

GROUP COACHING: SHIFTING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FROM THE INDIVIDUAL TO THE COLLECTIVE

Glain Roberts-McCabe shares her experiences of integrating group coaching within leadership development programmes – and highlights the roles and skills coaches need to adopt beyond one-to-one coaching.

To say that the past two years have been a strain for leaders and their organisations is an understatement at best. With the challenges of remote work, constant states of uncertainty and the ‘great resignation’ – all the while chasing ever-increasing targets – the brutal business reality is that the pressure on leaders is mounting. Skills development and behavioural change have never been more mission critical. Yet, when it comes to supporting high potentials and current leaders, is one-to-one executive coaching sustainable? Maybe it’s time for a rethink.

More and more companies are seeking scalable coaching solutions designed to bring coaching to a wider audience. Progressive organisations are shifting their focus to group coaching approaches in order to reach more leaders, more quickly, and to reap the benefits that come from a shared learning journey. The opportunity is ripe for the coaching industry to take the lead on supporting the learning and development of teams and groups.

GROUP COACHING CHARACTERISTICS

Group coaching shares many of the same characteristics as team coaching and, as such, often can cause some confusion within the coaching community. Yet, there are some very clear and specific differences between the skills required and the process of group coaching versus that of coaching teams. Let’s look at the hallmarks of group coaching.

Nature of relationships: in group coaching, members may not know each other beforehand (particularly in open enrolment programmes) and may not work together following the completion of their learning journey. Strong bonds are often built during successful group coaching programmes and may continue well after the formal programme has been completed – the sign of a great group coaching experience!

Peer-based: the peer nature of group coaching programmes is an important aspect to recognise. Group programmes thrive when individuals have some shared interests and can exchange experiences to facilitate collective learning. If a group is imbalanced in either experience or personal objectives, the learning of and overall satisfaction with the group coaching programme will be compromised.

Balance individual with group goals: group coaching participants will enter programmes with both shared and individual goals. This can make managing group coaching engagements more complex as coaches actively balance the needs of different individuals. It can be helpful to include a one-to-one coaching element to ensure individual needs are being met.

EXPANDED COACHING SKILLSET REQUIRED

Group coaches regularly dance between a variety of skills beyond coaching, including facilitation, education, advising and even conflict resolution. It’s a complex tango that group coaches need to do to help groups transition through the coaching experience. Here are four key roles that we want group coaches to embody. In addition, group coaches will invariably encounter various ‘choice points’ throughout the group coaching experience. Highlighted below are also a few questions to consider depending on the role being played.

1. **Coach:** contracting, active listening, powerful questions. All the hallmarks of great one-to-one coaching exist in a group environment as well. The nuance is to elevate these elements from individual needs to the needs of the group in co-creating group agreements, boundaries and working methods.

Considerations:

- Where is the group’s energy? What are you noticing as coach?
- What observations can you bring to the group?
- What is being left unsaid in the group that needs to be surfaced?

2. **Facilitator:** helping groups address issues together, keeping the group timing on track, managing group dynamics and establishing collective accountability for the learning agenda requires facilitation and well-honed meeting management skills.

Considerations:

- What are the fixed and the flexible components of your group coaching session?
- How will you recontract with the group around timing and outcomes?
- What are the ground rules and meeting protocols, and how will you encourage a sense of group ownership/accountability?

3. **Educator:** creating meaningful learning content or establishing a core curriculum that balances education and application – delivered with a coach-like approach – requires a fundamental understanding of adult education and learning design.

Considerations:

- What are the key learning objectives for this group?
 - How will you make the content appeal to all learning styles?
 - What actions are required before, during and after the learning discussion?
4. **Mentor:** providing guidance and experience that elevates the group’s learning as well as role modelling effective coaching practices for the group are often key.

Considerations:

- Where else is there wisdom in the group around this topic?
- What is my role in advancing their understanding of the concept/topic?
- How do I add enough value to the discussion, but not too much?

SUCCESS FACTORS FOR GROUP COACHES

The leap from one-to-one to coaching groups can be a tricky one to achieve. From our experience, here are the top five things to help you (and your group) succeed:

Focus on trust and psychological safety: participating in a group coaching experience requires that the group builds bonds. The group coach must work actively to create psychological safety within the group, ensuring group members feel that they can participate with candour. It is essential to take the time to build vulnerability and trust among all group members. Because groups are typically together for specific periods of time, this process needs to be done quickly.

Create shared agreements: group coaching programmes need to operate with a set of shared working agreements that allow the group to grow and develop together. The group agreements set the expectations for the learning journey, which support the culture of trust and vulnerability needed to have a successful experience. If group coaches miss this key step, once group norms get set they are hard to undo.

Build group accountability: accountability in group programmes is the responsibility of the group. Breaches of confidentiality (if they happen), lack of follow-through on commitments and ownership of the learning agenda are the responsibility of the group members, not the group coach. Group coaches need to facilitate the right conversations but not own the problems that may occur.

Balance between agility and process: the group coach needs to have the skills to move nimbly in and out of the conversation; to know when to challenge or push the group; to observe the energy of the collective; and to be able to drop in when appropriate. The group coach puts their skills honed as an individual coach to the test by pivoting between one-to-one questions and larger group enquiry questions, driving insight and action. Managing the coaching process, while adapting along the way, ensures that participants in group coaching programmes achieve the results that have been set within the programme.

Focus on group energy over individual energy: managing intergroup dynamics is a challenge. It’s not only about monitoring and exploring the collective energy of group members. Energy management and impact is also something that each group coach needs to assess on a personal level. Whereas in one-to-one coaching we can select our clients based on mutual fit, in group coaching we may be working with people whose approaches and styles don’t fit our own. Our biases and beliefs, and the judgements those create, are additional layers to coaching – whether groups or teams – that need to be continually explored. Coach supervision is critical in this regard.

With these key building blocks in place, group coaches create a shared leadership journey rooted in trust, insight and a collective commitment to creating a successful learning experience.

THE FUTURE OF COACHING

As global uncertainty and volatility continue to affect organisations, we propose it’s time for learning professionals to shift how they approach executive development to a more sustainable model – collective leadership development.

A well-designed group coaching programme that ties business objectives to programme goals delivers all of the benefits of individual coaching. Yet – from breaking down organisational silos to the richness of shared learning experiences to the unique ability to tap into the power of peer pressure to help group members hold each other accountable – collective learning also brings in additional layers and nuances that just aren’t possible in a one-to-one environment.

Based on 15 years’ experience of running group coaching programmes for high-potential leaders, we have seen the bonds and relationships that develop through the coaching process strengthen cultures, build leadership capability and boost engagement and job satisfaction. Group coaching can be a powerful strategy for progressive organisations looking to take their leadership capabilities to the next level.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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