



**TEAM UNITY ENHANCED DURING INTENSE
AND RAPID ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE**

TEAM COACHING CASE STUDY



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The process of skilled team coaching affords psychological safety, trust and time for intense reflection. These are the pre-conditions for teams to tap into their collective wisdom. When they do, extraordinary results are possible

Susan S. Freeman



No matter how tough the circumstances, trust teams' innate collective capabilities to pull through

Osama Al-Mosa

BACKGROUND

The in-country senior leadership team of a well-established and respected institute from the higher education sector in Africa experienced intense and rapid change including: shift in organizational structure from traditional to holacracy, (a form of self-governance that is absent of linear, hierarchical structure), formation of a new senior leadership team, and move from in-person to online and hybrid learning delivery, among others.

Team coaching was embraced as a means of supporting in-country leadership empowerment to prepare for transition to holacracy and de-centralized decision-making

At the time, the team was supported by a global leadership council consisting primarily of U.S.-based stakeholders. Prior to initiating team coaching, the team reported strong commitment to organizational mission, respect for colleagues, and good communication among themselves.

However, the team was looking forward to building a model senior leadership team demonstrating psychological safety, collective unity and empowerment to confidently assume major strategic decisions at the local level. These opportunities gave rise to supporting a team coaching initiative.

TEAM CONTEXT AND KEY CHALLENGES

During initial discovery and scoping of the engagement, the team appeared as talented, enthusiastic, collaborative and self-driven towards the mission of the organization.

During one-one interviews, team expressed a strong need for clarity around alignment and purpose. This had been strongly impacted by the previous organizational structure with its reliance upon the global senior leadership team as a key decision-making body. The in-country national team consequently experienced a lack radical transparency, real ownership, and frustration at being far removed from the locus of decision-making. This created a team experience of frenetic pacing, reactivity, and lack of confidence in their decision-making abilities. The team and its leader struggled with effective delegation and accountability as well.

Stakeholders saw the team as strong in their “determination, loyalty and grace, pivot and innovate, compassion for students and one another, and with a commitment to the mission. They saw the team as lacking ownership, relying upon complying and pleasing due to lack of distributed power and decision-making authority.”

The opportunity for the team coaches was to support the team in creating a healthy climate of collaboration and togetherness within a transitioning organizational structure. This included developing trust and empowerment among team members, acknowledgment of team resilience in the face of extraordinary challenges, and preparation for self-governance with the disbanding of the multi-national, governing global leadership council.

DESIGN

Coaches conducted six (6) sessions of team coaching for ninety (90) minutes duration for a period of six (6) months.

Design features included:



1. The preparation phase:

to understand what performance means in this context and how ready the team is for coaching, considering willingness and readiness for coaching. It included one-on-one introductory and discovery calls with the team leader and the sponsor in addition to a one-on-one contracting and agreement call with the team leader and emailed agreements to all team members.



2. The shaping and agreement phase:

to clarify around the goals and timing. How to measure the outcomes of coaching and understand the team strengths, challenges, barriers and their level of commitment.



3. Coaching conversations

focused on the team, their relationships, the climate health, and the team learning. The first session or two will be focused on the team coaching objectives supporting the team to identify 2-3 team development goals by using team effectiveness instruments.



4. Following up on the coaching goals with the team collectively,

and through one-on-one debriefs with the team leader. Intention was to revisit the initial objectives mid-way through the engagement.



5. Concluding and outcome review

how to help the team to sustain coaching itself while exiting the formal team coaching relationship.



6. Follow up and collecting feedback,

included a one-on-one with the team leader and the team sponsor.

PROJECT ARC

There was noticeable progress between the start of the coaching program to the midpoint of the engagement. The team dynamic and interaction were noticeably enhanced and there was a climate of healthy engagement and communication. Team leader indicated “people are more enthusiastic at meetings and they come ready to share their ideas. Our unity is very strong at present as a result of the trust. We know it is now our collective responsibility to serve.”

