A network visualization graphic showing a complex web of interconnected nodes and lines, with nodes in various colors (blue, orange, red, yellow) and lines in blue, set against a dark blue background.

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Which hats should a team coach wear?

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Abstract

Role confusion is a common phenomenon for coaches and team coaches. Through the lens of a complex team coaching case study, an internal coach describes various roles she found herself in, some of which were helpful, some were helpful in some circumstances, and others were not helpful at all. The article emphasises that role efficacy depends on context, and what may have been unhelpful in this case, may be helpful in other circumstances. Implications for practice are also considered along with suggestions on how coaches can grow visibility and appreciation for the hats they wear and the impact on the system.

Value of article

Useful for all coaches, internal or external, one-to-one or team, and all coach supervisors. A real case study is used to draw awareness to role confusion and methods to ascertain which roles a coach should or could take. There is also emphasis building awareness of the roles you are in and understanding systemic implications.

Key words

Team coaching, role clarity, coaching, complex adaptive systems, supervision

Overlap with other publications

Concepts and quotes are drawn from the same case study used in a book already published. Note the book goes into much more depth including the views of the system from five different perspectives in the system over three years, comparison of perspectives and growth experienced by each perspective.

Zink, H. (2023). *Team coaching for organisational development: team, leader, organisation, coach and supervision perspectives*. London: Routledge.

Introduction

Some years ago, new to the world of systemic team coaching, I found myself wearing many different hats as an internal team coach. Some were helpful, some helpful in some circumstances and not in others, and some I should not have worn at all.

This article draws from real experience and client feedback to illustrate role dilemma's all coaches face at times, whether they are internal or external, one-to-one or team, or coach supervisors.

I cover the roles I took on as team coach, describe which hats stakeholders in the system found helpful and unhelpful, share learning and insight, and suggest ways in which all coaches and supervisors can identify, and consider roles they take on, whether the hats are conscious or slip on subconsciously.

Background

As mentioned, this case was complex. The team was new, implementing new strategy and organisational structure for the function they led, with new deliverables and new expectations

of themselves as leaders. The wider environment was complicated too, including funding constraints, stakeholder pressure, reputational issues and process and system changes.

I was new to the organisation, specifically brought in to support the team and leader with managing change, leadership development and team coaching. I was an internal team coach. I was also part of the team I was coaching, reporting to the team leader, fully integrated and working with them on a daily basis. Reaction to this unusual construct might be critical – however, it was intentional, with many advantages and disadvantages.

This article focuses on the dynamics of my role(s) as team coach and the hats I wore in this case. It does not cover the content or outcomes of the team coaching work itself.

Theoretical context

The concepts of system dynamics, self-deception and the importance of internal coach role clarity, are core to this case and covered briefly here.

Any coach, whether internal or external, one-to-one or team are part of the Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) they work in. Hawkins and Turner (2020) remind us that coaches both influence and are influenced by their system. Each coach has their own way of thinking, interpreting and communicating, and their own biases – all of this is brought to an engagement. Equally coaches draw from the systems they work in, their context influences their sense of meaning and the choices they make.

The concept of coach self-deception is related, which Bachkirova (2015) describes as coaches seeing client circumstances through their own insecurities or personal motivations. This phenomenon might limit a coach's ability, or divert attention from, what is best for the client.

Authors and coach professional bodies caution internal coaches. Due proximity, they are even more likely to influence and be influenced by systems they work in than external roles. St John-Brooks (2013) warns that internal coaches and their clients should not be in the same part of the organisation, and never in the same chain of command. The EMCC (2016) Code of Ethics also warns coaches of ability to operate effectively in complex environments such as these. In this engagement warnings were ignored.

Approach

This case was not formally established to test particular hypotheses. Rather, as the engagement drew to an end, I felt it useful to share learning from the unusual and complex circumstances.

The content that follows was gathered through my own post-engagement reflection, and the amalgamation of 66 contributions from stakeholders including: all members of the team, the team leader, representatives of staff reporting to the team and the wider organisation, human resources staff involved in the case, and my supervision and support networks.

Respondents were asked specific questions relating to my role as an internal coach and team member, and team dynamics. Direct quotes from contributors are included in the outcomes section.

