

# Group Coaching: Key skills and considerations

*The very essence of coaching is to connect with people and help them grow. Yet the dynamics and goals of individual, team and group coaching are particular to each distinct coaching environment. Each one requires a distinct and discrete set of skills and abilities, and approach to the coaching process.*

*Let's look at two key coaching approaches – individual coaching and team coaching – and compare them to group coaching. There are many similarities but also several differences that coaches must consider.*



## Individual Coaching

The Coaches Training Institute, one of the earliest and leading coach training groups, teaches coaches that clients are 'creative, resourceful and whole' and that the primary role of the coach is to help the clients unlock existing inner wisdom. In a one-to-one coaching relationship, the coaches role is to move a client from their current state to a clearly established future goal that the client themselves has an interest and enthusiasm for achieving.

Coaches develop and maintain mindsets that are open, curious, flexible and client-centered. They partner with their client to create well-defined agreements about the coaching relationship, process, plans and goals. They work with the client to co-create a safe, supportive environment that allows the client to share freely.

A strong coach is fully conscious and present in the moment and focused on the client's agenda (not their own). They deepen client insight and learning by using tools and techniques such as powerful questioning, active listening, silence, metaphor, mirroring and analogy. This all happens in an environment of mutual respect and trust.

In the one-to-one coaching relationship, there is a dynamic that is continually shifting between the coach and the client. This 'dance' between coach and client evolves throughout the relationship.

As we shift from one-to-one to one-to-many, the complexity of the skills we need beyond this foundation, begins to grow.

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## Team Coaching

What is a team and how does it differ from a group? By definition, a team will have:

- a shared purpose that requires collaboration and coordination (members of a group may simply have a common purpose)
- a degree of interdependence in the tasks they have to complete (members of a group may have some interdependence or none at all)
- relative formality in communications and social structures (teams almost always exist within a larger organizational structure)
- a degree of shared responsibility towards the collective endeavor



The team coach's role is to move the team towards one collective and shared goal (and often starts by helping the team collectively define what that goal is).

Although teams are collections of individuals, the role of the team coach is not to focus on how everyone contributes to the team (although that may be an element of the coaching). Rather, the team coaches focus is on the collective 'we' of a team by exploring the dynamics that are playing out within the team and between team members. Team coaches help teams build their collective and shared awareness and understanding of how these dynamics will either support or impede their shared goals. Team coaches spot the verbal and non-verbal communication patterns among team members; identify potential alliances, conflicts, and growth opportunities; and help the team reflect and reconcile their working relationships. The team coach shines a light on the observed dynamics and patterns to strengthen and support the team's awareness and collective insight.

Team coaches can help teams build shared agreements and understanding. They facilitate managing multiple agendas, build trust and intimacy, cultivate confidentiality and hold the team accountable to implementing actions. The team coach encourages participation and contribution by all team members and can help teams move through challenging conversations and conflicts.

In addition to solid coaching capabilities, team coaches leverage additional skills such as: facilitation, expertise sharing, advisory and team building skills. Team coaches have a high degree of agility to know when to drop in with expertise and when to pull back and allow the dialogue to flow. This dance between being an advisor, an advocate, a facilitator, an educator and a coach is subtle and shifts many times over a team coaching engagement.

The team coach supports the team in realizing its shared vision and purpose and defining and upholding common team and organizational values. Team coaching is a complex process that requires coaches to take a broad systemic view of not just the individuals within the team, but the stakeholders that the team impacts both within and outside the company.

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## Group Coaching

Group coaching shares many of the same characteristics as team coaching and, as such, often can cause some confusion within the coaching community. Group and team certification programs are frequently lumped together and yet, there are some very clear and specific differences with the skills required and the process of group coaching versus that of coaching teams. Let's take a look at what's different and then what's the same. And, keep in mind, as a group coach, you're always tapping into all those solid coaching skills we use when coaching individuals but now we're layering in the complexity of multiple individual agendas.

### The Differences between Team and Group Coaching

**Longevity of relationships:** One key difference between group coaching and team coaching is the fact that the team will remain intact after the coaching experience. Working relationships on teams continue in between formal coaching sessions and will endure after the formal coaching program is complete.

In group coaching, members may not know each other before hand (particularly in open enrolment programs) and may not be together following completion of their learning journey. This requires group coaching programs to have a clearly defined closure point vs. team coaching which will continue through the coaching roles of the team leaders involved.

It should be said that the relationships in group coaching programs may continue well after the formal program has completed. That's the sign of a great group coaching experience in our opinion.

**Power dynamics:** As a result of existing relationships and corporate hierarchy, formal leadership exists within a team coaching engagement and the dynamics of personal and positional power are a key factor to monitor as a team coach. Team coaching often presents higher personal risk for those involved, as careers can legitimately be impacted if team coaching processes aren't handled effectively.

For group coaches, leadership within the group is shared by the group members. The majority of group coaching programs are peer-based and learning occurs when members of the group experience bring a certain set of experiences/background to the program.

