



An Exploration of Team Coaching: Coaching Through Psychological Safety and Trust with Teams

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Roundtable: Professional Coaching

With 80% of organizations operating in teams, team coaching is quickly being recognized as a way for teams to significantly impact those they serve. Psychological safety in teams is paramount to this success and is established when team members feel valued, wanted, accepted, and heard. When the collective body is psychologically safe, trust and powerful team learning is the outcome. As teams learn to operate in a state of psychological safety, they become more than high-performing teams, they become confident, high-value teams that create transformation and impact (CVTI) for their stakeholders. This paper outlines the difference between individual, group, and team coaching and psychological safety and trust. Further, this paper offers practical application for coaches and teams to generate psychological safety through agreements, processes, and systems.

Keywords: psychological safety, trust, team coaching, high-value teams, transformation, impact

During the 2021 Regent University Professional Coaching Roundtable, *An Exploration of Team Coaching* presented differences between individual, group, and team coaching. When successful, each type of coaching assists in creating a client experience that is a transformative process. However, team coaching has a complexity not all coaches, including seasoned individual or group coaches, are trained to engage in. The European Mentoring Coaching Council (EMCC) is the first coaching body to endorse a team coach certification. Further, in 2020, EMCC was the first in the world to graduate team coaches at the Foundation Level (ITCA), followed by a team coach Practitioner Level certification (ITCA-Practitioner) in 2021 (Graduates, 2020). I was part of the first cohort to obtain the Foundation and Practitioner Level certifications under the tutelage of pioneers, professors, and practitioners in the team coaching industry, Professors David

Clutterbuck and Peter Hawkins. While EMCC offered “the first globally recognized standards for team coaching accreditation” (Graduates, 2020, para. 3), the International Coaching Federation (ICF) adopted team coaching competencies in 2021. The first ICF team coach certification was ascertained in 2022. As the coaching profession continues to grow, leaders, teams, and organizations will have a wider pool of coaches to consider and will likely contract with competent, well-trained, credible team coaches who provide a safe space to do meaningful, advanced coaching work.

Individual Coaching

Table 1 notes individual coaching takes place with one client and one coach. The goal for the engagement is client-directed. If a sponsor (the payor of the contract) is involved, a specific goal is incorporated into the engagement. The purpose and values are based on the individual and what the client brings into the session. The length of the contract, sometimes called an agreement, is typically short-term and decided by the client. If a sponsor is involved, the sponsor may dictate the length of the contract. This may depend on what the coaching is for. In addition, the length of the contract may be dictated by the ability to fund the engagement. The objective for an individual coaching engagement is to help the client move the needle so they can experience transformation based on the goal that the client or sponsor set.

Group Coaching

Group coaching builds upon individual coaching by adding more than one client to the engagement. While there are multiple clients in the session, each comes with an individualized goal, purpose, and set of values. While the group may establish accountability agreements, typically, individuals are responsible for their own progress or commitment to the process and may find an accountability partner outside of the group.

Table 1: Professional Coaching Differences

	Individual Coaching	Group Coaching	Team Coaching
Who	1 client to 1 coach	2+ clients to 1 coach	2+ clients to 2 coaches
Goal	Client and/or Sponsor directed	Individualized	Shared
Purpose/Values	Individualized	Individualized	Collective
Accountable to	Individual	Individual	Team/Sponsor/ Stakeholders

	Individual Coaching	Group Coaching	Team Coaching
Length of Contract/Agreement	1+ short term/individual/Sponsor	1+ short term	Multiple, long term, continuous (9 mo.-2+ years)
Objective	Move the needle-individual transformation, confidence	Move the needle-individual transformation, confidence	Move the needle-collective confidence, create value & stakeholder impact thru transformation, learning engine status
Other Differences			Develop the team leader to coach the team through individual coaching/peer-to-peer coaching/real-time in meeting team coaching/engagement may include other modalities/additional KSAs/supervision with a seasoned team coach.

