging context. The coaching enabled the skippers to learn from the race directors' prior experience and encouraged belief in their own ongoing development, rather than merely responding to a prescriptive approach to race preparation. This sense of agency was stimulated by the shift from "telling" to engagement in exploring scenarios and reflecting on alternative approaches.

The above findings suggest that the initial coaching enabled the skippers to draw on vicarious experience to develop awareness of the challenges of team leadership and support. Lawrence and Whyte's (2017) observation is that coaching helps to balance challenge and support, identifying the role for coaching in the gap between expectations and experience. The early coaching, with its emphasis on empathetic understanding, contributed to plugging the gap that existed between their own experience and that of others, and so contributed to developing their confidence in transitioning into the team leadership role.

2. Coaching and the role of experience

Coaching during the race offered skippers the opportunity to reflect on their earlier expectations and their actual experiences as the race progressed. The role of experience is multi-dimensional and participants repeatedly commented on how it influenced both their expectations and subsequent behaviour. Two of the high-performing skippers, in particular, mentioned their prior

experience of corporate coaching and instructing. One skipper used the experience of being coached in an organisational context to coach his crew:

I did a lot of it, I was an IT project manager before, I did a lot of sessions like that, coaching [...] trying to find performance in the group [...] So, I'm working like that with the group – HPSKIPPER3.

This response suggests the probability of team leaders drawing on their previous work experience and highlights the potential to transfer coaching skills across contexts. Another skipper offered a similar perspective, evoking prior experience to justify behaviour in the new situation: “a lot of the stuff that they (coaches) were saying [...] that’s what I’ve been doing naturally anyhow” – LPSKIPPER4. These observations suggest that the internalisation of prior experience supports team leader development and contributes to self-assurance in leader behaviour.

In addition, the experience of the external coaches was also recognised as influential in the coaching relationship as other skippers identified:

I respected it (coaching) because I knew the backgrounds of those individuals – if I didn’t know the backgrounds of the individual then it would be difficult for me to think about how they would contribute to what I already know – HPSKIPPER4.

Both (DIRECTORS) have done the race before so they know what we’re up against and they understand completely what it is we have to go through. So, they were very supportive – LPSKIPPER1.

Experience can be seen as contributing to the respect that skippers had for the coaches and as they perceived the coaches to be experienced in extreme situations so that built confidence in the coaching process. One director expanded on the role of experience:

By coaching the skippers, from the experience that we have had in previous races, it helps them understand that there are pretty difficult times, tricky situations [...] coaching them in a certain way, rather than just telling them – DIRECTOR3.

The director highlighted how previous experience of the race context informed the coaching and helped develop the skippers’ awareness of challenges that can be expected. This in turn contributed to the alignment of skipper expectations to the race experience. Similarly, a crew member highlighted the role of experience in influencing the social dynamics within the team during the race: “people will naturally defer to people with experience” – HPRTW7.

Experience was also found to influence the coaching relationship and the leadership within the team. A crew member commented on the experimentation involved in this process:

Our skipper, he is someone who just goes with his feelings, and if he thinks something will work, he will try it and if it doesn’t work, he will admit that it didn’t work and then goes on with something new and he’s always experimenting, even with something that worked, he will always try something new –LPRTW1.

Different stages of learning from experience (Kolb, 1984) are evident in the extract above, with the skipper drawing on emotions (“goes with his feelings”), cognition (“thinks something will work”), experimentation (“will try it”), and reflective observation (“admit that it didn’t work”). The above extract also highlights that such learning is continuous, with further experimentation (“goes on with something new”) following the reflection stage.

Thus, at various points in the race, coaching enabled the skippers to reflect on experience, their own and that of others, and to reframe problems into learning opportunities to develop their

leadership capability. Skippers with prior coaching experience were able to transfer these skills to a different context, thus contributing to their leadership capability. Similarly, by recognising how coaching enabled skippers to reflect on the gap between expectations and experience, the findings support the call by Day et al. (2014) for a greater focus on understanding the complexity of the development process.

