



Coaching Your Team as a Collective Makes It Stronger

By Sanyin Siang and Michael Canning

Teams are the engine of the corporate machine. They bring together diverse sets of skills to solve problems, innovate, and execute strategy. They're also where the work experience is shaped, and where culture is experienced real time. Teams generate opportunities for newer employees to learn and help solve problems, and for more senior employees to share their knowledge and leverage their experience.

Despite all of this, most management systems continue to focus on individual employees. This is particularly true of coaching, which until recently has been considered primarily a one-on-one practice designed to deliver better individual performance and job satisfaction. There's nothing wrong with that — good individual coaching is an immensely valuable management skill and, when done well, has elevated performance of many individuals. But no matter how effective employees are on their own, they can only contribute to the real power of the collective if their managers provide them with quality support and coaching as a group.

A Team-Based Approach

Leaders can close this gap by embracing the practice of team coaching, which shifts the focus from individual performance to collective impact. In this environment, a leader's role is to support the team as an organic unit, providing support and guidance, setting routines and practices, and creating constant opportunities for group learning.

The team-coaching approach encourages team members to go beyond their roles and understand one another's strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations. Members are encouraged to build stronger relationships themselves, not just one-on-one with their manager. They're also challenged to sharpen their collaboration skills, to hone their ability to collectively take ownership of and solve business challenges, and to address any team-related issues that may arise. The approach creates an environment of agency and accountability, with a healthy balance between challenges and support.

In our work as educators and practitioners, we've studied, led, and worked with teams using the tools and techniques of team coaching. Below are the three we've found to be the most important for fostering accelerated learning and successful outcomes.

Problem-based coaching.

There's a natural instinct among team leaders to step in and take over as problems and challenges arise. But in a team-coaching environment, leaders treat problems and challenges as opportunities for real-world learning and growth that all team members can — and have to — take advantage of.

One place that employs this approach effectively is the Osler Internal Medicine Training program at Johns Hopkins, where, from day one, first-year doctors are expected to "own the patient experience" as they make their rounds, with the more-experienced physicians on the team serving as their guides and coaches. It's a mandatory arrangement: With a first-year doctor at "the point of the wedge," everybody discusses and assesses the situation, provides perspectives, and proposes solutions. The most senior doctor on the team listens in, finding out what team members know and asking questions — and, of course, making sure that everybody's assumptions and decisions are sound. Although this approach requires a little more time and energy up-front than having the senior doctor simply step in to solve problems, the long-term benefits — accelerated learning, increased confidence, team spirit, a collective investment in the work — are substantial.

Coach, don't tell.

A second and related leadership technique is based on the Socratic-method of teaching: Team leaders use questions, not answers, to invite and shape how team members understand situations and solve problems. It takes restraint and practice to learn how to formulate questions that prompt insights and shift thinking, but when leaders have mastered this skill, it can become a powerful management technique.

In employing this approach, it can be useful for leaders to develop a list of questions to ask. For instance: "What have you tried thus far?" "What's working? What's not?" "Is there a different way we could frame the problem?" "Do you have all the data?" "What assumptions are you bringing to the problem?" "Who does this well? What would she do?"

When team members respond to these questions, leaders often gain immediate and important insights into how well their teams understand the work, and where additional support may be required. We've worked with several client organizations and executive-leadership teams that have employed this approach very successfully. "Not only does practicing this method deepen team learning around specific customer challenges," a manager at a leading professional-services firm told us after using the approach, "it focuses the whole team on exploring issues more thoroughly, possibly unearthing previously overlooked errors and incorrect assumptions."

Treat both successes and failures as opportunities to learn.

This approach transforms the work dynamic. When team members understand that successes and failures are both considered opportunities to learn in a no-blame environment, they become more willing to test the boundaries of what's possible, to challenge assumptions, and to admit when things have gone wrong. This makes it easier to learn and pivot from mistakes, which in turn enables faster and cheaper failures, and bigger breakthroughs.

For this approach to work for teams, all members need to be given the chance to contribute, because some are likely to notice details and patterns of behavior that others are blind to. It can take time to expose those details and patterns, because they can be buried several levels down in the ingrained thinking and behavior of an organization. So another key to this message is to encourage everybody to repeatedly ask the question “Why?”

The U.S. Special Forces have successfully adopted this approach. After every mission, they conduct an after-action review (AAR), during which team members are invited to provide their perspective on everything that went right and wrong, without assigning any blame, and then before their next mission they conduct a pre-action review (PAR), during which they consider how what they've learned in previous AARs might be applied to the new mission. (For more on AARs, see “*A Better After-Action Review*,” by Angus Fletcher, Preston B. Cline, and Matthew Hoffman.)

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Teams today are having to learn how to deliver results in shorter cycles with fewer resources. They need leaders who can help them learn collectively from their successes and failures, optimize their performance, and adapt quickly to changing demands. Leaders who adopt the approaches to team coaching that we've outlined in this article are well positioned to achieve this, and in so doing can successfully differentiate their businesses by drawing on the remarkable power of the collective.

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