However, shortly thereafter the coaches observed a marked low-mood during call check-ins. Both coaches sensed a highly disengaged team. The previous day there had been an announcement of a major re-structuring that included workforce reduction of 25 people, including some of the team members who were participants in the team coaching initiative.

Coaches chose to quickly re-configure all planned activities and themselves expressed high levels of vulnerability. We shared our realization and experience with the team, and then held the space for them to decide what would best support them during the session. This turned out to be the moment that all team members remember as pivotal to their team coaching experience.



THE CLIENT EXPERIENCE

The following are representative direct quotes from team members during the final team coaching session:

- “Gratitude for the great work you’ve done. We’re in a much better place from where you found us. It has changed the way we worked. Now whatever we do, we all get involved. People are more self-directed than ever before. We have a high level of trust where we previously had no trust. We used to keep our distance; now we interact more closely with one another.”
- “Was a good experience. Helped us to neutralize what was going on as a team in response to layoffs and change to structure of holocracy. We had a safe space to share our emotions and fears and not be alone. Psychological safety was created. We developed solutions to move forward.”
- “We learned we thrive when we give each other space to be accountable for our own roles. We have confidence in ourselves to do our roles. We were able to bring to light issues we are facing in ways that are healthy, respectful and constructive. I’ve learned that as a leader, we don’t always know everything. There is room for change as long as you speak up. Systems or rules are not set in stone. In the session after people were let go, it was a very tense time. We felt grateful you noticed what was wrong and we were apprehensive. You talked us through it. As a result, we could speak in helpful ways to others throughout the organization.”
- “In the past we interacted as a result of our leadership positions. Now we focus on our vision and can reach greater heights. We focus more on integrating ideas across the organization. Every member of the organization is important. Everyone has something to contribute. Leaders learn from their subordinates and vice versa.”

When asked what object they would bring to share that symbolizes their personal experience of the team coaching journey, here are a few comments:

- “A water bottle symbolizes my experience here. We each give life and water is life. All of us pour into each other to give life and build life. We fill in on each other’s skills to grow. Let’s hydrate and pour into each other.”
- “I bring a trophy. We have overcome lots of hurdles. This is a prize for everyone. Every session was a hurdle we overcame. It’s a reminder to celebrate our wins, both small and big at work and outside of work. We need to be easier on ourselves.”
- “I bring a tree that represents our team growth and resiliency throughout the session. I am really grateful to have had these sessions. I was so uncomfortable when we began. Now I see the flowers of this tree we have planted together.”
- “My symbol is compassion, teamwork and trust. All the virtues of leadership. If I as team leader don’t demonstrate these, we can’t achieve much.”
- “I feel nourished and energized to move forward. I appreciate both coaches for being patient with us. You have strengthened us. I feel as if I am a better version of myself now.”
- “This has been a rebirth to me, both personally and professionally. We are better and more effective leaders.”



CONCLUSION AND INSIGHTS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSITIONS

Team coaching appears to have served a vital role in supporting this senior leadership team at time of extensive organizational transition. Follow-up indicates that team members appreciated the supportive learning environment during a time of turbulence. Indications are that their newly-acquired team competencies, mindset, and behaviors created the quality of interactions for success in the new organizational structure.

Coaches appreciated the value of co-coaching with one another. Specifically, the opportunity to co-create the design phase and to digest and process each team coaching session. This was most helpful at a key juncture where the session indicated extreme team turmoil. The two coaches were able to quickly sense the importance of urgency when the team showed up in a session completely without the emotional resources to engage. Team coaches supported one another and the team with a strong container for the conversations that mattered.

LEARNING



Enhanced the team involvement, closeness, and trust



Created a higher level of psychological safety



Helped bring to light issues the team was facing in ways that were healthy, respectful, and constructive



Facilitated a learning space where the team realized there is room for change if you speak up; systems or rules are not set in stone



Helped the team realize they had a duty and responsibility to speak up rather than resign to cynicism; guiding them towards courageous authenticity



Guided the shift in the interactions of team members from positional leadership into their shared vision; consequently, positioning them to focus more on integrating ideas across the organization