Outcomes

My clear remit when I joined the team was that formal team coach, and as explained above, I was a part of the team. As the engagement progressed further roles within the system emerged. I found myself wearing multiple hats, which I named through reflective practice and supervision work, refer to Figure.

When questioned after the conclusion of the engagement, contributors to this case study found some of my roles, or hats, helpful. Some were helpful in some circumstances and not in others. Some I should not have worn at all. I expand next.

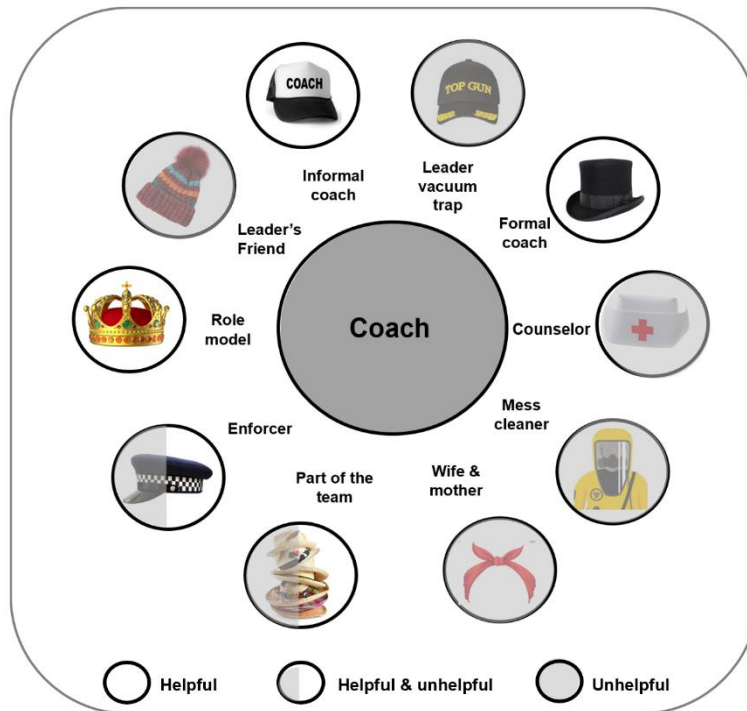


Figure 1 – Coach hats (Adapted from Zink, 2023)

Helpful roles/hats

Formal coach

The most helpful role I had, and my original remit, was formal coach. Michael, the team leader, made the conscious decision to position the role internally, saying "I was concerned the team would not achieve the level of development and commitment of time required if we used external support to help us – support which we would only see from time to time. I felt we needed more continuity."

Informal coach

The role of informal coach emerged quickly. Being part of the team I worked alongside placed me in a great position to provide everyday support, including one-to-one informal coaching. Jane, a member of the team said "It worked well for us. Helen was experiencing the same things that we were experiencing, so it was easy for her to appreciate the context and environment in which we operated. It also facilitated plenty of opportunity for one-to-one informal coaching, which we all found so valuable."

Michael added "The scenario that played out was one of the significant benefits of having an internal coach as part of the team. Helen was right there with me experiencing a lot of what I was experiencing, and literally on the spot offering advice and coaching as events played out."

Role model

My close proximity to the team was also helpful in role modelling different ways of behaving. For example, if I sensed psychological safety was low, and team members were not challenging Michael or each other constructively, I did, and others picked up on my approach.

Helpful roles/hats in some circumstances, not helpful in others

Part of the team

Some of my roles were helpful in some circumstances and not in others. As described above being part of the team provided ready access to informal coaching. However, one of the implications of close proximity was a perceived shift in relationship status within the team. For example, Taylor, a team member said, "Helen was closer to the Michael than I was ever able to get," and Rosa said, "I had always been Michael go-to person, and now that seemed to be Helen." The shift in dynamics between Michael and me created tension, which fed into and was felt within the system.

Enforcer

A benefit of my internal role was the opportunity to micro-correct the team in the moment. Michael reflected that "Helen was able to intervene when habits of the team or individual team members required additional support or modification in the moment."

Greg, a team member, added "There was plenty of opportunity for Helen to reinforce behaviour and remind us of agreed actions. I know the team were aware of this and valued it."