Cox (2013, p. 40) pointed out that “the attempt to articulate experience is a complex process”. However, our findings suggest that the developmental gap between expectations and experience can be accessed through coaching and the reflection it stimulates. The extracts highlight how the skippers drew on their daily experience to advance their leadership capability with coaching seen as offering a supportive challenge to help examine expectations and experience and so facilitate experiential learning.

3. Continuing team leader development through coaching

Thematic analysis suggested two further sub-themes relating to the developing team leadership capability through coaching. The first theme is the developmental challenge of facilitating crews while the second identifies the ‘learning curve’ (Yelle, 1979) that the skippers experienced.

i) The developmental challenge of facilitating crews

A substantial theme emerged around the developmental challenge of enabling skippers to facilitate the crew experience. Skippers typically commented on the challenge of the “people dimension”, which many considered more daunting than the task of sailing. Some skippers acknowledged the need to develop leadership within their crews to support them in their formal role of skipper. A director also recognised the challenge of leading teams in this way and suggested that most of the skipper role focuses on crew relationships:

[With] 10% sailing the boat and 90% managing the crew. So far, from my 14 years’ experience with Clipper [this is] more true today than when I first started out with them – DIRECTOR2.

Directors also commented on the developmental challenge of focusing the skippers on facilitating the crew experience:

I don’t know if the skippers think about the race as being for the crew and that they are there as a facilitator of the crew experience, and I don’t know if that’s Clippers fault because we don’t stress that to them or stress it enough or whether the skippers are such strong focused characters, which is really important and they need to be, that they hear that from us but then decide that they don’t agree with it – DIRECTOR1.

The race directors recognised the challenge of developing the skippers’ focus beyond the task of competing in the race, to encompass the well-being of the team. For example, the directors commented on the role of coaching in contributing to the team well-being:

Resolution with some conflict that they are having [...] improves the relationships – DIRECTOR2.

Engaging with your crew [...] builds a relationship straight away – DIRECTOR3.

Coaching was therefore found to be useful for broadening the skippers’ awareness of the relational aspect of team leadership. Directors recognised the value of coaching in developing the relationships between the skippers and the crew to facilitate the crew experience, and in developing collective understanding by developing a coaching ‘style’ of leadership, involving dialogue. A skipper also commented on the relational role of coaching: “It helps all the time to

discuss a lot of problems [...] yes, it did” – HPSKIPPER3. This skipper found the coaching to be supportive, as it offered the space to talk about issues.

Some crew members made similar remarks about the coaching culture developed by the skippers. One suggested, for example:

If we had had a skipper who was always the boss, and just shouting orders, I wouldn't have learnt as much as I did – LPRTW1

However, a different, more performance-oriented perspective was offered by other crew members:

They (crew) really want to win [...] so the pressure was on, they had got a lot of podiums previously, so the pressure was on to improve that, and unfortunately that didn't happen [...] we went for the MP coaching session [...] and tried to thrash out where they thought things perhaps could be improved - HPLEG6.

Many minds working together can raise [...] performance to levels you never thought possible - HPRTW5.

Coaching can be seen to have supported the development of relationships within the teams and enabled the collective development of people skills. The findings suggest leadership was not limited to the skipper, as the crew members also learnt about themselves and others through the development of a coaching culture. The development of the individual skippers through the coaching intervention will have contributed to a culture of improved collective decision making and crew relationships. In addition, some of the experienced crew were recognised by other crew members and skippers for their informal leadership roles within the team.