Note: "KSA" refers to knowledge, skills, and abilities. Reprinted from "Psychological safety & trust for teams" [Presentation] by K. M. G. Whelan, 2022, Regent University Annual Research Roundtables: Professional Coaching Roundtable.

Team Coaching

While it would make sense for team coaching to build upon group coaching, there are several differences at the onset. Researchers and trained team coaches view team coaching through a holistic lens. In team coaching, the sponsor, if there is a sponsor, and the team are the client rather than any one individual. According to the research of Clutterbuck (2020) and Hawkins (2017), team coaching has a systemic lens where there are interactions with team members and stakeholders. Team coaching is a collective performance where team members co-create for stakeholder impact.

Defining a Team

There are many types of teams. If you were asked to define a team, what would you say? Like the elusive definition of leadership which was defined and strengthened by the work of Drs. Bruce Winston and Kathleen Patterson (2006), coaching has broadened and strengthened over time. With this, so has the development of team coaching definitions. My working definition of a *team* is a collection of individuals who rally around a collective purpose and common goal. They are guided by shared values,

embrace team learning and mutual accountability so together, they create confidence, high-value, and transformational impact for their stakeholders.

Knowing what a team is will help the team exist more fully, as the team purpose defines the team. Before a team can be effective, it must first define who its identity is as a collective body. While most team members understand they are part of a collective experience, they must also understand the depth to which a confident, high-value, transformational impact (CVTI) team is defined.

Coaching in Pairs

A distinct difference in team coaching is that, many times, coaching takes place in pairs. This is referred to as co-coaching. While not always the case, utilizing co-coaches may depend upon the size of the team and the project's scope. There are benefits to having a second pair of hands, eyes, and ears for the engagement with teams greater than six. An example of the benefits of a co-coach is note taking. Not all teams allow the coaching session to be recorded. While a team coach would benefit from taking copious notes in a session to aid with recall, taking notes is not always possible, as the coach is functioning and focused on all voices in the room. Having a partner helps bring a more fruitful engagement to the team and to the organization being served.

Co-Coaching and Faith

Individual team members have different performance attributes, personalities, and strengths. The same is true for those who work with teams. Coaches need to be in partnership with a co-coach. This begins with having the same or similar values, partnering for the right reasons, and having an established trusting relationship and connection. If the team coach walks in Christian faith, then seeking out a co-coach who is also faith-filled is worth exploring. I have found that partnering with a Christian coach has benefits which go beyond the notion of coaching for the sake of having another set of eyes, ears, and hands. However, essential aspects may differ and create strife between co-coaches when they do not share the same belief system and values nor agree on how to process through conflict or whether faith should be included in the engagement. Best practice and experience urge the creation of coaching agreements before a co-coaching engagement begins. These agreements include but are not all-encompassing: administrative, planning, team contact, expressions of faith, and confidentiality.

Collective Purpose

High-value, high-impact teams know their collective purpose. Teams who know their purpose can articulate it to others. A purposeful team knows what they do better than anyone else and uses this to their competitive advantage. If the purpose defines the team, who does the team need to be for the organization they serve?

Shared Goals

Teams have shared goals. While a team is comprised of individuals who come together with individualized goals for tasks, the collective goal aligns with the team purpose. The collective goal is the outcome of the shared approach to attainment, which includes a transformative experience and deliverables for those they serve.

Learning Engines

Teams are learning engines. As noted in the 2021 We're Still Curious Discovery Survey (Belem Leaders, 2022), learning opportunities were the fourth highest need for teams. High-value, transformational impact teams have a thirst for learning and growth. Learning falls under individual development and collectively for team development. CVTI teams seek out learning opportunities so they can rise into excellence. As a collective body, psychological safety is encapsulated within this learning.

Mutual Accountability

Teams hold themselves accountable to fulfill their purpose. Accountability does not lie solely with the team leader. The team holds themselves accountable at the individual and collective levels. All CVTI teams create agreements that dictate how accountability will be accomplished. Without accountability parameters in place, teams are, or become, dysfunctional.