However, as time moved on, my role as micro-corrector, or enforcer, became unhelpful and the team became reliant. Michael said his "internal dialogue was that it did not really matter if we bought into something we were working on, as Helen was there to pull us back on track."

Unhelpful roles/hats

Leader's friend

Some of the roles I took on were unhelpful in almost all circumstances, such as the friendship that developed between me and Michael. We worked closely together and supported each other, quickly building a strong level of trust. However, on balance, I believe our friendship fell into the unhelpful hat category. Our close relationship was obvious to others in the organisation. As a result Michael's boss, and others, used me as a go-between at times, expecting me to pass on messages around their expectations, rather than talking to him directly.

Leadership vacuum

Michael's role was stressful and demanding and without even realising it, I took on some of his responsibilities. Michael commented that "It was obvious Helen had high leadership capability. So over time, more and more leadership activity moved from me to her. She stepped in for me sometimes, spoke on my behalf at staff meetings, covered my role while I was on leave, and led significant projects. I was also aware she was covering for me in informal ways as well. Filling gaps she saw seemed natural for her, and I think most of her

actions were subconscious. I knew it was happening, and I let it, as I prioritised wider organisational deliverables and pressures.”

While the leader and I were comfortable with the arrangement that had emerged, team members and other stakeholders said “It was not well coordinated or communicated. We received messages from both Michael and Helen. We were confused and frustrated, which caused even more angst at a time when we were already overloaded and stressed.” The team exclaimed many times that it was unclear who their boss actually was.

Counsellor

As I built trust with team members, which was good, they increasingly came to me with their concerns about each other, Michael, and others across the organisation, rather than working through concerns with the parties concerned. Greg said, “Helen became counsellor to just about everyone.”

Wife and mother

I recall Rosa referring to Michael and me as “Mum and Dad” at times, and I really did feel like Michael’s work wife. Although Rosa was probably joking, I think she was describing our relationship accurately. I know she did not like me being Michael’s confidant, and she felt extremely uncomfortable when we disagreed and argued in front of her or the team, which did happen at times.

The wife and mother hat was often the focus of supervision sessions, with much discussion on transference, parallel processing, and drama triangles.

Mediator/Mess cleaner

The last unhelpful role I will highlight is that of mediator and mess cleaner. I recall team members, including Michael, asking me to work on staff issues they encountered. It felt like responsibility for gnarly issues had shifted from those responsible for people management to me.

Discussion

Why unhelpful hats fit so easily

As described above, most hats were informal roles that emerged from dynamics within the CAS. As I reflect on my circumstances in this case, there were many reasons I slipped on unhelpful hats so easily. Some reflections:

- The engagement was early in my team coaching career, and I was somewhat naïve.
- Like most coaches, I get energy from helping people – that is why I do what I do.
- Michael and the team were under a lot of pressure, and I had more capacity than them.
- My role position description stated I was there to support the team and Michael with people matters - it was hard for me to push back on expectations.
- Unclear, or lack of, responsibility from the team leader and team.
- Blind spots - sometimes I knew I was wearing unhelpful hats, and sometimes they slipped on unconsciously.

As the team and Michael appreciated what I was doing and the system reinforced roles I took on, does it not follow that all hats were helpful? After all EMCC (2015) Competencies emphasize that client’s needs must be central in coaching.

Looking back, what may have seemed natural within the CAS and helpful for the team at the time, may not have been in their, or my, best interests.

Impact on the team

Some hats I wore most likely constrained the team's progress. For example, taking on people related issues reduced the opportunity for the team to grow EQ development. As Goleman (1995) says, a valuable characteristic worth perusing.

The EMCC (2015) Competencies emphasize that clients should take responsibility for their own learning. Clutterbuck (2020) also explains that the aim of team coaching is to "build the team's capability to solve their own problems". Yet some hats I wore reinforced the team's reliance on me.

This reliance was put to the test when the engagement ended, and I left the team and organisation. Gaps in capacity and capability were evident and the team reported struggling post my departure.

Impact on the coach

Some of the unhelpful hats I describe fed self-deception (Bachkirova, 2015). I wanted to be helpful, preserve my own role, and I wanted the team and myself to succeed for my own sense of worth and career progression. I had personal skin in the game.