Coaching was also not limited to the formal coaching by the external coaches. The skippers acknowledged the support of the ongoing coaching from the race directors and the crew recognised the support of coaching from some of the skippers and experienced crew members. Thus a coaching web, or network, emerged as the race progressed in response to the demand for developmental support from both the crew and the skippers.

ii) Supporting the learning curve

Findings suggest skippers found the task of facilitating their crews particularly challenging as they transitioned from technical sailing experts to team leaders. This learning curve was evident across multiple levels: individual, social relational and collective decision making. There were repeated references in the data, for example, to the developmental challenge faced by the skippers especially as they contrasted the initial learning curve at the first stage of the race to later stages:

The learning curve for me was huge, and the middle bit was more of the same and the end was [...] in a way, it was let's see what we can do before it's all over – LPSKIPPER2.

This skipper recognised that the initial transition to team leadership represented a significant learning curve and suggested that this development enabled capability over time. The extract also highlights the temporal dimension of leader development.

Another skipper also acknowledged the scale of the challenge: “it was definitely, probably the most challenging experience I've ever had [...] it was quite daunting” – HPSKIPPER1.

Whilst this skipper acknowledged the daunting nature of the challenge, a crew member acknowledged the novelty of the challenge and commented on the impact: “never been through anything like that [...] the burden on his shoulders was immense” –HPRTW1. This crew member expanded on this perspective and suggested that the skipper was:

On the edge of his capability, it's stretching him – HPRTW1. Another participant commented that: It's a massive learning curve for anybody – LPLEG3.

These extracts suggest that development occurs and that it can be an overwhelming experience, as reflected in the comment “on the edge of his capability”, challenging the nature of the skipper’s role and the function of coaching in supporting skippers’ development.

One of the directors reflected on the role of coaching in supporting the skippers in decision making, offering a clear link between coaching as a tool to support decision making and encouraging reflection on alternative routes to “find a way through”:

If they can see another route to achieving their goals and objectives [...] at an impasse with a crew member, having some coaching, even just talking it through, with somebody else, you can generally find a way through [...] the solution normally always presents itself to you [...] coaching is a tool to unlocking that for you – DIRECTOR2.

This quote also illuminates the social dynamics within the crews, with conflict expressed as an “impasse” occurring between the skipper and the crew members.

Additionally, there is evidence of behavioural development as a result of skills coaching. Skippers commented on how coaching supported the development of behavioural skills such as speaking to a group:

Public speaking [...] you do a lot of standing up in front of 20 crew [...] gave us these little tricks – LPSKIPPER3

So I think the public speaking stuff and the presenting stuff, that was really helpful [...] and friends have actually commented when they've seen interviews of the race, they said that I had progressed – LPSKIPPER4.

Yet another perspective was offered by one of these skippers, who acknowledged how coaching can alleviate the sense of isolation leaders experience and appreciated how the coach was “someone to talk to” – LPSKIPPER3.

Directors also identified that the coaching supported skills development of the skippers by: “presenting and briefing and asking the right questions and coaching techniques” – DIRECTOR3.

Another director also reflected on the role of coaching in exploring different approaches to problem solving: “lots of different, different styles of doing things, different ways, sometimes you can, I guess people can be quite tunnel visioned” – DIRECTOR3. Coaching offered the opportunity to broaden cognition and explore alternative paths. For example, coaches encouraged skippers to ‘push authority down’ to the team. This director explained the role of coaching as to “encourage them to find solutions” – DIRECTOR3.

Whilst the directors acknowledged the value of coaching, one director also recognised the challenge of coaching the skippers: “It’s quite tricky – some of them are very good at it – others not so. Some are very good at listening and acting on it – even if it’s passive - and some are not. It’s very difficult I think” - DIRECTOR2. This extract highlights that team leader development occurs individually and is related to the skipper’s identity, past experience and learning orientation. This finding aligns with the extant theory that recognises that development trajectories differ (Day & Sin, 2011) and highlights that coaching methodology’s greatest strength is that it originates from the individual agenda and builds on individual motivation and creativity (Swart & Harcup, 2013).

These perspectives further highlight how coaching can support individual team leader development across the cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions. Cognitive development has been

supported through the focus on experiential learning. Affective outcomes have been shown through the development of the confidence needed for the team leadership role. Value was also placed on specific behavioural skills aimed at addressing specific challenges.