*Special note: The peer nature of group coaching programs is an important one to recognize. Group programs thrive when individuals have some shared interests and can exchange experiences to facilitate collective learning. If a group is imbalanced either in experience and/or personal objectives (eg: a new mother joins a group filled with parents of teens to learn about parenting a newborn), the learning – and overall satisfaction with the group coaching program – will be compromised.*

**Individual goals focus vs. team goal focus:** While teams may be working towards a shared set of goals and objectives, group coach participants will have their individual goals and objectives. This can make managing group coaching

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engagements more complex as coaches actively balance the needs of individuals in a group learning and coaching experience. Often, group coaching programs will include a one-to-one coaching element to ensure the needs of both elements are being met.

**Level of structure:** Unlike team coaching programs which are guided by the immediate needs and agenda of the team and can be very fluid, group coaching programs often offer a balance of 'just in time' discussions alongside a more planful learning journey.

Group coaching programs have a defined 'beginning, middle and end'. Team coaching programs can often shift and expand along with the dynamics of the team making them more complex and trickier to manage.

Because of the more 'prescriptive' element of group coaching, experience in adult learning design is especially helpful to create content that engages in a variety of methods and mediums. The group coach needs to know which tools to incorporate to drive the greatest impact and turn insight into action.

## The Similarities between Group and Team Coaching



**Foundation of Trust & Psychological Safety:** Like in a team, participating in a group coaching experience requires that the group builds bonds. The group coach actively works to create psychological safety to ensure group members feel comfortable that they can participate with candour. Unlike team members that have pre-existing relationships, group members may be new to each other. This makes it essential to take the time to actively build vulnerability and trust amongst all group members in order to develop momentum. Because groups are typically together for specific periods of time, this process needs to be done quickly.

**Shared Agreements:** As with team coaching, group coaching programs operate with a set of shared working agreements that allow the group to grow and develop together. Like team agreements, the group agreements set the expectations for the learning journey which supports the culture of trust and vulnerability needed to have a successful experience.

**Accountability:** Creating shared understanding and hold members accountable are hallmarks of both a group and team coach approach. Unlike in one-to-one coaching, accountability in group programs extends beyond the coach. We like to call this *positive* peer pressure. Both group and team coaching experiences provide collectively accountability that raises the bar on performance.

**Agility and Process Focus:** As with team coaching, the group coach needs to have the skills to nimbly move in and out of the conversation. To know when to challenge or push the group, to observe the energy of the collective and be able to drop in when appropriate. The group coach puts their skills honed as an

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individual coach to the test by pivoting between one-to-one questions and larger group inquiry questions for the purposes of driving insight and action.

At the same time, coaches keep their teams or groups on track. Managing the coaching process, while adapting along the way, ensures that clients in both group and team-based coaching programs achieve the results that have been set within the coaching program.

**Interpersonal Dynamics & Energy:** Managing intergroup dynamics is a challenge for both group and team coaches. In both experiences, the coach is regularly dancing between a variety of skills: facilitation, coaching, educating, advising and, sometimes, managing. It's a complex tango that group and team coaches need to do to help both groups and teams transition through the coaching experience.

Energy management takes on a special meaning when coaching teams and groups. It's not only about monitoring and exploring the collective energy of group members. Energy management and impact is also something that each group or team 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 and team 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 and growing in popularity as a result.

*Special note: The nuance for group coaching programs is that, unlike in a team coaching scenario, it is possible for individuals to get 'voted off the island'. Those who choose not to follow the norms of the group may be asked to leave the program if their engagement is detrimental to the learning of their colleagues. This adds an interesting and sometimes tricky layer to coaching groups.*

## Results: Real-World Application, A Delicate Balance & Deliberate Intention

Like with all coaching engagements, tangible results are expected.

Every member of a group coaching program should have a clear idea of what they want from the experience and have some clear goals and objectives. Because putting things into practice takes place away from the coaching session, how group members apply their learning will be vary from individual to individual. It is common for members of the group to take and apply different concepts based on their personal goals, needs and ambitions. Group coaching programs always strike a balance between shared learning and individual goals.

As a group coach, you bring your own credibility and capability to the table as well as specific expertise that builds value as the trusted advisor to the group. Unlike traditional training and learning programs where instructors take the role of the "sage on the stage", group coaches embody the "guide on the side" by providing greater learning impact by



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knowing when to hold back and allow participants to come to their own conclusion and when to lean in and provide experience and new perspectives. A skilled group coach will know when to pause and allow the group to integrate their collective learning versus showcasing the coaches own expertise.

Group participants need to be encouraged to try new things, take risks and effect change. Results for a group coaching program will be apparent when participants keep the learning top-of-mind. The power of group coaching stems from the unique ability to tap into the power of peer pressure to help group members hold each other collectively accountable to the goals they've set for themselves.

## Additional Resources

For a full and comprehensive overview of team and individual coaching please refer to the ICF (International Coaching Federation) website for the complete competency descriptions. The competency guide for individual coaching can be found [here](#) and for team coaching can be found [here](#).

## About the Author

Glain Roberts-McCabe, PCC CTP is the Founder & CEO of The Roundtable and The Group Coach Academy. With over 25 years of experience coaching groups, teams and individuals, Glain is passionate about helping organizations unleash collective impact by leveraging group and team coaching approaches. The Roundtable has won multiple awards for their group coaching programs and has supported clients from PepsiCo to the Toronto International Film Festival all sizes, shapes and industries in-between. You can follow Glain on LinkedIn at [www.linkedin.com/in/glain](http://www.linkedin.com/in/glain)