My heavy involvement in day-to-day functioning of the team most likely enhanced stakeholder optics of overall progress. The team may have looked as though they were progressing more than they actually were and I may have looked more successful in my role than I actually was.

As described, role confusion and multiple hats created significant tension within the system. Tension contributed to the pressure and energy depletion I suffered during the engagement. I questioned myself many times whether I was fit or able to continue in my role, in line with ICF (2020a) Code of Ethics.

Which hats should a team coach wear?

In this case study I describe some hats as unhelpful - negatively impacting the team and me. However, each engagement and each CAS differs. What was unhelpful in this case might be helpful in yours. Also, what seems useful at the beginning of engagement may not be useful later on.

There is no definitive advice on which hats team coaches should wear, which the team should wear, and which hats to leave on the hook. Instead, I encourage coaches to prioritise self-awareness and systemic awareness, covered next.

Tips for your coaching practice

Although the context of this case study is unusual, lessons learnt can be applied by all coaches, whether internal or external, one-to-one or team, or coach supervisors, and anyone facing complex role dilemmas. I encourage coaches to actively work on self-awareness and grow

systemic appreciation. Fortunately, there are established ways to support reflection, awareness, experimentation and choice.

Contracting

Contracting and continually re-contracting is core to coaching and even more important when working with teams and CASs. Interestingly, Clutterbuck (2020) provides examples of common team coaching challenges resulting from insufficient contracting including: the leader transferring responsibility to coach, the team assuming coach is there to solve their problems, the team assuming coach will do the work for them, and others. All similar challenges to those highlighted in this case.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice or “The ability to step away from your work and identify patterns, habits, strengths and limitations in your work and/or within the system you work in” (Turner, Lucas and Whitaker, 2018) is critical for coaches and team coaches in particular, due to the inherent complexity of their work. Reflective practice may involve journalling, mindfulness, individual or group supervision, peer support and self-care.

Supervision

Supervision is a way to build and maintain competence, capability and capacity (Turner, Lucas and Whitaker, 2018), and build reflective practice and the self-awareness required for team coaching. The EMCC (2020) Team Coaching Standards also state supervision is an expectation in a team context.

Self-care

The EMCC (2020) Team Coaching Standards state that self-care and resilience are critical for team coaches, and they must “develop and implement appropriate processes to maintain resilience and self-care and the active management of... their own needs.”

Co-coaching

Co-coaching in complex situations such as teams is another way to share the load. The ICF (2020b) Team Coaching Core Competencies explain that co-coaching is helpful in team scenarios as it facilitates increased presence, more ability to observe team dynamics, provides alternative perspectives, and increases the opportunity to role model team behaviour. It also provides a partner to share experiences with and reduce the burden a single coach might feel. In this way co-coaching is also a form of self-care.

Conclusion

Throughout this engagement I was well resourced and undertook most of the suggested tips for coaching practice above, including professional one-to-one and group supervision. While all were beneficial, I struggled with complexities of role clarity throughout the engagement.

External team coaches or one-to-one coaches reading this may think the scenarios raised in this article are not relevant for them. Perhaps thinking their situations are not as complicated, or they have more experience and are less naïve than I was. However, invisible hats can slip

on any coach at any time – as described, some will be helpful, and some are likely to be unhelpful.

Whichever hats you decide to wear, role visibility is paramount. That visibility grows from self-awareness, systemic awareness, identifying and naming hats in the system, considering self-deception, experimenting with hats to assess benefits, and openly working with teams on which hats are most helpful for them and the whole system in particular circumstances.

The article is based on a case more extensively covered in Team coaching for organisational development: team, leader, organisation, coach and supervision perspectives. Routledge. 2023. For the full case, including content and outcomes of the engagement see the book.

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Helen is a growth coach, leadership coach and team coach, with significant hands-on business and leadership experience at a senior level. Helen draws from a large toolkit, including coaching, team coaching, applied positive psychology, change management and other strategic tools and methodologies. She holds many qualifications and certifications, including: Senior Practitioner Team and Individual Coach with EMCC, Advanced Certification in Team Coaching and Professional Certified Coach with ICF, MSc (Coaching Psychology), MBA, BMS (hons), and others. Helen published Team coaching for organisational development: team, leader, organisation, coach and supervision perspectives in 2023.