The race context and its coaching intervention has provided a complex, but compact setting through which to study team leadership development. With support of coaches, the skippers adapted as the race progressed, shifting from using their own technical expertise to focusing on developing relationships within the team and encouraging the team to become self-sustaining.

Conclusion

This research explored the role for coaching in team leadership development in the context of a round the world sailing race. A multi-method, case study methodology was used to track the influence of a longitudinal coaching programme delivered to race skippers. The race context was chosen as a 'living laboratory' since it was anticipated that there could be some correspondence between the role of coaching for new skippers and for new business leaders, with insights that could not have been so evident merely via observation of the latter.

The coaching intervention was described and, although initially participants were sceptical about the coaching and there was some lack of clarity about purpose, all the different stakeholders recognised it as adding value. As the race progressed, the coaching required a shift in focus to acknowledge that team leadership evolved over time from the expected formal authority of the skipper to a more collective leadership within the team.

Four main findings emerged that suggest a significant role for coaching relative to team leadership development.

First, coaching was seen to support team leader development for transitioning leaders by affording opportunities for them to engage with both their own and others' experiences and to address any gap or tension between expectations and experience. In particular, access to vicarious experiences via a coach plugs the gap between expectations and preparation for the future leadership experience and increases confidence. This could be important for transitioning leaders across contexts – for example, for onboarding CEOs and first 100 days coaching (Elsley & Riddle, 2015).

Second, coaching was perceived to provide support for leaders as they took up their team leadership roles, by supporting and challenging them. They were offered the opportunity to make sense of experience and consider alternative actions and develop different ways to respond. The coaching was thus found to support leadership emergence, offering a context to uncover dominant, underlying knowledge principles (Drath, 2001). These principles related to the personal confidence and dominance of the skipper and other team members and the interpersonal influence patterns within the team.

Third, ongoing coaching can support development of a coaching culture within teams. The findings indicated that coaching 'webs' could emerge within teams, particularly high-performing teams; where skippers were coached by both the external coaches and the internal race directors, and the skippers and experienced crew coached other crew members. This cascade of coaching added to greater collective team leadership and also contributed to more relational forms of leadership emerging as the race progressed. These findings align with Cunliffe and Eriksen's (2011, p. 1434) intersubjective view of the world that offers "a way of thinking about who leaders are in relation to others [...] and how they might work with others within the complexity of experience". Further, the role of the leader is recognised as influential in this collective learning – thus putting the 'ship' in leadership. Consequently, the research highlighted that leadership is not limited to the individual leader, as multiple team members also had influence. These findings also highlight a temporal

progression in team development, where power may reside with the leader at the outset, but as the team bonds or unites over time, both the leader and the team are influenced to share leadership. Further research into this phenomenon in different contexts is suggested.

Fourth, the study also acknowledges how coaching supports the development of confidence as a relationship mediator between leader development and team performance. It can be argued that a leader who is influential in developing team confidence will find that this contributes greatly to team performance as well as team well-being. This is also an area for further research.

This research has identified the complexity of the role of coaching during the team leadership development process. The findings suggest a temporal role for coaching during the development process, beginning with initiation and a focus on previous experience and its potential application to the new experience. Ongoing coaching support and challenge then helps leaders reflect on current leadership experiences, and develop and expand their ability, ultimately developing a relational leadership approach and potentially enhancing a coaching culture within teams and organisations.

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About the authors

Sue Fontannaz is a researching professional committed to integrating research, theory and practice to address the leading global challenge of team based organisational design. Her focus is on aligning individual development and team performance, drawing on leadership and team coaching to encourage coaching cultures within organisations.

Elaine Cox is a senior lecturer in the International Centre for Coaching & Mentoring Studies at Oxford Brookes University, where she supervises doctoral students. She is an experienced researcher, author and editor. Recent books include *Doing Coaching Research* (2020) which she co-wrote and edited with Peter Jackson.