Stakeholder Confidence, Value, and Transformational Impact

CVTI teams identify their stakeholders. Teams spend time uncovering whom they serve and measure team effectiveness and impact through discovery and inquiry. Beyond identifying their stakeholders, teams understand their stakeholders. CVTI teams build relationships with their stakeholders to serve them well and create impact on their behalf. Serving stakeholders is a co-creating process where the team and the stakeholder use their relationship to understand what each needs to generate mutual fulfillment and transformation.

Length of Contract

Contracts, also called agreements, vary in team coaching. However, the length of the contract is often long-term and continuous. If good work is to be accomplished, I have found, at the very least, a yearlong contract is needed. Why? Because a team coach, along with the team, is on a journey of transformation. Relationships, psychological safety, and trust take time. Without these components, the engagement will fail.

Coaching the Team Leader

As a team coach, it is essential to understand one goal is to work your way out of a job and leave the team self-sufficient. Team coaching involves coaching the team leader to coach the team. The agreement of who coaches the team leader is dependent upon engagement variables. Remembering that the team is the client, some team coaches believe coaching the team leader can be accomplished by the team coach without a conflict of interest. Others believe that if there is a pair of coaches, one of the coaches can coach the leader. A third dynamic is also valuable, and that is having an external coach contracted to coach the leader. Exploring the comfort level of each is encouraged.

Individual Coaching and Peer-to-Peer Coaching

Depending upon the contract, individual coaching may take place. As with team leader coaching, agreements are created within the engagement. In addition, peer-to-peer coaching within the team evolves as the team is coached in real time. Bringing all voices to the table and allowing each to be heard begins the process of team members helping team members through coaching.

Team Coach Supervision

Team coach supervision is available to aid in the development of the coach. Supervision is a valued service to a team coach regardless of experience level. Supervision is either one-to-one or takes place in a group session. During the sessions, coaches bring forth their current team cases to discuss struggles and wins, gain encouragement, and learn from established team coaches.

Team Coach Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs)

The umbrella for team development is more than team coaching. Different modalities aid in creating a team session that brings transformation. The ICF adopted team coaching competencies in 2021, stating, "Because team coaching is multi-faceted, team coaches must have a significantly broader knowledge base when working with teams than individuals" (p. 4). These modalities include team building, team training, team consulting, team mentoring, team facilitation, and team coaching. Not all coaches will rise into team coaching. If a coach is not able to effectively rise into a modality that is needed for a successful engagement, the coach must contract with others to fully serve the client well.

Trust vs. Psychological Safety

The Belem Leaders 2021 We're Still Curious Discovery Survey (2022) suggests psychological safety is a top need for teams to be successful followed by

communication, collaboration, and learning opportunities. Successful teams provide confidence, value, and transformational impact for their internal and external stakeholders.

Team coaching utilizes a broader lens and may incorporate an umbrella of modalities listed above. Regardless of modality, team coaches must demonstrate and help build a high level of psychological safety and trust.

As teams come together to serve their stakeholders, they must develop trust. Psychological safety expert Amy Edmondson (2019) summarizes that trust is the expectation of giving someone the benefit of the doubt, where psychological safety is whether others will give you the benefit of the doubt as you share your thoughts and ask for help. The work of Tammy Turner (2019), as depicted in Table 2, demonstrates Edmondson's work that trust is an individual construct, whereas psychological safety is a group construct. Trust is the expectation that an individual can be counted on to do what they say they will do in a future moment. Trust happens in personal and professional relationships and is given to an individual but is also diminished or lost.

Table 2: Trust and Psychological Safety

Trust in individuals	Trust in teams	Psychological safety
An individual construct	Team construct	A group construct
Measures if another can be counted on to do what they say they will do	Measures if the team can be counted on to do what they say they will do	Measures if it is ok to openly share concepts and make mistakes
Measured by the individual about another	Measured by a stakeholder/s about the team	Measured by team members they know if the environment is safe
Giving the other person the benefit of the doubt for getting things done	The stakeholder gives the team the benefit of the doubt for getting things done	Gives the contributing team member the benefit of the doubt for getting things done

Note. This table reflects further thinking on trust in teams. Adapted from "Teaming and Psychological Safety," by T. Turner, 2019, Australian Taxation Office. Copyright 2019 by the Commonwealth of Australia.

In Turner's (2019) compilation of trust and psychological safety, a question arose. Does trust in a team look different? As trust in a team construct was considered, I looked at how team members view the team as well as how stakeholders view the team.

1. Can the team be counted on to do what they say they are going to do?
2. Is the team delivering high value and creating transformational impact for their stakeholders?
3. Can the team be counted on to serve stakeholder needs?

4. Do stakeholders give the team the benefit of the doubt for getting things done?
5. Individually, how is the team viewed by stakeholders as it pertains to trust?
6. What do stakeholder groups collectively say about the team and trust?

Knowing how trust is perceived at the team level and by stakeholders will help identify areas of strength so the team can continue to generate trust in their stakeholder relationships. Further, the evaluation will uncover areas of weakness and create a way forward to develop strength for the team. Trust is elevated when psychological safety is high. Trust is the outcome of an experience, and psychological safety is that experience. Edmondson (2019) suggests “psychological safety exists when people feel their workplace is an environment where they can speak up, offer ideas, and ask questions” (p. 723). When people experience psychological safety, they feel safe, valued, welcomed, encouraged, appreciated, and acknowledged. A team will not automatically trust a coach who enters the room. As a coach, it is imperative to provide the space for teams to feel safe so the coach can build trust. Within the juncture of trust and psychological safety, a coach can step in and do meaningful work.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety happens in an environment of openness. While not all-encompassing, psychological safety is measured by how safe a person feels to openly share their ideas, thoughts, and aspirations without fear of retaliation. Coaching is relational; we must create a space where we serve people well. Whether you are part of a team, are a coach, or a student, excellence should be the measure of everything you do, provide, and seek.

Dr. Timothy Clark (2020), another expert in the field of psychological safety, provides a progressive 4-stage guide to psychological safety in his book, *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation*. These stages include:

1. Inclusion Safety: belonging and feeling valued by the team. Embracing each other as human beings.
2. Learner Safety: is intellectual as well as emotional. Learner safety is about being ok asking questions, being ok failing forward, experimenting, and offering feedback that feeds forward. This is not about condemnation, but rather, accepting feedback knowing feedback helps yourself and the collective team.
3. Contributor Safety: knowing what you do makes a difference. This stage is about the team, but also about how we are contributing to the wider view of the stakeholders in creating a difference. The more we contribute, the more confidence and competence we develop. When we help a team create contributor safety for others, we empower and provide autonomy. We give autonomy, we guide, encourage in exchange for efforts and results.

4. **Challenger Safety:** team members question the status quo free from retaliation. They can ask questions without being demeaned. This is where innovation happens. Failing forward, they can try and take risks even if the risk is a failed attempt. The failed attempt is still learning. Learning is part of team development and growth.

During the 2022 Regent University Professional Coaching Roundtable live panel discussion, *Coaching Globally and in Organizations*, Dr. Ulf Spears, a family coach, shared his perspective on psychological safety. He contends families can be healthy but can also be broken. He suggests there are ways to talk to people without harming them. One way is to use “I” statements. Dr. Spears teaches basic skills and coaches families toward ways not to harm or tear down one another. Ulf’s comments align with what is experienced in a team coaching dynamic. Learning to speak with care is an essential part of creating psychologically safe teams.

In the same live session, Dr. Sally Fry, a leader development specialist in the northeast district of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, added to the discussion. She sees psychological safety happening on a continuum with the pastors in her district. Having 76 churches in Upstate NY creates a geographical issue where not all pastors can physically meet. However, Fry notes she has witnessed collaboration beginning at the regional level, pastor to pastor, with some meeting monthly. During her training on coaching with these pastors, Fry often provides opportunities for peer-to-peer coaching. She found this type of coaching removes the hierarchy which may occur with a pastor coaching with someone from the district or national level. In closing, Fry reminds the audience that there is a high level of confidentiality that is valued in the clergy environment, which helps with psychological safety and trust. Peer-to-peer coaching and confidentiality are important pieces for teams. As team members explore and inquire in a safe environment, better decisions and outcomes will occur.

Modeling the Way

As we move into all God is calling us to and through, team coaches should never discount the opportunity to help teams step into a confident, value-creating team that delivers transformational impact to their stakeholders. This charge is our responsibility as we open the door for others by advancing the team coaching profession and create inviting spaces for others to experience psychological safety and trust.

Team coaches model the way in establishing psychological safety. This is accomplished by calling team members by name and making each feel welcomed and valued. A team coach is trained in calling out patterns of interruptions. Doing so creates space for the quieter voices in the room who may shy away from bringing their voice forward. Teams must learn quieter voices are still valued, as they may be the thinkers in the room. Thinkers may only bring their thoughts to the table if they are invited or feel so strongly

about a topic that they must speak. Team coaches listen and summarize what is being heard for the team. Summarization is a way the team will hear and know the coach is listening to all voices. Team coaches empower the team to work with emotions – the softer side of leadership and teamship. There are times in the coaching dynamic when conflict may occur. A team coach remains non-judgmental and a neutral party while caring for the team. The team will follow when a coach outwardly demonstrates ways to create psychological safety.

Team Engagement Overview

There are many aspects to a team coaching engagement. One area that may occur is processing psychological safety with a team. The team may be experiencing something within the team that may seem off or not right. While teams understand the word trust and may have heard the term psychological safety, most have never strategically positioned themselves to face them head-on.

The initial meetings to begin the process of going deeper with a team include discovery and inquiry with the team leader and the sponsor, if they are involved with the engagement. The discovery and inquiry with individual team members follow the initial meeting with the team leader. This could be one-to-one interview, an assessment, or both. If an assessment is warranted by the coach and agreed upon with the team, a trust and psychological safety assessment is distributed, followed by collection and data review. Once the team coach compiles, reviews, and understands the data, an overview meeting is scheduled with the team leader (and sponsor). The findings overview is not an in-depth review, but a time for the leader to have a high view of the findings before the team. The overview with the team becomes a team discovery session. The team will experience aha moments, and a wider lens of the team is found based on thinking and feeling. Initial team learning begins at this juncture.

Based on the results and following the team discovery session, the team formulates a way forward with the coach. The coach will then move the team toward their development goal of increasing psychological safety and trust to make way for more significant transformational impact. To harness the development effort, a follow-up assessment is distributed to aid in learning if the team has increased trust and psychological safety based on the coaching effort.

Concluding Remarks

For teams to serve their stakeholders fully, they too must be well. Without psychological safety and trust, dysfunction occurs. When dysfunction occurs, the leader, team, organization, and those they are in service of will fall short. Team coaches should be open to teams who are not psychologically safe. Coaches should challenge themselves to seek out ways to proactively engage the team to help create confident,

high-value, transformational impact for those the team serves. To have well-functioning individuals and teams, experts in the field of psychological safety and trust acknowledge the necessity to assess and design a way forward. Assessing and leaving psychological safety and trust to chance is not enough. Team coaches have an incredible opportunity to offer their skills and application to teams regardless of size or their place on the hierarchy chart. When a team is open and ready to experience and engage with a well-trained, high-impact coach, they can expect their psychological safety, trust, and CVTI to increase exponentially.

About the Author

Dr. Kelly M. G. Whelan is a globally recognized executive and team development strategist and founder of Belem LLC (Belem Leaders). Dr. Whelan is a 2017 DSL graduate of Regent University and adjunct in the doctoral coaching concentration. She is certified as a Gallup® Strengths Coach and, with a passion for working with teams, holds a European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) Foundations (ITCA) and Practitioner (ITCA-Practitioner) Level team coaching accreditation. In keeping with bringing a Christian voice to the world, Dr. Whelan became editor-in-chief of *Christian Coaching Magazine* following a July 2022 acquisition by Belem LLC.

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